

Mental Health and Schools

Support the Governor’s plan to enhance school mental health services, pass legislation to increase the mental health literacy of school personnel, establish mental health related excused absences, and support school suicide prevention

There are a number of immediate steps that MHANYS supports in response to the mental health needs of schools including enhancing access to school mental health services, raising the mental health literacy of school personnel, and promoting policies that contribute to a climate and culture of wellness in New York’s schools.

School mental health service expansion: MHANYS applauds and supports Governor Hochul’s proposal to invest \$20 million to expand mental health services in schools by increasing Medicaid payment rates for school-based satellite clinics, and a \$10 million investment to expand school-based wraparound services, including an annual investment to provide the start-up funding necessary to get new and expanded school services in operation quickly.

School personnel training: Legislation signed into law in 2016 now requires all schools in New York State to teach students in grades K-12 about mental health from a mental health literacy perspective as part of the school health curriculum. Teachers and other school personnel, however, are not currently required to have any training in mental health.

As students begin to learn more about mental health it is vital that teachers, administrators and school support personnel have similar training. A shared knowledge of mental health across the school community helps promote a school culture and climate of wellness that benefits everyone in schools as well as families and the community at large.

Excused absences: Mental illnesses and the symptoms associated with developing mental health challenges impact students in many ways, affecting their academic performance, maturation, relationships, prospect for graduation and much more. Bouts of depression and anxiety can be just as debilitating as many chronic health conditions and when a student is experiencing the symptoms associated with mental health conditions it can impair their ability to function in school. Just as with physical illnesses, people with mental health conditions need the ability to take a break from the demands of school in order to rest, heal and seek professional treatment when necessary. When public policies reflect an appreciation for parity between mental health and physical health it helps to reduce stigma and supports norms which acknowledge the seriousness and legitimacy of mental illness. Both Oregon and Utah have passed laws allowing students to take time off from school due to mental health. In New York, each school district establishes its own policies regarding what constitutes an excused absence within state guidelines. There is currently no law that requires, allows or encourages schools to include “mental health days” in their policies regarding acceptable reasons for excused absences.

Suicide prevention: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reports that among high school students in New York in 2017, 17.4% seriously considered suicide and 10.1% made non-fatal suicide attempts. Each year, 4,600 children and teens, age 10-19, die by suicide making it the second leading cause of death for that age group.

Schools can play a critical role in suicide prevention and intervention efforts for youth in crisis. Unfortunately, according to The Trevor Project, over 1/3 of New York school districts do not currently have a suicide prevention policy and there is currently no legal requirement for them to have such policies. When youths are in crisis, it is essential that the adults around them be equipped to recognize issues and respond appropriately. It is equally important that those in crisis be able to access resources that provide care, support and safety.

Legislative Need

MHANYS supports three legislative proposals in response to the mental health needs of schools including:

- 1) Support the Governor's budget proposal to expand school-based satellite clinics and enhance school-based wraparound services through an investment of \$30 million.
- 2) S.5294 (Fernandez) would require all holders of a professional certificates in the classroom teaching service, all holders of a level III teaching assistant certificates, and all holders of professional certificates in educational leadership service to receive three hours of mental health training annually.
- 3) S.3179 (Hoylman-Sigal) would amend the education law, in relation to providing for absences from school for the mental or behavioral health of minors.
- 4) S.1537 (Hoylman-Sigal)/A.4788 (O'Donnell) would require all New York school boards to adopt a policy on student suicide prevention, intervention, and post-vention for grades 7 to 12.