

THE PATH TO HOLISTIC MENTAL HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE IN EDUCATION

Recommendations from Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows



INTRODUCTION

“Oftentimes, children and young adults’ mental health issues are not taken seriously. They are often brushed off in the school setting as if the child is just being defiant or lazy. No one ever stops to think that the child may be suffering from depression, psychosis, or ADHD.” —Mississippi Teacher ¹

In 2020, thousands of Mississippi public school teachers and students left their schools for Spring Break with no idea that they wouldn't return for the rest of the year. Mississippi's public schools would ultimately close for the rest of the semester and adapt to hybrid and virtual systems for the 2020-2021 school year. An unprecedented situation for our public education system required educators to make immediate, drastic changes to their normal practices and systems.

While the nation's classrooms have welcomed students and teachers back from the isolation of COVID-19, we continue to struggle with the trauma caused by the pandemic and the increase in school violence. Research continually validates the existence of a mental health crisis among students and teachers. In fall 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), and the Children's Hospital Association (CHA) declared a [national emergency in children's mental health](#).² In the surveys and focus groups conducted by Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows since spring 2020, teachers have consistently listed mental health training and services as one of their most pressing needs.

We are a group of Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows and highly effective teachers and counselors across the state working to advance evidence-based policies including solutions to the mental health crisis in our schools. After conducting a survey of teachers across Mississippi, we identified conditions critical to creating an infrastructure that addresses our students' mental health needs and the education of the whole child.

Findings

1. While teachers generally feel schools are prioritizing mental health, they highlight the need for a more holistic system to meet the needs of students.
2. Teachers want greater access to mental health professionals inside and outside of the school, including more capacity for school counselors and greater access to therapists and social workers.
3. Teachers want training and tools to help them better identify students in need of mental health services.

Recommendations

1. Require districts to establish Mental Health and Wellness Teams as part of a system of support for students' mental health.
2. Provide Mental First Aid Training to ensure schools can better identify students in need of mental health care and resources.
3. Increase the quantity and capacity of school counselors to provide mental health support for students.
4. Require districts to adopt mental health screeners and periodic wellness checks to identify students' mental health needs.

METHODOLOGY

In March 2023, Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows shared a “School Mental Health Supports Survey” with teachers and school counselors from across the state to identify resources and policies both teachers and school counselors would prioritize in order to build effective systems that address students’ mental health needs. Over 100 teachers and school counselors, representing school districts from each of Mississippi’s four congressional districts, completed the survey.³

In the survey, we asked respondents to share their thoughts about mental health resources currently accessible to students and school staff members. Respondents were asked to identify priorities for addressing the mental health needs in their schools and to select up to three evidence-based options among the following:

- + Identify mental health needs of students through the implementation of mental health screeners and wellness checks.
- + Increase capacity of counselors to address mental health needs by hiring more counselors and/or protecting time for counselors to meet with students.
- + Provide student-led mental health services and resources, such as youth mental health first aid training, peer mediation, etc.
- + Adopt SEL/mental health programs with varied platforms aligned to the mental health needs of students.
- + Provide training and professional development for school staff focusing on trauma-informed instruction and supporting identified student mental health needs.
- + Increase access to mental health service providers for students and teachers, such as therapists, behavioral specialists, and social workers.
- + Make time for mental wellness by incorporating wellness time into school schedules and allowing a finite number of excused absences for mental health days.



FINDINGS

1. While teachers generally feel schools are prioritizing mental health, they highlight the need for a more holistic system to meet the needs of students.

Seventy-five percent of our survey respondents agreed their school leaders prioritized supporting student mental health.⁴ Eighty-five percent also reported they understood the process of reporting mental health issues to appropriate personnel when necessary.⁵ However, according to respondents, schools are missing the training and systems needed to identify students facing mental health challenges and the connection with the services and resources they may need.⁶ One teacher said:

“It’s not that I think that my school leaders don’t care, it’s that there are so few resources available to support our families that maybe no one even knows where to start? It’s not just our students who are suffering- it’s their families and our teachers and staff. Everyone is overwhelmed and floundering.”⁷

2. Teachers want greater access to mental health professionals inside and outside of the school, including more capacity for school counselors and greater access to therapists and social workers.

