



a closer LOOK



The 2022-23 state budget: Schools need resources to support mental health needs

There is a growing need for school districts to support the mental health needs of their students. Increasing trends in youth anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidality are troubling, and schools want to be a resource for services that promote the well-being and mental health of our children. The General Assembly must prioritize and adequately fund efforts to promote the mental and emotional health of students.

School districts are seeking a minimum of \$60 million in targeted grant funding in the 2022-23 state budget, which they could use in a flexible manner to provide additional mental health staff and services that best meet the needs of their students and communities.

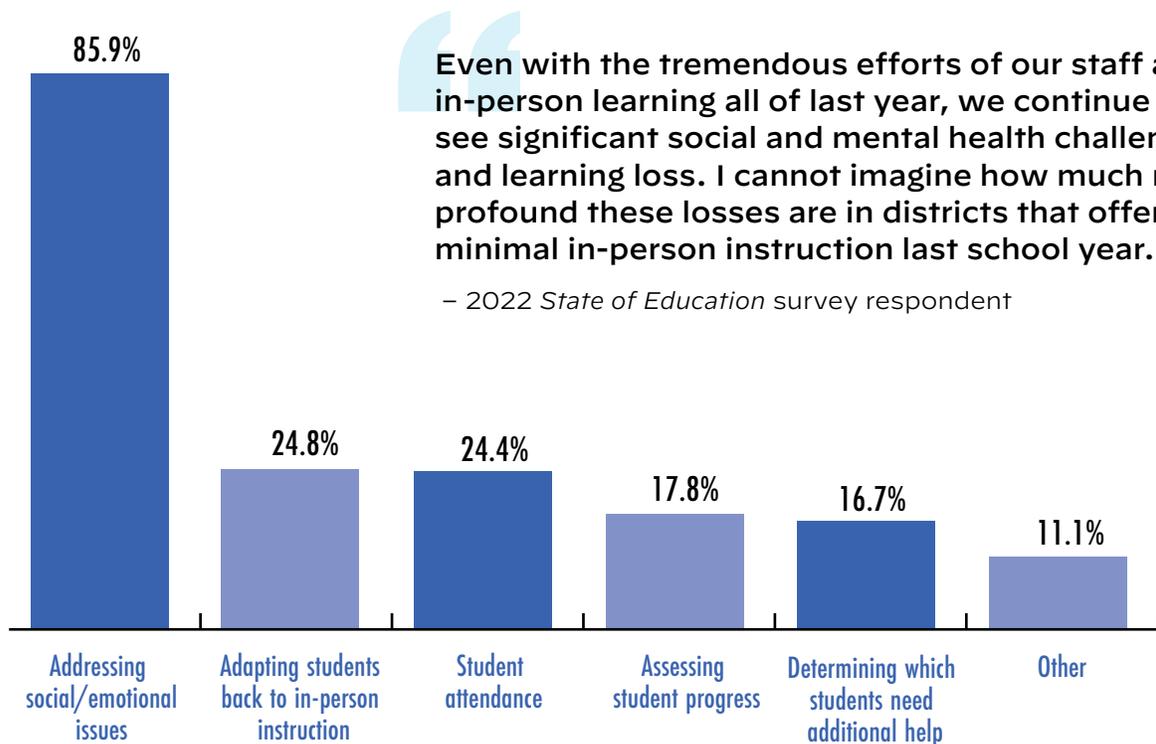


The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the decline in mental health among children and teenagers. Isolation, grief and anxiety created by deaths, loss of family income, changes to their educational model and other factors have led to even steeper declines, impacting children and families of all racial and ethnic groups, urban, suburban and rural areas, and socioeconomic divides. Our students bring these pressures into the classroom, and schools are, in many cases, the primary support for these children.

However, addressing student mental health needs was a rising concern even before the arrival of COVID-19. According to the U.S. surgeon general, before the pandemic, “mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, with up to 1 in 5 children ages 3 to 17 in the U.S. having a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder. Further, from 2009 to 2019, the share of high school students who reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%, to more than 1 in 3 students.”

Pennsylvania school districts identify mental health issues as a major challenge

PSBA’s 2022 *State of Education* report, with survey responses from chief school administrators from across the state, examined the effects of pandemic. The reduction in face-to-face learning time since the start of the pandemic has created a number of instructional challenges for school leaders. By far, the most commonly cited instructional challenge was addressing the social and emotional issues that students are experiencing, which impact their ability to learn. Nearly 86% of school districts identified student mental health issues as one of their biggest challenges.



“Even with the tremendous efforts of our staff and in-person learning all of last year, we continue to see significant social and mental health challenges and learning loss. I cannot imagine how much more profound these losses are in districts that offered minimal in-person instruction last school year.

