



PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES 2021-23

Building on Success and Advancing Mental Wellness

1. Continue growing school-based mental health services grants
2. Invest in our mental health workforce
3. Advance parity coverage for telehealth

In recent years, Wisconsin policymakers have prioritized student mental health by supporting policies and funding initiatives to increase student access to mental health therapy services in school, while also promoting key strategies to advance healthy school climates that foster mental well-being. These valuable investments have laid a strong foundation for quality school/community partnerships. However, the pandemic has taken a toll with more students reporting episodes of depression and anxiety and Wisconsin's mental health workforce is insufficient to respond to the current and emerging needs of our students.

Members of the Coalition for Expanding School-Based Mental Health in Wisconsin know first-hand the difference that strong, comprehensive approaches to student mental health can make in student success. School-based mental health treatment and mental well-being investments work. Wisconsin should continue to grow our mental health workforce, provide incentives for emerging school mental-health programs and sustain strong, model programs across the state, so that students benefit from school climates that advance the well-being of all.

Continue Growing School-Based Mental Health Services Grants

The School-Based Mental Health Services Grants have been an important resource to help school and community partners develop quality collaborations to support students and school staff. The Coalition recommends an increase of \$3.5 million in each year of the biennium will result in a total annual allocation of \$10 million.

- **Increase Access to Grants.** In addition to increasing the grants, the Coalition recommends modifying the SMH grant language to:
 - Permit larger grants in excess of \$75,000.
 - Allow schools to partner with an individual therapist and/or telehealth provider when a community-based agency is not available.
 - Make tribal community schools eligible for grants.
- **Grant demand exceeded funding.** Per the DPI budget request: "The department was able to fund 106 applicants in the most recent grant cycle, but even with the increased funding, dozens of applicants went unfunded."
- **Service needs are significant.** Demand for mental health services continues to rise, particularly as rates of anxiety and depression have increased during the pandemic. The most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey showed nearly 60 percent of high school students reported experiencing mental health challenges in the previous year.

Invest in Our Mental Health Workforce

It takes a team to build and sustain a comprehensive school-based mental health system. Comprehensive systems rely on key pupil services staff to support social and emotional learning and mental health therapists to consult with teachers and staff and offer individual/group therapy when needed.

Expand state support for 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 backbone 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 staff often serve as the “navigators” for our students and families who need to connect with group or individual therapy services – helping families with insurance coverage challenges, overcoming barriers like high deductibles, and facilitating student and parent consents. The Coalition supports increased funding to improve the student to pupil services staff ratio across Wisconsin.

DPI has recommended and the Governor’s budget provides for an increase of \$22,500,000 GPR in FY22 and \$24,000,000 GPR in FY23 to expand the categorical aid for school mental health programs and provide reimbursements for all pupil services categories. The last budget targeted school social workers, however, schools need additional support for school counselors, school nurses, and school psychologists as well and all should be reimbursable under expanded state funding.

Help New Mental Health Therapists Complete their Training. The 2019-21 biennial budget created a new grant program to support new mental health professionals complete their training and prepare for full professional licensure. This small grant program should be expanded to create more paid, in-training 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.

The Coalition recommends investing an additional \$500,000 annually to further expand the clinical supervision grant program for qualified treatment trainees who are pursuing their 3000 hours of supervised practice in preparation for full licensure. (WI Stat 146.618).

- **Double the grant program.** This program was initially funded at \$500,000 annually in the 2019-21 biennial budget. The proposed increase would result in available grants of \$1 million annually.
- **Expanding Opportunities for Clinicians in Training.** The grant program focuses on growing opportunities for master’s level mental health providers to obtain their 3000 hours of training prior to full mental health therapist licensure.
- **Focusing on Diversity in the Sector.** The first round of grants placed particular emphasis on increasing opportunities for BIPOC practitioners, those with skills to serve the deaf and hard of hearing community and expanding mental health services to other underserved populations/regions of the state.
- **Grant Demand Exceeded Available Dollars.** The first round of grants was awarded in December 2020 and qualified grant proposals significantly exceeded available grant dollars.

Advance Parity Coverage for Telehealth

Early in the public health emergency, school-based mental health providers pivoted quickly to teletherapy services. Therapists continue to deliver virtual care as school closures persist. Students, parents and therapists are reporting positive experiences with teletherapy overall. While in-person services should continue emerging as public health conditions permit, teletherapy is here to stay. The passage of 2019 WI Act 56 laid the groundwork for Medicaid to fund telehealth services into the future. Medicaid is a critical funding source for school-based mental health providers given that most students receiving therapy services are Medicaid eligible. To achieve universal access and true

“parity,” the Coalition recommends that private insurers and employer plans should also make the permanent shift to covering teletherapy services.

- **Continue expanded access.** Teletherapy allows for continued safe, practical, and effective treatment for students and in some instances has enabled more students to access services and/or access services more quickly.
- **Expand family connection through teletherapy services.** Practitioners have reported on the benefits of telehealth for more readily connecting parents and caregivers to family therapy and other psychoeducational supports – empowering them to support their student’s mental health and well-being.
- **Prohibit restrictions that limit access.** Any state policy to require parity coverage of telehealth services should consider elimination/reduction of barriers such as: cost sharing, prior authorization, limited networks, inequitable payment structures, and/or restrictions related to medical necessity.

Coalition for Expanding School-Based Mental Health in Wisconsin

A statewide coalition whose mission is to advance and support expanded, comprehensive and integrated mental health services within the school setting through school, home, and community partnerships.

<https://www.schoolmentalhealthwisconsin.org>

Supporting Organizations

Children’s Wisconsin

Disability Rights Wisconsin

Family & Children’s Center

Family Service Waukesha

Foundations Health & Wholeness

Journey Mental Health

Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, Inc

Orion Family Services

Professional Services Group

Pathfinders Milwaukee, Inc

Racine Collaborative for Children’s Mental Health

RISE Wisconsin

SaintA

Samaritan Counseling Center of the Fox Valley

School Community Partnership for Mental Health

Sebastian Family Psychology Practice

Wisconsin Association of Family & Children’s Agencies

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