



February 2021

## Article III – Texas Education Agency

Thank you for allowing the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health to provide comments on this important work. The foundation is part of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. These comments will focus on how Texas can support the mental health and well-being of students and teachers and healthy school climates during this unprecedented time. **Identified in the Statewide Behavioral Health Strategic Plan as Gap #2, addressing the behavioral health needs of public school students is critical.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new and unexpected challenges. COVID-19 has not only emphasized the importance of mental health and well-being in schools, but the long-standing need to address inequities and disparities for students of color. As the 87<sup>th</sup> legislative session progresses, it is inevitable that you will be tasked with making many difficult budgetary decisions. Now more than ever, attention must focus on supporting the mental health and well-being in schools so students and teachers are able to fully engage in the classroom.

***The foundation recognizes and greatly appreciates the legislature’s past and continued support for addressing the mental health needs of Texas schools. We look forward to continuing to work with you to improve availability of resources for schools to ensure access to critical mental health and substance use supports.***

### COVID-19 IMPACT ON STUDENTS’ LEARNING

Stress and trauma can affect various aspects of a student’s experience in school including academic performance, behavior in class, physical health, interpersonal relationships, and mental health.<sup>1</sup> The stress and trauma experienced by students are known to cause problems with concentration, memory, motivation, and decision-making – affecting their ability to learn.<sup>2</sup>

As we continue understanding the broad impacts of COVID-19, supporting mental health and school climate strategies are important for all students to help combat the pandemic’s impact on learning, as well as overall well-being. This is especially critical for students who are more adversely impacted including students of color, students living in poverty, students with mental health conditions, and students with a history of trauma.<sup>3,4</sup> Early recognition and connection to appropriate supports is essential in preventing further academic decline.<sup>5</sup>

### DISPARITIES IN DISCIPLINE

“For many children who have experienced traumatic events, the school setting can feel like a battleground in which their assumptions of the world as a dangerous place sabotage their ability to remain calm and regulate their behavior in the classroom.”<sup>6</sup>

*“Learning to read, write, take part in a discussion, and solve mathematical problems rests on many underlying foundations— organization, comprehension, memory, the ability to produce work, engagement in learning, and trust. Another prerequisite for achieving classroom competency is the ability to self-regulate attention, emotions, and behavior. Not surprisingly, trauma resulting from overwhelming experiences has the power to disturb a student’s development of these foundations for learning. It can undermine the development of language and communication skills, thwart the establishment of a coherent sense of self, compromise the ability to attend to classroom tasks and instructions, interfere with the ability to organize and remember new information, and hinder the grasping of cause-and-effect relationships—all of which are necessary to process information effectively.”*

- Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative

Behaviors stemming from unidentified mental health conditions, substance use, or trauma can be perceived as “bad” behavior at school, leading to punitive discipline practices. This effect is heightened when schools do not have adequate services to provide alternative responses to disruptive behavior. When students are relocated out of their typical learning environment, there are often a number of short- and long-term implications. Research shows that exclusionary discipline increases the likelihood of lowered academic performance, dropping out, antisocial behavior, and future contact with the justice system.<sup>7,8</sup>

Highlighted by COVID-19, the health disparities and inequities for people of color is glaring. These disparities and inequities have long been identified in schools. Research shows that while students of color do not “misbehave” more frequently or more seriously, they are disproportionately disciplined and arrested at school.<sup>9</sup> In exploring ways to improve mental health and wellness in schools, addressing systemic inequalities and their impact on these children must be included. We cannot allow inappropriate responses to unaddressed trauma as a result of COVID-19 further the discipline disparities against students of color.

Schools need support and guidance for students with unaddressed mental health concerns or who have experienced trauma. Rather than punitive discipline, it will be imperative that children remain in their classrooms and connected to appropriate resources. Further, these resources must be available for teachers and schools so they are supported and feel safe in their classrooms.

## ACCESS TO SERVICES ON CAMPUS

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For some kids, schools often serve as the first point of intervention when services or supports are needed. This can be as simple as having someone to talk to. Too frequently, unidentified symptoms, reactions to trauma, or kids just having a bad day are perceived as poor behavior. Providing a trained mental health professional to be available will not only support students, but allow teachers to focus on teaching, and school administration and school resource officers to commit their time and resources to where they are more appropriately needed.

Providing mental health services and support for youth is a potential solution toward achieving health equity. Students experiencing disparities in outcomes because of family income, being under- or uninsured, or having a single parent working multiple jobs may not otherwise receive services or support. When care is accessed in schools, students, parents, employers, and schools all benefit. Students spend more time and fully engage the classroom and parents avoid missing work. Placing critically needed services directly in schools so that all students have access should be a priority and should be inclusive of mental health supports.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- 1. Fund TEA’s exceptional item #1 Ensuring Equitable Opportunity through Targeted Supports, with explicit inclusion of schools’ abilities to fund programs, services, or supports targeted at mental health and school climate strategies.**
- 2. Maintain funding for the school safety allotment (SSA), and direct a portion of SSA funds to be used on mental health and school climate strategies.**
- 3. Include funding for access to school-based support services for students and teachers. Funding should be dedicated to:**
  - Restorative discipline measures, specifically for teacher support and FTEs of Restorative Justice Coordinators;**
  - Expanding the use of school social workers, LSSPs, and other mental health professionals; and**
  - Assisting families in being connected to community-based services and utilizing family liaisons or family-partner support services.**

## CONTACT

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<sup>1</sup> Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative. (2018). *Helping traumatized children learn*. Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School. Retrieved from <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/trauma-and-learning/the-problem-impact/>

<sup>2</sup> Saxton, J. (January 2021). *Addressing learning loss by supporting student mental health in school settings*. Texans Care for Children. Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5728d34462cd94b84dc567ed/t/601b0af5bcedb13fba45edab/1612385191323/js-brief-addressing-learning-loss.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> National Alliance on Mental Illness, California. (2020). *School during the pandemic: Mental health impact on students*. Retrieved from <https://namica.org/blog/impact-on-the-mental-health-of-students-during-covid-19/>

<sup>4</sup> Saxton, J. (January 2021). *Addressing learning loss by supporting student mental health in school settings*. Texans Care for Children. Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5728d34462cd94b84dc567ed/t/601b0af5bcedb13fba45edab/1612385191323/js-brief-addressing-learning-loss.pdf>

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- <sup>5</sup> Texas State Texas School Safety Center. (n.d.). *COVID-19 and mental health considerations amid reintegration to school*. Retrieved from <https://locker.txssc.txstate.edu/c121b4e74c0ad21208803a946157b024/FULL-COVID-19-and-Mental-Health-Considerations-Amid-Reintegration-to-School.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative. (2018). *Helping traumatized children learn*. Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School. Retrieved from <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/trauma-and-learning/the-problem-impact/>
- <sup>7</sup> Pufall, Jones, E., Margolius, M., Rollock, M., Tang Yan, C., Cole, M.L., Zaff, J.F. (2018). *Disciplines and Disconnected: How Students Experience Exclusionary Discipline in Minnesota and the Promise of Non-Exclusionary Alternatives*. Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance
- <sup>8</sup> Texas Appleseed. (2019). *Texas: The State of School Discipline. A Look at the Data: 2017-2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/SchoolDisciplineinTexas-new.pdf>
- <sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division & U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2014, January 14). *Joint "dear colleague" letter on the nondiscriminatory administration of school discipline*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201401-title-vi.html#ftn7>