

## **Funding for School Districts and Community Providers to Serve Students' Mental Health**

**June 2, 2022**

As the PA General Assembly reviews the State 2022/23 Budget, RCPA would like to provide some guidance and feedback on the intersection of future school district funding and student mental health services.

The need for student mental health services has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the trauma experienced over the last few years in our schools. Governor Wolf's budget outlines more than \$40 billion in educational funding, including \$1.25 billion in fair funding allocations, \$300 million in "level up" funding, and \$200 million in special education services. There is little language specifying the utilization of these dollars for mental health services funding.

RCPA wishes to outline possible strategic considerations for allocating mental health funding to educational institutions and stress the critical role providers play in meeting the mental health needs of individuals (kids, families, etc.). We have seen several success programs throughout Pennsylvania where strategic partnerships have brought the expertise of community-based providers and school districts together to develop a vision for student mental health treatment. Such programs are represented in two separate and distinct school/community-based provider models.

- Children's Service Center in northeastern PA operates a Community School-Based Behavioral Health (CSBBH) initiative developed by the regional HealthChoices MCO. The program is a 24/7 model that has shown strong outcomes and grown significantly throughout the state where Community Care Behavioral Health Organizations (CCBHOs) manage the Medicaid dollars.
- The Brownsville School District in Fayette County targeted nearly \$1,000,000 in a 5-year agreement with Uniontown-based Chestnut Ridge Counseling Services. "We thought it was critical to have an extended relationship with a comprehensive and well-respected local mental health program," noted Brownsville District Superintendent Dr. Keith Hart Bauer. "One other feature of our extended relationship is to jointly develop a vision and plan to meet our students' mental health needs now and into the future."

RCPA fully supports the funding of mental health services for students and offers the following recommendations and considerations:

- PA school district mental health funding should require partnership and planning with community-based behavioral health service providers.
- Program models should have 24/7 care for youth and families via school and community-based components to ensure Social Determinants of Health faced by these kids every hour of every day are addressed.
- Community-based providers offer approved and annually-audited licensed programs for a wide range of mental health diagnoses, which are delivered by trained and qualified staff that can immediately be accessed.
- Unstipulated funding could potentially weaken an already taxed behavioral health workforce continuum, as school districts may be able to offer significantly higher wages, better hours, better benefits, and less requirements, unlike licensed outpatient therapists and mental health programs.

If you have any questions, please contact RCPA Policy Director [Jim Sharp](#).