

Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup

Background of the Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup

State Superintendent of Public Instruction (SSPI) Tom Torlakson convened the Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup (SMHPW), with funding from the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA). The CalMHSA is an organization of county governments working to improve mental health outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.

The CalMHSA administers Prevention and Early Intervention programs funded by Proposition 63: The Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) of 2004 on a statewide, regional, and local basis. The SSPI has brought together individuals with diverse expertise to develop innovative policy recommendations to address the mental health challenges facing vulnerable youth. Many of these vulnerable youth are in programs for special education, English learners, children living in poverty, or foster care; but these programs are not enough to help students overcome additional mental health barriers they face in preparing for their futures.

The all-volunteer, unpaid work group is composed of teachers, school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, school nurses, and school administrators, as well as state and county mental health professionals. This diverse group of experts has reviewed the current mental health needs of California students as well as the existing student mental health practices, and its first recommendation is that educators—including administrators and teachers—need more training in the area of student mental health.

This sharper focus on methods of supporting student mental health is needed first in California's credentialing standards. These new credentialing standards will enable educators to enhance collaborative partnerships and school-level and district-level teams to link students who face the most severe challenges to appropriate services. Educators must be trained to provide students and their families with greater access to mental health services.

Educators must also be trained for California's multicultural population, and school-based family-oriented services should be emphasized in order to reduce stigma and increase follow-through with referrals to improve student mental health.

Background for the Need of Credential Training in Student Mental Health

Over the past decade, American society has become increasingly aware of mental health issues in the general population through tragic events such as the school shootings in Columbine, Newtown, and Taft.

This increased awareness has created an immediate response from student mental health stakeholders, parents, and policymakers who are demanding that students have access to mental health supports in the schools.

There is also a growing recognition that school staff need more training in recognizing the signs of mental illness and knowing how to refer students and families to appropriate school and community resources if greater mental health access is to be achieved.

Research indicates that teachers feel they lack the training needed for supporting children's mental health needs. In surveys, teachers cite disruptive behavior and their lack of information and training in mental health issues as major barriers to instruction. A study titled "Supporting Children's Mental Health in Schools: Teacher Perceptions of Needs, Roles, and Barriers" as reported in a 2011 issue of *Psychology Quarterly*, describes a "lack of experience and training for supporting children's mental health needs."

All certificated school staff must be better equipped to recognize key signs of mental health conditions and to understand possible actions available to them in addressing student and family needs.

The recommendations below are the Work Group's response to the mental health training needs of certificated school staff at this time when the curriculum standards for teachers and school administrators are being revised.

Revising these standards is especially critical to disadvantaged student populations. Mental health challenges appear to disproportionately impact students who face stressors such as violence, trauma, and poverty.

Academic interventions training for teachers and school administrators alone will not succeed in helping all students achieve. California's dropout rate is unacceptably high—especially in these subgroups—and one of the most frequently neglected issues in educator training is the social and emotional health of vulnerable children.

Research demonstrates that early detection and treatment of mental illness helps students reduce the symptoms of their illness and improves attendance, behavior, and ultimately academic achievement.

The time is right to move ahead to empower educators—especially new educators—with more knowledge and training in student mental health. This is especially critical in the schools with the greatest need, frequently staffed with the least experienced and least trained teachers and administrators.

Recommendation: Credentialing Preparation to Meet Students' Mental Health Needs

This recommendation acknowledges that significant mental health and wellness knowledge is required to fully address student barriers to education. There is a clear need for all credentialed classroom teachers and administrators to receive mental health and wellness training that would help in prevention and respectful early identification and support. In addition, teachers and administrators need to know how to refer students to mental health services.

The SMHPW recommendation is that the SSPI request that appropriate credentialing programs (starting with multiple/single-subject and administrative services credentials) include mental health and wellness curricula with information about mental health conditions and how they manifest at school.

Ideally, the curriculum would enable educators to identify, reach, and teach students affected by mental health conditions and promote school environments and strategies that improve school climate and positive discipline.

The specific mental health curriculum should increase in complexity from the preliminary to the induction credentials for teaching and administrative services credentials:

- Preliminary Multiple/Single-Subject Credentials

Provide basic information about mental wellness, mental health conditions, and strategies for supporting students in the classroom, including prominent evidence-based schoolwide strategies, such as those listed in the Regional K–12 Student Mental Health Initiative clearinghouse of resources at www.regionk12smhi.org.

- Induction Multiple/Single-Subject Credentials

Require classroom management standards that address student mental health needs, incorporating social and cultural contexts, linking students and families with mental health professionals, and work with administrators and colleagues to directly and indirectly support students in the classroom through schoolwide intervention strategies like those listed in the Regional K–12 Student Mental Health Initiative clearinghouse of resources at www.regionk12smhi.org.

- Preliminary Administrative Services Credential

Provide a review of mental health and mental health conditions. Understand the role of support staff such as school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, school nurses, child welfare and attendance supervisors, and other trained mental health professionals.

Understand systems of care that interact with juvenile justice, mental health, mental health advocacy organizations, child welfare services, foster care, regional centers, and homeless youth.

Understand the effective use of mental health accommodations and school disciplinary procedures, including manifestation determination for serious offenses, and prominent schoolwide intervention strategies such as those listed in the Regional K–12 Student Mental Health Initiative clearinghouse of resources at www.regionk12smhi.org.

- Induction Administrative Services Credential

Identify and use strategies to intervene with students who are chronically absent for reasons related to student mental health. Use strategies for referral to appropriate resources/services. Demonstrate the ability to meet the mental health needs of students and families, and effectively involve school personnel (both certificated and classified) in responding to student mental health needs, through implementation of schoolwide intervention strategies such as those listed in the Regional K–12 Student Mental Health Initiative clearinghouse of resources at www.regionalk12smhi.org. Require the inclusion of strategies to help design a Comprehensive School Safety Plan that responds to mental health crises and empowers families during mental health emergencies.