When survey respondents were asked what they would prioritize to promote mental health and wellness in their schools, nearly two-thirds pointed to increased access to mental health service providers, which includes “therapists, behavioral specialists, and social workers.”⁸ One teacher shared:

“Everyone needs a break at times just to make sure their mental health is intact. Having therapists and social workers in the building, who are professional, serious about their job and not burnt out, would be very beneficial to the students and staff members. Most of the staff are not trained to understand students’ mental health needs/concerns. So they are written up and suspended for their behaviors instead of referred for treatment.”⁹

Respondents also raised concerns that school counselors are often tasked with multiple responsibilities leaving very little time to address the mental health needs of students. A school counselor mentioned:

“I have worked in several school districts and the school counselors have more responsibilities than just assisting our students. Additionally, the media has made mental health a high profile topic and more students are being identified with mental health issues, so hiring more personnel is an obvious solution.”¹⁰

3. Teachers want training and tools to help them better identify students in need of mental health services.

Forty-three percent of survey respondents prioritized the use of mental health screeners and wellness checks as a means of more-effectively identifying students in need of support.¹¹ They highlighted the importance of identifying student and teacher mental health challenges and the fear, according to one teacher, of “missing big signs of mental health issues and how to address concerns with students.”¹² Additionally, when explaining why they prioritized certain mental health supports, respondents expressed the need for training and professional development that would help them assist students when appropriate, and refer them to additional resources when necessary.¹³ One teacher added:

“A basic screener and addition to the cumulative folder can be implemented statewide through MDE. Student-centered services and training will start to change the culture toward a more receptive environment for normative procedures. Training and development for school staff will allow us to differentiate some behaviors that are masked as trauma.”¹⁴



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Require school districts to establish Mental Health and Wellness Teams as part of a system of support for students' mental health.

In [Recommendations for Mental Health and Wellness Legislation](#), Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows recommended that districts establish teams that can take “proactive steps to promote mental health for students and teachers,” an effective method for coordinating school and community efforts for addressing mental health needs.¹⁵ The teams would consist of teachers, school counselors, and administrators and would be responsible for creating a Mental Health and Wellness Plan. These plans should be presented to the State Department of Education and should include:

- + Training and professional development opportunities for youth-service adults in the district.
- + Inventories of mental health resources, services, and providers in the community.
- + Solutions for ensuring sufficient time is reserved for providing mental health care.
- + A summary of research-based district policies and initiatives nationwide, such as [mental health days currently available in 12 states](#)¹⁶ and [administration of mental health screeners and wellness checks](#).¹⁷

2. Provide Mental Health First Aid Training to ensure schools can better identify students in need of mental health care and resources.

In March 2023, the Legislature passed [the Mississippi Collaborative Response to Mental Health Act](#), which states that “each county and municipal law enforcement agency shall provide mental health first aid training that is evidence-based and approved by the DMH to all law enforcement officers who are employed or contracted by the agency by July 1, 2031.”¹⁸ We strongly support the effort to better prepare law enforcement to respond to the mental health crises in our communities, and we believe educators must also be prepared to respond to the mental health crises in our schools.

To that end, we recommend Mental Health First Aid Training as a requirement for all members of Mental Health and Wellness Teams. Training sessions can be provided by state agencies, service providers, or nonprofit organizations [certified](#) in Mental Health First Aid Instruction.¹⁹ Each district's Mental Health and Wellness plan should include the following:

- + Documentation of each team member's training
- + Indication that at least one teacher and one administrator at elementary, middle school, and high school levels has been trained
- + Documentation of additional district staff members who were trained, at the discretion of the Mental Health and Wellness team

3. Increase the quantity and capacity of school counselors to provide mental health support for students.

Mississippi currently employs [1,137](#) school counselors in our public schools with a student to counselor ratio of 389 students per counselor. While this ratio is slightly lower than the national average, it is well above the 250:1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.²⁰ States that have smaller ratios are able to better address mental health needs, and research has found a link to lower discipline infractions, higher graduation rates, and attendance rates.²¹ In order to meet the mental health needs of our students at this critical time, it is imperative that we work to significantly increase access to counselors across our school districts.

