

## **School-based Mental Health Services January 2024 Update**

### **Overview**

On May 3, 2022, the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (SCDHHS) announced the results of its comprehensive review of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health's (DMH) school mental health services program and seven recommendations to improve access to mental health services in South Carolina schools. The review was conducted by SCDHHS' Bureau of Program Integrity and Internal Audit and included several key findings that prompted the agency to make recommendations it believed would remove barriers that previously existed to providing access to quality mental health services in South Carolina's schools. Through the implementation of its recommendations, SCDHHS established a short-term goal of reducing the counselor-to-student ratio in South Carolina's schools from 1:1,300 to 1:650 (effectively the equivalent of providing access to a mental health counselor in each school in the state) by 2023. A summary of the key findings, SCDHHS actions specific to its May 2022 recommendations and updated South Carolina school mental health services data from a September 2023 survey of South Carolina school districts are available below.

### **Summary of 2022 Key Findings**

- The mental health counselor-to-student ratio was approximately 1:1,300.
- There were approximately 600 mental health counselors providing services in schools, of which approximately 60% were employed by DMH.
- Given the choice, 59% of school districts would prefer employing their own counselor rather than contract with DMH.
- SCDHHS had a differential rate schedule that paid DMH counselors, who are typically not licensed, more than double what district employed counselors were reimbursed for a 30-min. individual therapy session.

### **Summary of SCDHHS Actions**

- Effective July 1, 2022, SCDHHS enacted policy changes to give school districts greater flexibility in hiring their own counselor or contracting with a private counselor. School districts are also able to continue to receive services through DMH and may use a combination of the three delivery methods listed above.
- Effective July 1, 2022, SCDHHS raised its counseling rates and placed an emphasis on paying licensed clinicians at a higher rate than unlicensed clinicians. The new rate is available for any licensed clinician, including those employed by a school district and private providers who are contracted with a school district. For a 30-min. individual therapy session, the rate for licensed clinicians who were not employed by DMH was increased from \$37 to \$71.31.
- On Sept. 28, 2022, SCDHHS announced a partnership with the University of South Carolina's Department of Psychology to help schools integrate mental health services into their operations.
- In January and September 2023, SCDHHS partnered with the South Carolina Department of Education to survey school districts to update school mental health services program data. These surveys provided data updates six and 14 months after the agency's July 1, 2022, policy changes took effect.

### September 2023 School Mental Health Services Data

- As of September 2023, the mental health counselor-to-student ratio is approximately 1:653.
  - 2022 data showed a ratio of 1:1,300.
  - January 2023 data showed a ratio of 1:829.
- The number of school-based mental health counselors doubled over the course of a year and a half. The number of school-based mental health counselors rose from approximately 600 in the 2021-2022 school year to 1,209 at the start of the 2023-2024 school year.
- Survey data shows students at 230 more schools had access to school-based mental health counseling at the start of the 2023-2024 school year than they did during the 2021-2022 school year.
- From January to September 2023, the number of school-based mental health counselors by all three employment types (DMH-employed, school district-employed and private mental health counselors) increased.
  - The number of school district-employed mental health counselors increased to 617, which is more than the total number of school-based mental health counselors in South Carolina in January 2022.
  - The majority of school-based mental health counselors (617 of 1,209) are now employed by local school districts.
  - In January 2022, 60% of school-based counselors were employed by DMH.
  - This trend correlates with 2022 survey data indicating 59% of school districts would prefer to employ a counselor(s) to contracting with DMH for mental health services.
- The number of districts where 100% of schools had access to mental health counseling increased from 35 in 2022 to 56 in September 2023. There were 77 South Carolina school districts surveyed (this is an increase from 76 in the January 2023 survey with the addition of a survey response from the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind).
- Students in all South Carolina school districts now have access to mental health counseling services. In January 2022, nine districts did not have any access to school-based mental health counseling services.

### Key Youth Behavioral Health Statistics

- According to a recent report from the Boston Consulting Group, 77% of youth in South Carolina with a major depressive episode do not receive any mental health treatment. This is well above the national average of 60%.
- [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), youth suicide has increased significantly from 2007 through 2021. Suicide rates for Americans ages 10 to 24 rose 62%.
- Nationally, the number of mental health visits in pediatric emergency [departments increased from 7.7% of all encounters in 2011 to 13.1% in 2020](#).
- According to the South Carolina School Behavioral Health Academy, children are 21 times more likely to access mental health services in schools than in any other setting.
- In 2021, national data indicates 30% of female high school students seriously considered suicide, an increase from 24.1% in 2019, [according to the CDC](#).
- In 2021, national data indicates 13.3% of female high school students attempted suicide, an increase from 11% in 2019, [according to the CDC](#).
- High school students with depression are [more than twice as likely to drop out](#) than their peers.
- Suicide is the [third leading cause](#) of death for South Carolinians between ages 10-14.
- Suicide is the [fourth leading cause](#) of death for South Carolinians between ages 15-17.