– 2022 *State of Education* survey respondent

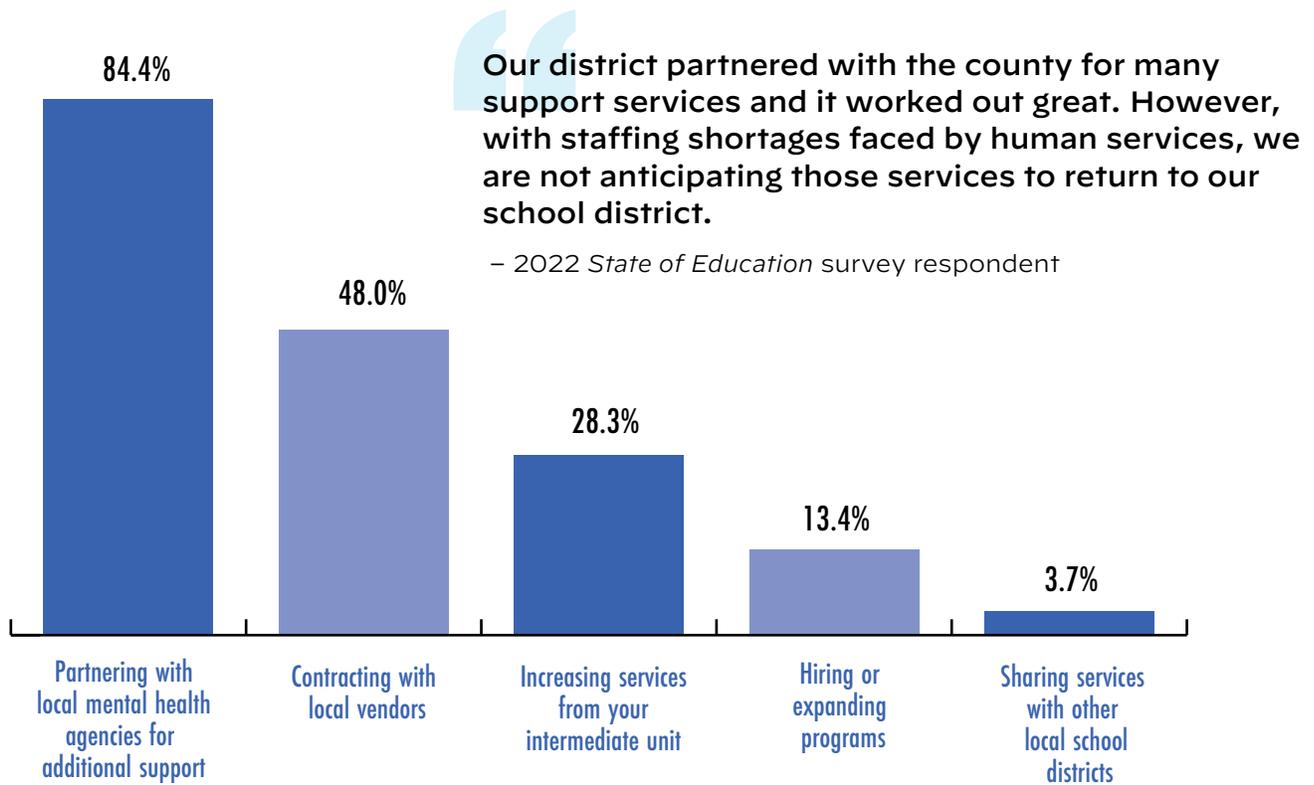
School districts are providing student supports using temporary federal relief funds

Public schools need to be able to provide an array of varied mental health services that are built on a strong foundation of consistent school programs and access to well-trained professionals, including administrators and educators, psychologists, social workers, counselors, and other mental health professionals.



With student social-emotional issues impacting learning being the top instructional challenge facing school districts, many districts are expanding their programs and services to address this growing need. According to the 2022 *State of Education* report, 84% of districts report contracting with local mental health service providers to place a professional in at least one of their buildings, and for additional supports. This was made possible largely due to the federal pandemic relief funding that school districts received. Most of those districts, about 87%, reported using federal relief funding to address social-emotional learning. Unfortunately, those federal funds will soon expire.

What schools need are additional state resources in order to supplement current mental health programs and services and to help with continued funding of these programs and services as one-time federal pandemic dollars are exhausted.



House Bill 2468 offers flexible grants to help schools

There is an undeniably demonstrated need for mental health programs and services in public schools. In order to build quality school mental health systems that promote student well-being and provide the services and supports that can be tailored to the needs of our specific communities, we need the General Assembly’s help.

House Bill 2468, introduced by Rep. Jason Ortity (R-Allegheny), would provide for student mental health-focused grants that schools could use for a variety of purposes. For example, grants could be used to hire additional counselors, social workers, school psychologists and other mental health personnel. These funds could also be used to enter into contracts for outside mental health services and supports, provide the counseling and crisis intervention services needed for students, and provide training programs for our teachers so they can identify and assist with mental health needs.



House Bill 2468 is not a pilot program impacting a few districts. Instead, it enables all school districts across the state to respond quickly and creatively in meeting the needs of the local community, in a manner that is efficient and responsible with taxpayer dollars. Funding under the bill would be driven out utilizing the current School Safety and Security Grant program housed at the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). This legislation follows the same pattern set by the General Assembly under Act 30 of 2020, when the existing grant program was amended to focus exclusively on responding to COVID-19, by amending the program again to focus solely on addressing student mental health. Under House Bill 2468, each public school entity in which a student is enrolled full-time will receive a minimum grant of \$40,000 and an additional amount based on the average daily membership of the public school entity.

This broad program provides maximum flexibility in the allowable uses for grant funding, which will enable schools, especially in areas of the state where there is a shortage of mental health service providers, to better train their existing providers, contract for a wider array of services such as crisis intervention services that can be provided remotely, or any other innovative program that is likely to have a positive impact on student mental health.

Students' mental and emotional health impacts their ability to learn, the safety and security of their schools, the classroom environment for all students, and the work environment for teachers and staff. School districts are calling on the state to prioritize and adequately fund efforts to promote the mental and emotional health of students. Legislation such as House Bill 2468 allows school districts to better meet the need for additional student mental health supports for their students.