

Fortifying School Mental Health April 28, 2020

Children are at an elevated risk. Prior to the pandemic, one in five schoolchildren in California had a significant mental health need. Disrupted routines and social connections heighten the stress response of many students, particularly those who previously experienced trauma or have preexisting mental health needs. Parents and caregivers also are struggling with job losses and other impacts, contributing to rising domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health needs. These conditions, early indicators show, are increasing “adverse childhood experiences.”

The Role of Schools in Protecting Mental Health has been Disrupted

The Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission over the last three years has extensively and publicly explored the need and potential to improve the mental health services provided to children through schools, and by extension to their families and educators. These activities inspired expansion of Triage grant program and the establishment of the Mental Health Student Services Act, and it informs this analysis and recommendation.

Social and emotional support structures have temporarily broken down. With schools closed and under isolation orders, educators cannot provide the same face-to-face human connection and teachers are struggling to provide emotional support in a virtual space as they develop online lessons. Schools are ramping up efforts for “virtual check-ins” and “telehealth,” but many schools didn’t have adequate staffing before the pandemic.

Schools typically connect families and communities to services. Schools are a vital mechanism for connecting to entire families, and to connect families to the mental health and other services they need. Referrals to mental health and social support agencies are down at a time of heightened need, and many services cannot be provided under the isolation rules.

Teachers cannot provide the same “protective factor” for abused children. Several counties have reported sharp decreases in referrals to Children Protective Services, even while domestic violence cases are thought to have increased. Substantial numbers of students are not participating in remote learning or have not checked in with schools, particularly students in alternative schools.

The State has a Foundation for Ramping up School Mental Health

California’s recent investments in school mental health revealed the need and the ambition of community stewards to address this need. Educators, health professionals and children’s

advocates were already acting out of a sense of urgency to respond to the physical, emotional and developmental needs of children. They are cobbling together the financial and professional resources and adapting emerging programs to support children and make learning possible. Grant programs have been significantly oversubscribed, an indicator of the unmet need.

The State’s investments also revealed the need for a systemic approach. Schools and county behavioral health departments are building programs based on existing relationships, available knowledge and funding. The response could be significantly scaled by coordinating peer-based learning and disseminating models that are sustainable, impactful and adaptive from design.

The System of Support for K-12 education could provide the infrastructure for developing models and professional skills. The new support structure is intended to help all schools close the achievement gap with levels of increasingly specialized support, including Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for mental wellbeing. This network could be deployed to reach all districts and help to identify gaps in capacity and funding to meet the elevated needs.

Take Action Now

Based on the extensive analysis, public engagement and previous deliberations and managing and evaluation grant programs, the Commission believes the following actions would provide immediate value to children and families struggling to adapt to COVID-19 conditions.

Recommendation: Increase financial support and technical assistance for collaboration between schools and counties.

- > The State should rapidly scale services by increasing Triage grants and Mental Health Student Services Act grants and technical assistance to meet the immediate needs of families in crisis. Growing the number of case managers, parent partners, and mental health clinicians is an essential part of a public health response.
- > These efforts should be coordinated with the K-12 Statewide System of Support to build a more enduring infrastructure ensuring that all schools can become “Centers of Wellness” that effectively support students and their families, including using tele-health. California’s educators, consistent with our health care providers, will need mental health support so they can provide emotional and educational assistance to children and families. Consistent with the HealthCorps and new web-based mental health supports, the State needs a strategic mental health and wellbeing initiative to prepare essential educators for a return to the classroom.

Disrupt the Emerging Mental Health Crisis

COVID-19 is impacting the mental health of millions of Californians. Physical distancing may be reducing the spread of disease, but the strategy also weakens the links between Californians and supportive services. The State can disrupt this emerging mental health crisis now by increasing funding and fortifying critical public mental health infrastructure. This brief supplements the Commission’s April 28, 2020 letter to the Governor and Legislature.