By adding 336 new counselors to our existing workforce, Mississippi would not only reduce our student-to counselor ratio to 300:1, but would race past North Carolina by having the lowest ratio among states in the southeastern region. Meeting this goal, based upon [the average school counselor salary data](#), would require an investment of approximately \$16.6 million.²² While a state investment from our legislature would be ideal for achieving this goal, policymakers could work to potentially reduce the total expenditures through the utilization of additional state and federal funding streams, and through community mental health partnerships which could also provide additional access to counselors.

At the local level, school and district administrators can set staffing priorities in order to ensure that school counselors have additional time to address mental health needs. For example, hiring [career coaches](#) to assist students with planning post-graduation goals, or by allowing lead teachers to supervise testing and administrative tasks, school counselors will be able to devote more time toward addressing mental health issues.²³ Offering teacher incentives to take on additional tasks that are often assigned to already overloaded school counselors would be a solution to navigating the heavy workload while at the same time benefiting educators that decide to take on extra duties.

Southeastern School Student/Counselor Ratio (2021-2022)²⁴

Southeastern States	Student/Counselor Ratios
North Carolina	316:1
South Carolina	329:1
Arkansas	357:1
Mississippi	389:1
Texas	390:1
Alabama	409:1
Georgia	411:1
Louisiana	432:1
Florida	436:1
Tennessee	458:1

4. Require districts to adopt mental health screeners and periodic wellness checks to identify students' mental health needs.

Teachers want to be able to better identify student mental health needs and mental health screeners and wellness checks can provide useful and timely information for school staff members. Periodic wellness checks could inform educators about the general mental health and well-being of students while the more formal screeners can be included in the cumulative folders of each student. Mental Health and Wellness Teams can establish a timeline for administering the screener in the aforementioned established Mental Health and Wellness Plan and can determine what training or professional development would be necessary for implementation.

To ensure the effectiveness of these measures, it is essential to mandate the use of the mental health screeners and incorporate them into the cumulative folder of each student. Furthermore, it is crucial for these screeners to be conducted in person by trained counselors. By making mental health screeners such as [the ACEs \(adverse childhood experiences\) Screener](#) readily available, schools will be able to promptly identify students in need of mental health services.²⁵

CONCLUSION

For far too long, teachers in Mississippi have struggled with the trauma caused by the pandemic and the increase in school violence. It is time we develop a framework and infrastructure to address the mental health crises among students and teachers. This begins by listening to our teachers.

Teachers want school districts to establish Mental Health and Wellness Teams to create systems to better support mental health. They want mental health training to identify students in need of mental health resources. We must also increase the quantity and capacity of school counselors to support our students and mandate mental health screeners, critical for educating the whole child and increasing opportunities of academic success for all. We challenge educational leaders and policymakers to hear the voices of these Mississippi teachers as they plea for help. We encourage them to view the resulting recommendations as a blueprint for building the kind of school culture that can heal and grow whole students and whole communities.

2022-2023 TEACH PLUS MISSISSIPPI POLICY FELLOWS

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ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all.
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ENDNOTES

- 1** Question 13: If you would like to provide an explanation for your above responses, please use the space below. (open response question) Question 12: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Respondents chose whether they Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, or Strongly Disagree with each of the following statements. “My school leaders prioritize supporting student mental health.” “I understand the process for reporting student mental health issues to appropriate personnel when necessary.” “I feel comfortable discussing student mental health issues with administrators in my school.
- 2** American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021). AAP, AACAP, CHA declare national emergency in children’s mental health. AAP News. Retrieved from: <https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/17718/AAP-AACAP-CHA-declare-national-emergency-in?autologincheck=redirected>
- 3** See Appendix for full demographic data
- 4** See Question 7 in the Appendix.
- 5** See Question 8 in the Appendix.
- 6** See Question 10 in the Appendix.
- 7** Question 12: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Respondents chose whether they Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, or Strongly Disagree with each of the following statements. “My school leaders prioritize supporting student mental health.” “I understand the process for reporting student mental health issues to appropriate personnel when necessary.” “I feel comfortable discussing student mental health issues with administrators in my school. Question 13: If you would like to provide an explanation for your above responses, please use the space below. (open response question)
- 8** See Question 10 in the Appendix.
- 9** Question 15: In the space provided below, please share your reasons for selecting your top options for meeting the mental health needs in your school.
- 10** Question 15: In the space provided below, please share your reasons for selecting your top options for meeting the mental health needs in your school.
- 11** See Question 10 in the Appendix.
- 12** Question 15: In the space provided below, please share your reasons for selecting your top options for meeting the mental health needs in your school.
- 13** See Question 10 in the Appendix.
- 14** Question 15: In the space provided below, please share your reasons for selecting your top options for meeting the mental health needs in your school.
- 15** Archie, K., et. al. (2021). Recommendations for mental health and wellness legislation. Teach Plus Mississippi. Retrieved from: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dqMzC2QKngJz1FeLtsxwDz9mICmvP09g/view>
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21 American School Counselor Association (2022). School Counselor Roles and Ratios. Retrieved from: <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/School-Counselor-Roles-Ratios>

