Written Testimony to Legislative Budget Board regarding Article III: Public Education

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NAMI Texas is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization founded by volunteers in 1984. We are part of the nation’s largest grassroots mental health organizations and we exist to help improve the quality of life for individuals with mental illness and their families. Around the state, we have 27 local NAMI affiliate organizations and approximately 2,000 members.

Introduction

Student mental health is critically tied to public education. Students are often first identified and receive services for mental health issues within the school system. Half of all mental health conditions emerge by age 14, and over one-third of youth age 14 and older with mental health conditions drop out of high school.¹ To ensure students are able to graduate and succeed as adults, we must protect their health and well-being, including mental health, through robust prevention and early intervention programming.

NAMI Texas has appreciated the strong focus on student mental health we saw within the last legislative session and the intensive work the Texas Education Agency has taken on after the last legislative session to improve school safety and student mental health policy through training and technical assistance. We also recognize the extreme challenges faced by the Texas Education Agency during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the public health and mental health crises, and its impact on public education. We believe the progress on student mental health policy and the challenges of the pandemic necessitate for Texas to fully fund mental health initiatives within schools.

Protecting School Mental Health Initiatives from 86th Session

The State Legislature passed multiple bills last session that required the Texas Education Agency and school districts develop policies, procedures, and frameworks with which to promote student mental health and well-being. However, we are concerned that the resources needed to effectively implement these changes may not be available to the Texas Education Agency, school districts, and schools, during the upcoming biennium.

NAMI Texas is concerned about the change to funding for the School Safety Allotment. Currently, it appears that the Legislative Appropriation Request (LAR) does not include funding for the allotment in 2022-2023. In 2020-2021, $100 million was appropriated to school districts within this allotment. This allotment goes beyond physical infrastructure changes – it also allows

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schools to fund support program that prevent and treat child trauma, mental health support and threat reporting systems, and programs for suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention.

There does not appear to be any replacement funding for mental health services within the Texas Education Agency LAR. Under the Behavioral Health Schedule 6J in the LAR, the Texas Education Agency writes:

The Texas Education Agency received $0 appropriations for behavioral health for the 2020-21 biennium and therefore will not have any funding to carry forward as part of the base funding for the 2022-23 biennium. Despite receiving no specific appropriation, the TEA is working tirelessly to implement existing state mandates and recently enacted duties required by SB 11, HB 18, and HB 906 (86th Legislature) with only one dedicated full time staff member.

While we applaud the Texas Education Agency for their hard collaborative work with Statewide Behavioral Health Coordinating Council, SAMHSA, and the Health and Human Services Commission to secure funding and maximize opportunities, we are concerned there will still be a deficit of resources for student mental health and no guarantee of stable funding specific to the needs of Texas schoolchildren. In addition, the Health and Human Services LAR contains a 7.4% funding cut to children’s outpatient mental health services, which will further limit the ability for students to access necessary mental health services.

**NAMI Texas recommends that specific funds are set aside to fully implement the advances in student mental health and well-being policy from the last legislative session.**

**Student Support Programs and Addressing Disparities**

NAMI Texas also advocates not only for access to appropriate treatment programs for students with mental health conditions, but also services and supports that address disparities in mental health and overall improve school climate and student well-being.

NAMI Texas supports the inclusion of Exceptional Item 1 - Ensuring Equitable Opportunity through Targeted Support. As the pandemic exacerbates existing gaps in achievement and economic outcomes, addressing systemic inequities through targeted interventions, including through diversifying educator hires, will be critical to ensure success and well-being for all students.

NAMI Texas opposes cuts to the Communities in Schools program. The Texas Education Agency LAR cuts $3.2 million across the biennium from the Communities in Schools program. Communities in Schools is a student and family support program that utilizes individual case management and other support services to help at-risk students address basic needs, mental health and crises, academic needs, and other support and enrichment activities. This program has a significant role in offering in-school mental health services to students in need, with 52,652 Texas students specifically receiving more intensive mental health services in FY2019.2 As this

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public health crisis continues and more families fall into economic insecurity, this program will become even more vital to student and community success.

Finally, NAMI Texas recommends appropriating funds to increase family engagement in school districts and school. Family involvement in a student’s mental health services and supports can make or break a young person’s recovery. In a study of clinic-based services, between 40% and 55% of 15- to 17-year olds reported that family was the major influence on their help-seeking behavior.3 Psychoeducation for parents, or education on mental health services, has been proven to increase parental and youth satisfaction with mental health treatment, increase attendance in treatment programming, increase adherence to treatment plan, and reduce stigmatizing and negative beliefs around mental health disorders.4

To promote psychoeducation and access to necessary support services for families whose children have mental health issues, NAMI Texas recommends funding opportunities for Family Partners and education and support groups, including programs such as NAMI Basics. A Family Partner is a parent or guardian with lived experience raising a child with mental, emotional, or behavioral health challenges and who has at least one year navigating a child serving system. Family partners provide skills in the areas of informational/education support, skills development, emotional support, instrumental support, and advocacy. Family partner services have been shown to improve service retention, increase knowledge, and improve family engagement.5 NAMI Basics is a 6-session education program for parents, caregivers and other family who provide care for youth (ages 22 and younger) who are experiencing mental health symptoms. The in-person course is taught by a trained team with lived experience raising a child with a mental health condition.6 Together, these cost-effective resources can be utilized to set a child and their family up for success with mental health recovery across the lifespan. NAMI Texas urges investment in family engagement and support around student mental health.

**Conclusion**

NAMI Texas urges the state to protect and enhance funding for student mental health services and supports, including the infrastructure to support student mental health within the Texas Education Agency. An early investment in mental health, especially during this time of heightened stress and instability for families, is critical to help our students become happy and healthy Texans down the line.

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