Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Building and Sustaining Programs for School-based Behavioral Health Services in K-12 Schools

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Youth spend most of their time in school, offering an important opportunity to deliver mental and behavioral health services that meet them where they are. Schools can provide prevention services aimed at supporting positive youth behavioral health, decreasing the need for higher-level care, and can also serve as a key point of access for youth to receive more targeted services, such as therapy and crisis intervention. This is particularly important for youth in under-resourced communities where there are high unmet behavioral health needs and insufficient numbers of behavioral health providers.

Defining and meeting the needs of schools to support youth behavioral health is particularly important given the current youth behavioral health crisis. Behavioral health challenges in children were rising even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and youth psychological distress and unmet behavioral health need increased further during the pandemic. When combined with the limited and inequitable access to care that existed before the current crisis, the increased behavioral health challenges among youth translate to more children needing services in school. States are working to respond to this challenge and potential opportunity.

With this white paper, we describe several innovative strategies implemented by states and municipalities in support of comprehensive behavioral health services in schools.

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