22 Career Explorer (2023). School Counselor Salary in Mississippi. Retrieved from: <https://www.careerexplorer.com/careers/school-counselor/salary/mississippi/>

23 Accelerate MS. (2022). Accelerate MS announces \$8 million investment in innovative career coach program. Retrieved from: <https://acceleratems.org/acceleratems-announces-8-million-investment-in-career-coaches-for-125-mississippi-high-schools/>

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25 Watson, P. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) questionnaire. The Childhood Trauma Kit,. Retrieved from: <https://www.porticonetwork.ca/web/childhood-trauma-toolkit/toolshttps://www.porticonetwork.ca/documents/844852/0/ACE+Questionnaire+2018/f6ed0ddc-9589-4e91-80a5-26a42ea52a57>

APPENDIX

Overall Sample Size: 123

1. Person of Color

n = 123	%
Yes	26.02
No	68.29
Prefer Not To Disclose	5.69
Total:	100

2. Race/Ethnicity

n = 123	%
Asian or Pacific Islander	2.44
Black or African-American	26.8
Hispanic or Latinx	0.81
Native American or Alaska Native	0.81
White or Caucasian	68.29
Prefer Not To Disclose	0.81
Total:	100

3. Current Role

n = 123	%
Teacher	79.67
Counselor	6.50
Other - Write In	13.82
Total:	100

4. Years of Teaching Experience

n = 123	%
Less than 4 years	13.82
4-9 years	19.51
10-15 years	30.08
More than 15 years	36.5
Total:	100

5. Grade Level Taught (total may be over 100%)

n = 123	%
Pre-Kindergarten	4.88
Elementary School	46.34
Middle School	32.52
High School	32.52

6. Title I

n = 123	%
Yes	59.35
No	21.14
Unsure	19.51
Total:	100

7. My school leaders prioritize supporting student mental health.

n = 123	%
Strongly Agree	34.96
Somewhat Agree	40.65
Somewhat Disagree	10.57
Strongly Disagree	13.01
Unsure	0.81
Total:	100

8. I understand the process for reporting student mental health issues to appropriate personnel when necessary.

n = 123	%
Strongly Agree	63.41
Somewhat Agree	26.02
Somewhat Disagree	4.88
Strongly Disagree	4.88
Unsure	0.81
Total:	100

9. I feel comfortable discussing student mental health issues with administrators in my school.

n = 123	%
Strongly Agree	59.35
Somewhat Agree	26.83
Somewhat Disagree	8.94
Strongly Disagree	3.25
Unsure	1.63
Total:	100

10. The following is a list of options for promoting mental health and wellness in schools. Which of the following options would you consider to be the most important for your school? Please choose up to three.

n = 123	%
Screeners and wellness checks	43.09
Increase counselor capacity	52.85
Student-led mental health services	12.20
SEL/mental health program	29.27
Trauma-informed training and PD	32.52
Access to mental health service providers	64.23
Make time for mental wellness	35.77

11. My school leaders prioritize supporting the mental health of school staff.

n = 123	%
Strongly Agree	17.50
Somewhat Agree	45.83
Somewhat Disagree	16.67
Strongly Disagree	15.83
Unsure	4.17
Total:	100

12. I feel comfortable discussing mental health needs of staff in my school.

n = 123	%
Strongly Agree	22.31
Somewhat Agree	39.67
Somewhat Disagree	24.79
Strongly Disagree	11.57
Unsure	1.65
Total:	100