

Background: In the past two decades, mental health concerns among Texas students have been on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these needs, with more students struggling with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation than before. ¹ All schools have students with past or ongoing trauma and stressors outside of school, which can present as difficulty concentrating, low motivation, and more. Supporting student mental health and promoting mental well-being is crucial to ensuring their engagement in class and avoiding the negative consequences of not addressing deteriorating mental health.²

Texas has a number of initiatives aimed at supporting child and youth mental health through the Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium, including the Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHAT) program. Additionally, the proposed budgets for the Health and Human Services Commission in the House and the Senate include continued and new funding for community-based mental health services. However, these mental health programs and funding are only intended to support children and youth with diagnosable disorders through medical professionals or mental health providers, and do not address the needs of students who may be struggling but do not meet diagnostic criteria. These students may benefit from early, less intensive interventions or tools to promote their mental well-being.

Snapshot: Student Mental Health Needs

- There are approximately 17,000 school-aged students in Texas schools who are in foster care on any given day.
- In the 2019-2020 School Year, there were about 111,401 students experiencing homelessness in Texas. 15,315 of those students were unaccompanied homeless children or youth.
- Nearly 3.3 million Texas students are identified as Economically Disadvantaged (61%).³



What Youth and Young Adults Say: In 2022, TNOYS hosted listening sessions with youth and young adults across Texas who are currently or have been in foster care, juvenile justice, experiencing homelessness, or at risk of these experiences. When asked about what could have been done to better support them, the overwhelming response from the youth was a desire for mental health support earlier in their lives. Here are the most common themes:

- *They wish they had been taught earlier what “mental health” is and how they could support their own mental health.*
- *Access to therapy or counseling at a much younger age and before they became systems-involved would have been beneficial.*
- *They need(ed) more mental health support and services while they were systems-involved.*
- *They would like schools to promote children and youth mental well-being.*
- *School is where they feel most safe and heard.*

TNOYS Recommends creating a school mental health allotment funded with at least \$400 million in General Revenue and allow school districts to decide what types of interventions and supports should be made available to their students as they know their communities best.

1. Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Texas Department of State Health Services. 2021. <https://healthdata.dshs.texas.gov/dashboard/surveys-and-profiles/youth-risk-behavior-survey> 2. Perry, Bruce. “The Brain Science Behind Student Trauma.” EdWeek. Available at <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-the-brain-science-behind-student-trauma/2016/12> 3. Texas Education Agency PEIMS Data for 2019-2020 School year. Homelessness data based on the McKinney-Vento definition of “Homeless students” and is collected by TEA at the end of the school year, not reported in PEIMS that reports data from earlier in the year.