

FY2022 Mental Health Workforce Shortages

The Honorable Patty Murray The Honorable Roy Blunt
Chairwoman Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Subcommittee on Labor, Health, and
Human Services, and Education Human Services, and Education
Senate Appropriations Committee Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Patrick Leahy The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman Vice-Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations Senate Committee on Appropriations

Re: Addressing the Shortages of School Mental Health and Other Specialized Instructional Support
Personnel in FY2022

Dear Chairwoman Murray, Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Blunt and Vice Chairman Shelby,

On behalf of the undersigned state and national organizations, we urge you to move as quickly as possible to pass an FY2022 appropriations bill that helps address the severe shortages of school-based mental health professionals (school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers) and other specialized instructional support personnel. Earlier this year, 165 state and national organizations called on Congress to invest significantly in addressing the workforce shortages, and we are grateful that you heard and addressed our requests.

We were pleased to see that the House passed an FY2022 LHHS Appropriations bill that contained \$502 million for the School Based Mental Health Services Professional Demonstration Grant; \$500 million for the School Based Mental Health Services Grant Program; and \$250 million for personnel development grants (IDEA Part D Section 662). Combined, these three grants address the critical shortage of school-based mental health professionals and other specialized instructional support personnel in two distinct and essential ways: by increasing the available workforce, and by helping districts support increased positions to improve access to services. Given the critical impact of COVID-19 on students, especially students from vulnerable populations, such as students with disabilities, students of color, and LGBTQ students- in terms of both academics and social/emotional/mental well-being - and the well documented shortages of such professionals, a targeted and significantly increased federal investment in each of these three programs is vital.

The Senate FY2022 LHHS Appropriations bill includes \$800 million for the School Based Mental Health Services Professionals and School Based Mental Health Services grants, combined, and \$200 million for the IDEA personnel development grants. We are grateful for these proposed investments, and encourage maximum investment in these critical programs. We urge you to pass an FY2022 appropriations bill as soon as possible so that states and districts can access these funds and engage in meaningful efforts to address the workforce shortages. To be clear, additional Continuing Resolutions would be devastating for students and school staff who require more support than ever and should not be considered a viable path forward.

Even prior to COVID-19, significant need existed among students for mental health services, while schools faced critical shortages of open positions and qualified practitioners, which includes school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers. Additionally, school communities are in need of graduate education programs and faculty needed to train the workforce necessary to keep up with the growing student population. The pandemic further exacerbated disparities in access and resources for schools that face the highest needs and are hardest to serve. As schools have reopened, they are facing unprecedented numbers of students and staff demonstrating mental and behavioral health concerns. The needs of our students are

quickly outpacing the capacity of our schools and communities to respond. Increasing the amount of school-based mental health professionals will be critical to these efforts. One in five students will experience a mental and behavioral health concern and research shows that students are more likely to receive mental health supports if they are offered at school. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends a ratio of one school psychologist per 500 students. The American School Counselor Association and the School Social Work Association of America recommend a ratio of 1:250; however national ratios for all professions are significantly higher than what is recommended. Shortages in school psychology, like shortages in other related education and mental health professions, have the potential to significantly undermine the availability of high quality services to students, families, and schools and result in limited scope of service delivery. Our students deserve more than the bare minimum.

Comprehensive school mental and behavioral health service delivery systems promote wellness, resiliency, skill building, and self-advocacy skills. Adequate access to school-employed mental health professionals improves delivery and integration of school-wide programming to foster positive school climate, prevent violence, and balance physical and psychological safety. Without a highly qualified workforce of school-employed mental health professionals, schools lack the capacity to provide comprehensive social and emotional learning and mental, behavioral, and academic interventions and supports. Qualified school-employed mental health providers help identify students who may need more intensive services or those who require immediate intervention and provide coordination with community providers for specific students. Importantly, ongoing access to mental health services promotes school safety by helping to create a positive learning environment in which students feel connected to their school community.

In order to support the increased need for comprehensive mental and behavioral health services and the availability of school-based mental health professionals, it is necessary to continue to provide robust federal investments to help high needs districts recruit and retain well-trained, highly qualified school-based mental health professionals. For these reasons, we urge you to pass FY2022 Appropriations legislation that contains, at a minimum, \$800 million for the School Based Mental Health Services Professionals and School Based Mental Health Services grants, combined, and at least \$250 million for the IDEA personnel development grants. As FY2022 Appropriations move to conference with the House passed legislation, we ask that you fight for these important investments to remain in the final bill.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to working with you to make sure students in every community are supported to reach their maximum potential.

CC: Members of US Senate
Members of the US House of Representatives
White House Domestic Policy Council