



The Children's Policy and Law Initiative of Indiana Comprehensive Student Support

Policies designed to advance youth justice, protect children from entering into the delinquency system, and disrupt the pipeline from school-to-prison

Federal COVID Funding Should Be Used to Invest in Comprehensive Student Support Personnel (Counselors, Social Workers, Psychologists and Nurses) in Indiana Schools

The Black-White achievement gap is a pressing concern for Indiana workforce development. There are unequal educational outcomes for students of color, and these lead to serious gaps in workforce development. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major effect on student learning *and* student mental health. Students made fewer academic gains during the pandemic and ended the year with lower achievement than earlier years.ⁱ Black, and Latinx, and American Indian/Alaska Native students, and students in high-poverty schools, were especially affected by learning losses.ⁱⁱ The pandemic has experienced serious increase in mental health issues among youth. There has been a 30% jump in suspected suicide attempts among adolescents,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as increases in student depression, anxiety and acting out behavior.^{iv} Academic success and student mental health are inextricably linked. Even before the pandemic we knew that trauma harms students' ability to learn.^v That is even more true today for more students. *We cannot meet critical instructional goals of overcoming learning loss or closing the achievement gap without attending to the increased mental health needs of children in the wake of the pandemic.*

Recommendation

Comprehensive student support personnel can help guide critical programming for students' mental health-related needs that have been exacerbated by COVID and contribute to the Achievement Gap. Through three rounds of federal coronavirus relief funding in 2020 and 2021, Indiana has been awarded over \$3,000,000,000, which becomes available over the next three years. With these funds, the state is receiving an historic level of education funding, while serious deficits of student support personnel exist across the state. Critical topics related to comprehensive student support workforce development opportunities and barriers, and evidence-based collaborative programming and interventions in schools, should be studied in an interim summer study committee in 2022. Additionally, the Indiana Department of Education should be encouraged to invest federal coronavirus relief funding to support raising the state's student-staff ratios for comprehensive student supports personnel—school counselor, school social worker, school psychologists and school nurses—to meet state and national benchmarks.

Reactive and Exclusionary Methods Should Not Be a Response to the Problem

Reactive and exclusionary methods for “keeping order” will likely exacerbate student mental health issues caused by the pandemic. Further, responding to social/emotional or behavioral problems with exclusion or punishment leads to:

- A more negative school climate^{vi}
- Decreases in student attendance^{vii} and academic engagement^{viii}
- Lower academic achievement^{ix}

- Increased dropout^x and decreased college attendance/graduation^{xi}
- Increased school disruption^{xii} and anti-social behavior^{xiii} in future years
- In the long term, higher rates of juvenile delinquency^{xiv} and arrest^{xv}

The negative effects of punitive and exclusionary discipline fall most heavily on students of color, who are more likely to attend schools with higher rates of exclusionary discipline.^{xvi} Harsh school discipline disproportionately increases school dropout and arrest rates for youth of color, and research has shown that *fully 20% of the achievement gap is due to Black-White disparities in suspension.*^{xvii} Instead, schools should **build a positive school climate with evidence-based programs** that promote a positive and supportive school climate. Positive school climates have been found to be associated with improvements in academic learning;^{xviii} less instructional time lost due to school removal; and improvements in student behavior.^{xix}

Meeting the Needs with Increased Staff and Evidence-Based Programming

At this moment in time, schools are in critical need of *resources* enabling them to respond to pandemic-related children’s mental health needs.^{xx} In particular, our schools need comprehensive student support personnel (school social workers, school nurses, school counselors, school psychologists), who have the training and school experience to implement evidence-based programs to meet those needs. All of those staff roles are seriously under-funded, leading to Indiana student-staff ratios far below both national and state recommended levels. For example, only approximately a third-to-a-half of school counselors are in place in Indiana schools, as mandated by 511 IAC 4-1.5-8.^{xxi} Using federal COVID relief funds, Indiana has the capacity to be able to respond to that need, in order to meet the needs of our students. Our state should develop a three-year plan and funding priority to raise staffing levels of all roles to recommended levels. Other states, including Arizona and Georgia, are using federal funding to support increasing the presence of comprehensive student support personnel.

Evidence-Based Collaborative Programming relies on those most well-trained to be able to guide those efforts (social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses). City Connects, Community Schools and Wrap-Around-based programs, are examples working in multiple schools in Central Indiana, Having specifically dedicated staff, such as licensed counselors and school social workers, is important in leveraging community assets and resources to address the needs of the entire school community. These programs emphasize collaborative team effort involving parents, teachers, and community,^{xxii} with good evidence for their effectiveness.^{xxiii}

	School Counselors	Social Workers	School Psychologists	School Nurses
National Recommendation	250:1	250:1	500:1	750:1
Indiana Average	533:1	4639:1*	2324:1	1022:1

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