

## 2024 Questions for Candidates: Supporting Student Mental Health

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This resource developed by the Policy Committee of the [Coalition for Expanding School-Based Mental Health in Wisconsin \(CESBMH\)](#) is intended to serve as an educational tool to help the wide array of parent, school, and provider partners across the state in their efforts to support improved student mental health and well-being. The Coalition invites feedback and suggestions to continue improving our resources. Please contact [kmarkeland@wafca.org](mailto:kmarkeland@wafca.org) with questions or suggestions.

### There are 3 key components to supporting school mental health (SMH) in Wisconsin:

- **GRANTS:** Growing School Mental Health Funding
- **WORKFORCE:** Building School Mental Health Workforce
- **INSURANCE:** Advancing Insurance Coverage for Student Mental Health

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### **GRANTS:** Growing School Mental Health Funding

**Main Message:** Wisconsin students deserve a robust financial commitment that promises to strengthen school climate, enhance mental health literacy, expand mental health services coordination, increase school staff competencies, and improve coordination of care with mental health therapists when students need higher levels of support.

**Question for Candidates:** As a legislator, how would you champion/prioritize financial and community resources to support student mental health?

#### **Talking Points on Grants:**

- The state could invest in the long-term sustainability of school mental health services and supports by providing dedicated allocations for every school district based on student enrollment.
- Categorical aid for school mental health will enable schools to build on the foundational programs they have developed and provide for **sustainable mental health programs and services in every district across the state.**
- The **bipartisan support for school mental health grants over the past four legislative sessions has been critical in laying the foundation** for school mental health. The changes to the grant structure adopted in the 2023-25 biennial budget allocated SMH dollars to every district in the state.
- Spreading the dollars across every district in the state based on student enrollment provided a more equitable allocation of dollars but left nearly half of the school districts in the state with an allocation of \$25,000 or less. Those allocations will drop by 60% in the coming biennium, resulting in more than 300 districts receiving less than \$25,000 annually in school mental health grants.
- **While school mental health efforts have been initiated in districts across the state, there continue to be significant inequities:** some schools develop robust, comprehensive, tiered supports, and other schools lack capacity and resources.
- **To support schools, the grants could have a floor.** In their 2023-25 budget, the Department of Public Instruction recommended a base of \$100,000 per district with an annual allocation of \$100 per pupil.
- Long-term sustainability of equitable **access to school mental health services for all students depends upon a permanent, continual commitment of state resources.**

### **WORKFORCE:** Build School Mental Health Workforce

**Main Message:** Move Wisconsin forward by engaging more school-based mental health services professionals. Create more paid opportunities for the development of a high-quality mental health workforce – with special focus on our underserved regions of the state and for the development of clinicians of color, who are historically underrepresented in the workforce.

**Question for Candidates:** As a legislator, how would you invest in school services professionals and mental health clinicians to ensure student mental health needs are identified and that there are supportive adults available to students to respond with the right level of care?

## **Talking Points on Workforce:**

### *~ Support Growth of Critical School Services Professionals*

- **Wisconsin falls far short of nationally recommended ratios for school nurses, psychologists, counselors, and social workers.** These **pupil services staff provide the infrastructure for mental well-being in our schools** and are critical partners for connecting students to community mental health providers working in collaboration with schools.
- These professionals often also serve as the “navigators” for students and families, helping families with insurance coverage challenges, barriers like high deductibles, and facilitating student and parent consents.
- In 2023-25, DPI sought \$36 million over the 2023-25 biennium to support these critical professionals.

### *~ Support Grants for Qualified Treatment Trainees*

- **Created by the legislature in the 2019-21 biennial budget, the Qualified Treatment Trainee (QTT) grant program supports new mental health interns and emerging therapists** as they complete their training and prepare for full professional licensure. In the 2021-23 biennial budget, the legislature expanded this small grant program to \$750,000 annually.
- There has been high demand for this program, which has been able to capitalize on the infusion of additional federal dollars to substantially **increase the number of QTTs serving historically underserved populations and geographically diverse regions of the state.**
- By the second year of the grant, grantee agencies were able to increase the average number of QTTs supported by 40%.
- At a minimum, the state could double the annual funding of this successful program to \$1.5 million.

## **INSURANCE: Advance insurance coverage for student mental health**

**Main Message:** *Properly recognizing and reimbursing peer specialists and therapists in-training supports students and supports growth in Wisconsin’s mental health workforce.*

**Question for candidates:** *As a policymaker, how would you support true mental health parity for our students and make sure that their health insurance (private or public) provides equitable access to effective mental health services?*

### **Talking points on insurance:**

#### *~ Commercial Insurance Coverage for In-Training Therapists (QTTs)*

- The state could address one substantial barrier to student access to mental health therapy by adopting a requirement that insurance plans cover master’s level mental health therapists in-training, who are licensed/certified by the state.
- Across the board, schools identify **lack of sufficient insurance coverage as a barrier** to students accessing mental health services in schools. Barriers include **high deductibles, prior authorization requirements, and restricted networks** that fail to include sufficient mental health providers.
- **Narrow networks occur in both the public and private insurance;** however, Medicaid does a better job of reimbursing for in-training therapists.
- Insurance **networks that don’t recognize therapists in-training keep students from accessing services** offered at their school location. School mental health works best when a student referred for individual therapy can access it quickly and conveniently.

#### *~ BadgerCare Plus & Commercial Insurance Coverage for Peer Specialists*

- Parent peer specialists are important resources to support family success in school mental health.
- Peer specialists may provide mental health navigation support and align with students and families to advance recovery and wellbeing.
- **Adopting Medicaid coverage of peer specialists as a covered Medicaid benefit will increase the peer specialist workforce and expand timely access to needed support.**