

School Mental Health

The Mental Health Services Act prioritizes the educational success of children and youth as a mental health outcome. The Act specifically calls for California's counties to invest in prevention and early intervention strategies that reduce school failure. Additionally, the Commission's membership includes the state Superintendent of Public Instruction and a local Superintendent of schools appointed by the Governor, signaling the need to integrate mental health and education strategies to support the health, education and wellbeing outcomes of children and youth.

In response to the language of the Mental Health Services Act, as well as the very real challenges facing California's school-age children and youth, including increases in suicidal thoughts and behavior, the Commission is investing in a range of strategies to bolster student mental health throughout the state.

School Mental Health Project

In 2017, the Commission began a policy research project on school mental health. Under the leadership of Dave Gordon, Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools, the Commission formed a subcommittee to better understand the mental health and related educational challenges facing children, youth, and their families, teachers and other educational staff. The Commission has held public hearings, convened advisory groups, engaged in site visits around the state and organized focus groups representing students and parents from diverse communities. These efforts have been organized to identify what is in place today to meet the mental health needs of students, how well those strategies are working, and where challenges and opportunities remain for improving educational and mental health outcomes.

The project focuses on early childhood through third grade. The Commission intends to develop specific recommendations to support improved school mental health and related outcomes and to study, encourage and enhance local school-county collaborative projects such as in Monterey, San Bernardino and Fresno.

Triage – School-County Partnerships

Under the terms of SB 82, the Mental Health Wellness Act of 2012, the Commission receives \$20 million each year in its budget to provide local assistance funding to counties through a competitive process to support improved outcomes to prevent and respond to mental health crises. Known as SB 82/Triage funding, historically, these funds were set at \$32 million each year to support a range of strategies to respond to mental health crises. The funds for the program are drawn from the Mental Health Services Act. In 2018, funding for this program was reduced by \$12 million annually to account for unspent funds from the initial round of grants provided to the counties. Additionally, in 2018 the Commission dedicated half of these funds to support children's services, including setting aside approximately one-fourth of the available funds to incentivize school-county mental health partnerships. Through a competitive grant program, four counties received \$21 million over four years to support school-county collaborations intended to address or prevent mental health crises and encourage the development of more effective collaboration between schools and behavioral health departments. The evaluation of these school-county partnerships now underway will produce a roadmap to student wellness for other counties and school districts to emulate.

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Building School Mental Health Learning Collaboratives

Because of the Commission's limited funding, we were able to fund four of the 16 county-school collaboratives that applied for the SB 82/Triage funding. Recognizing this broader need for and interest in school-county mental health partnership projects, the Commission is working with the California Department of Education to support a multi-county/school learning community collaborative. The collaborative will explore opportunities for delivering school-based mental health services or related approaches to meeting the mental health needs of children and youth and their families. The intent of this work is to engage and support a range of counties and schools and offer them planning support, to develop projects that could be funded with county mental health and local school funds.

Linking Mental Health and Education Data

Consistent with the partnership with CDE mentioned above, the Commission is working with the CDE and the Department of Health Care Services to better utilize existing mental health and education data to identify mental health services approaches that best support positive educational outcomes and student mental wellness. This project is just getting underway, but will involve engaging mental health, education, and other stakeholders and experts to maximize the use of all available data to improve understanding, and explore the need and opportunities for technical assistance to enhance outcomes and accountability.

Integrated Services for Youth

Santa Clara County recently received approval from the Commission for an ambitious innovation project that would engage youth to design integrated mental health, physical health and related services, including education, employment and housing support. As implemented by Santa Clara County, these services would be available to transition age youth, ages 15 to 25, regardless of insurance coverage or Medi-Cal eligibility. The County is working with insurance providers and health plans to ensure all youth in the county can receive care and services. The Commission is making available financial support for technical assistance and planning to support other counties interested in collaborating with Santa Clara County to explore applications of this approach in their communities.

Youth Innovation Project

In early 2018 the Commission convened a mental health innovation summit, to bring together California's mental health leaders and the state's innovation leaders to support innovative approaches to improving mental health services and outcomes. That event focused on strategies to infuse human centered design into county mental health systems. As a follow-up to that work, the Commission has launched a Youth Innovation Project to engage youth throughout the state to support the design of youth-oriented mental health innovations. The project is designed to engage youth to identify key challenges affecting their understanding of mental health, access to care, the quality and appropriateness of that care, the outcomes achieved or any other mental health related challenge raised by youth, including school mental health. Once identified, the project will support one or more opportunities to explore, design and plan innovations that would respond to those challenges. The proposed innovations will be presented to county mental health leaders for potential funding.

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SB 1004 – Developing a Strategic Approach to Prevention and Early Intervention

In response to SB 1004 (Weiner, Statutes of 2018), the Commission, in consultation with the counties and other stakeholders, will develop a strategic approach to mental health prevention and early intervention. As mentioned above, the Mental Health Services Act identifies preventing school failure as a key outcome for California’s mental health system and that goal will be included in the Commission’s work. SB 1004 also directs the Commission to develop a strategy for monitoring prevention and early intervention approaches throughout the state, and creating metrics and related strategies to assess and report on prevention and early intervention outcomes.

Suicide Prevention Plan

As required under AB 114, statutes of 2017, the Commission is developing a suicide prevention plan for the State of California. The Commission has held public hearings, conducted site visits, consulted with state, national and international experts on suicide prevention to support improved suicide prevention approaches. The work underway is designed to develop an action agenda to reduce suicide, suicide attempts and suicidal self-harm. As part of the plan, the Commission is exploring the role schools play in suicide prevention, including addressing California’s recent requirement to put in place policies and procedures for suicide prevention, intervention and follow-up for grades 7-12.

School Mental Health Engagements

The Commission provides a small amount of funding to community organizations to bring mental health events into high schools and colleges, generally through mental health related films and art engagements. These efforts are part of the Commission’s broader strategies to address stigma and misunderstanding of mental health and mental illness.

In addition to these specific efforts linked to school mental health, the Commission also is developing an on-line, searchable database of more than 2,000 mental health programs funded with Mental Health Services Act funds. This database will allow policymakers, community and mental health leaders, as well as the public, to learn about and locate information on the full array of community mental health programs in California. This on-line tool will be publicly accessible in late March or April. The Commission also has required, through its regulatory authority, counties to provide information on the numbers and demographics of people served for each prevention, early intervention or innovation program. That information is designed to better understand how well the public mental health system is responding to mental health needs. The information gathered only applies to prevention, early intervention and innovation programs because that is the limits of the Commission’s regulatory authority.

The Commission also provides a small amount of funding to support school mental health engagements that involve bringing art – namely brief independently made films on mental health topics – into high schools and colleges. This effort supports the Commission’s work to address stigma, promote awareness and help connect students with community resources. We also periodically provide scholarships and financial support for teens and youth adults to participate in mental health conferences. This effort also is part of our broader approach to engage youth, provide support, address stigma and ensure that our mental health systems are responsive to their needs.