



House Bill 1114

Relating to providing mental health services and mental health education to public school students at school-based health centers

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. We would like to express our gratitude for the commitment the Texas Legislature has shown in supporting student mental health and creating safe and supportive school climates. However, as you are likely aware, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented new and unexpected challenges for schools.

HB 1114 would allow School Based Health Centers (SBHCs) to deliver mental health services and education. SBHCs are facilities “providing preventive and primary health care services to children and adolescents conveniently located on or near a school campus.”¹ For some kids, schools often serve as the first point of intervention when a child needs services or supports because such a large part of their day is in an academic setting. This can be as simple as having someone to talk to. For those with more complex needs, child and adolescent disorders will often continue into adulthood without early intervention.² Services provided in-school support the school environment and academic achievement by helping children stay in school while identifying and addressing problems that may impact the learning process, like their mental health. One strategy is to include mental health services as part of the types of services School Based Health Centers (SBHCs) are able to provide.

SBHCs are also a potential solution toward achieving health equity. Students experiencing disparities in health 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 can be accessed in schools, students, parents, employers, and schools all benefit. Students spend more time and fully engage the classroom and parents avoid missing work.

Learning is inextricably connected to a student’s mental health. When students are socially, emotionally, and mentally well, they engage more successfully in learning. Student wellness is related to increased test scores, school attendance, grades, and graduation rates, while improving truancy and disciplinary rates.³ We know that mental health concerns including trauma, depression, substance use, and suicide are projected to rise as result of COVID.⁴ Further, the emotional and behavioral effects of trauma are known to spike more than a year after trauma exposure.⁵

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 and 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.⁶ COVID-19 has not only emphasized the importance of mental health and well-being in schools, but also the long-standing need to address inequities and disparities. Early recognition and connection to appropriate supports is essential in preventing further academic decline.⁷ School efforts to improve the mental health of all students is a key strategy for improving student academic performance.

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- ⁴ Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1049–1057. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>
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- ⁶ 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/>
- ⁷ 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>