

Youth Mental Health: New federal effort for needed resources

December 19, 2021



Oregon's U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley and Assistant Speaker Katherine Clark recently announced the introduction of the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Act, legislation that would greatly boost the availability of mental health resources in America's public schools.

Merkley said in a release that mental illness affects one in five—20 percent—of American youth, and just this week, the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued a new Surgeon General's Advisory stressing the urgent and critical need to address the country's youth mental health crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The bicameral legislation will put additional mental health providers in elementary and secondary schools across America, according to Merkley.

"Mental health care is essential health care, now more than ever," Merkley said. "Our country has neglected this fact for far too long, and our children are paying the price. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic still

greatly impacting the growth and experience of our school-aged kids, it's time to do a lot more to ensure mental health programs are available to every child in every school."

"We know that our students' success in school is about more than just test scores – they need the social and emotional support of mental health professionals in order to thrive," Clark said. "As kids return to school in new and unfamiliar ways coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's even more important that we invest directly in school nurses, social workers, and counselors. The Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Act will help public schools meet the counselor-to-student ratios necessary to foster safe schools and promote the long-term health and welfare of our nation's youth."

The Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Act would establish five-year renewable grant programs for elementary and secondary schools to hire additional school counselors.

A copy of the legislation can be found [here](#).

"Students' unmet mental health needs can be a significant obstacle to student academic, career and social/emotional development and even compromise school safety. We know the current staffing ratios are simply too high - all students deserve access to a school counselor – and this legislation is a step towards that goal," American School Counselor Association Executive Director Jill Cook said.

"Increasing schools' capacity to provide comprehensive mental and behavioral health services for all students is predicated on access to school employed mental health professionals, like school psychologists," National Association of School Psychologists' President Laurie Klose said. "Unfortunately, we are experiencing a critical shortage which leaves schools and communities without access to care, which is especially critical as we address increased mental health needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Act would help high needs districts work toward recommended staffing ratios so that every student has access to the mental care and support they need in school so they can focus on what is most important: learning and achieving their potential."

"Supporting the mental health needs of our children is essential to ensure they can thrive and grow, and it's of particular importance as students and families continue to navigate the challenges of the pandemic," National Association of Secondary School Principals' CEO Ronn Nozoe said. "We applaud Senator Merkley and Representative Clark for introducing the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Act because every school should have the resources necessary to recruit, train, and employ school-based, mental health professionals."

"The American Psychological Association strongly supports the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Act, which would help address the nationwide shortages of school-based mental health professionals, including school psychologists. This need existed even prior to COVID-19," American Psychological Association CEO Arthur C. Evans said. "Schools are often vital to providing health care to many children, particularly as they can be essential to both early detection and intervention efforts. School-based mental health providers are not only critical to students' behavioral well-being, but also play a key role

in their learning and academic achievement, as well as helping to foster positive and healthy school climates.”

Prior to the pandemic, there was already a huge unmet need for greater access to mental health services in schools, according to Merkley. The recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250 students per counselor, but the national average is 455 students per counselor and continues to rise.

For school psychologists the recommended ratio is 500 students per provider and 250 to 1 for school social workers. The need for youth mental health programs remains, and this need has only become more urgent as the COVID-19 pandemic has brought massive disruption and uncertainty to children’s lives, according to Merkley. He added that the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Act would help ensure that students receive the mental care and support they need in school so that they can focus on what is most important – learning and achieving their potential.

The Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Act is endorsed by the American Federation of Teachers, American School Counselor Association, American Psychological Association, National Association of School Psychologists National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Council for Mental Wellbeing, School Social Work Association of America and the National Education Association.