

Public Hearing on Youth Mental Health and Pennsylvania Rural Schools: Testimony Highlights

October 2022

Key Findings

- The most recent Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) found increased rates of depression and thoughts of suicide among students in Grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 .
- The lack of mental health professionals in rural areas makes access to mental health services for students extremely challenging.
- Teachers, administrators, and education policymakers are working to centralize trauma-informed practices and prioritize relationship-building and community in schools.
- Regulated paperwork and caps on reimbursements from public and private insurance make consistent, professional mental health services difficult to provide.

Background

On October 19, 2022, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors hosted a public hearing on youth mental health and Pennsylvania rural schools at the State Capitol Building. Representatives from state agencies, health care service providers, and school districts provided insights on how they are addressing youth mental health challenges in schools. These professionals, who brought a wide range of experience to issues surrounding behavioral health access, discussed the growing need for services in and around schools and current programs aimed at supporting schools and students facing mental health crises.

State Initiatives

The first panel included Michael Pennington, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) and Dr. Dana Milakovic, Mental Wellness and Trauma Specialist at the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Office for Safe Schools. Mr. Pennington provided findings from the most current Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), which students complete every two years on drug use, mental health, and other juvenile risk factors. The 2021 results suggested significant rates of mental health concerns among Commonwealth youth. Among students in rural Pennsylvania, 42 percent reported feeling sad or depressed most days of the week. Reported suicidal thoughts also increased among students at every grade level compared to the 2019 results, with noted increases in 6th and 8th grade students. Nearly one in five students considered suicide, and 11.9 percent of students attempted suicide. Mr. Pennington then discussed the work that PCCD is doing to support and further evaluate mental health needs in schools. PCCD recently established the School Safety and Security Committee, which is increasing training opportunities for school security, developing a model trauma-informed approach plan, and administering the one-time (FY2022-23) School Mental Health and School Safety Grants totaling \$190 million.

PCCD has surveyed school districts to measure mental

health service provision in schools. This survey found that more than 90 percent of schools report providing mental health education, both in the classroom and as continuing education for teachers. However, urban school districts were more likely to have these resources available than rural school districts. Dr. Milakovic focused her remarks on work the Department of Education is doing to cultivate community in school districts, even when funds for mental health staff might not be consistently available. This is especially important in rural areas, where finding and affording full-time professional mental health staff can be a challenge. This includes encouraging mental health curricula and implementing trauma-informed practices. Dr. Milakovic also noted that cultivating a sense of belonging and acceptance for students, especially in the face of academic challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, is essential.

School Districts and Intermediate Units

The second panel featured presentations from Dr. Bernadette Boerckel, Chief Outreach Officer of the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit (IU) and Dr. Erich May, Superintendent of Brookville Area School District. The Central Susquehanna IU connects 17 school districts with local health professionals to support schools in meeting the needs of students facing mental health challenges. She noted that one of the major challenges facing rural districts in her service area was workforce limitations, as licensed professionals are hard to find in rural communities and guidance counselors have large workloads that make handling emergency events challenging. The Central Susquehanna IU also works to reduce stigma around mental health care. Dr. Boerckel noted that part of the increased need for professional services comes from students and younger generations being more willing to self-report mental health challenges. Dr. May spoke about his experience leading a school district. He believes that the mental health issues discussed at the hearing predate COVID, and we need to thoughtfully encourage supportive and mentoring relationships for

young people. He noted that Brookville School District is using funding from PCCD to hire mental health professionals on a contractual basis, but that there is additional need to support individual students' crises. The importance of social connections in school is reinforced by athletics and arts programs in addition to the academic requirements of schools. Dr. May encouraged lawmakers to not emphasize academic rigor at the cost of programs that help students feel part of their scholastic community.

Health Care Providers

The third panel of health care provider representatives addressed the needs and challenges in addressing youth mental health. Michael Hopkins, President and CEO of the Children's Service Center (CSC) of the Wyoming Valley, focused his remarks on recruitment and retention of mental health professionals. He noted that CSC has been providing student loan forgiveness and tuition assistance, as well as additional support to part-time staff. However, capped rates on reimbursement for mental health sessions from public and private insurance make these additional expenses a challenge for health care providers to sustain. Dawn Zieger, Vice President of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health for Geisinger Health System, discussed her organization's push to develop more robust mental health services for those in north central and northeast Pennsylvania. She noted that telehealth has allowed for quick staffing increases to meet demand, and that wait lists for services, particularly for outpatient mental health counseling, are growing. Ms. Zieger also presented case studies from a telemedicine program in Texas as a model for expanding behavioral health access among youth and a knowledge sharing model from the University of New Mexico that demonstrates how health care providers can better provide teachers and counselors with effective mental health practices. A rural Pennsylvania case study was provided by Jody McCloud Missmer and Amie Allanson-Dundon of YESS! School-Based Therapy Program at St. Luke's University Health Network. YESS! (Your Emotional Strength Supported) is a school-based mental health program that connects 19 therapists with 63 school buildings in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Among those, four therapists operate in rural Carbon and Schuylkill counties. The program has dramatically decreased severity of depressive symptoms among students in the districts where the program operates. However, Ms. Missmer noted that the program has operated at a loss because of limitations on reimbursements. Also, Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) can't provide mental health services to those with certain public and private insurance providers, which can limit availability of services to students.

In addition to reimbursement rates and telehealth, panelists agreed on several structural challenges to supporting a healthy, professional mental health workforce. While they acknowledged that accurate and safe records are an important part of mental health care, the quantity and variety of non-standardized paperwork required by the state, insurance companies, and accrediting and licensing organizations can be onerous for organizations to maintain. Telehealth has been helpful to manage staffing limitations and they encouraged legislators to continue allowing telemedicine appointments to be reimbursed at in-person rates. Furthermore, they noted workforce development is essential to meeting present and future needs, especially in pediatric behavioral health. Many of these jobs face high burnout rates among staff and ensuring that staff are well trained and well supported is essential to building a robust network of mental health professionals in Pennsylvania.

Thank you to the hearing participants: Michael D. Pennington, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency; Dr. Dana Milakovic, Mental Wellness and Trauma Specialist – Office for Safe Schools, Pennsylvania Department of Education; Dr. Bernadette Boerckel, Chief Outreach Officer, Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit; Dr. Erich May, Superintendent, Brookville Area School District; Michael Hopkins, President and CEO, Children's Service Center of the Wyoming Valley; Dawn Zieger, Vice President, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health, Geisinger Health System; Jody McCloud Missmer, Network Administrator, Behavioral Health, YESS! School-Based Therapy Program at St. Luke's University Health Network; and Amie Allanson-Dundon, Network Director for Clinical Therapy Services, YESS! School-Based Therapy Program at St. Luke's University Health Network.

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