Testimony on SB 1, Article III, Texas Education Agency

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 nearly 2,000 members.

Mental health has a deep impact for Texas students and, therefore, for Texas schools. Mental health concerns among students are common across the state. These concerns can range from a diagnosable mental health disorder to more universal need for support of social and emotional well-being.

- In 2019, almost two in every five Texas high school students reported experiencing feelings of sadness or hopelessness almost daily for two or more weeks within the past year.¹
- In 2019, one in five children in Texas aged 0–17 were estimated to have two or more adverse childhood experiences that may have a lasting impact on their emotional, cognitive, social, and biological functioning.²
- In 2019, one in ten high school students in Texas reported attempting suicide within the last year.³

• Nearly half of individuals with chronic mental disorders experience an onset of symptoms by age.⁴

COVID-19 has exacerbated these existing challenges. Beginning in April 2020, the proportion of children’s mental health–related ED visits among all pediatric ED visits increased and remained elevated through October. Compared with 2019, the proportion of mental health–related visits for children aged 5–11 and 12–17 years increased approximately 24% and 31%, respectively.⁵

We thank the Senate for its support of the Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium (TCHMHCC), and we support the TCHMHCC funding increase proposed in SB 1. TCHMHCC provides key infrastructure for improving mental health care for children and adolescents. Increased funding for the Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHATT) program, Child Psychiatry Access Network (CPAN) program, research, and workforce development are central mental health for youth.

Mental health is inextricably tied to a student’s ability to thrive both in life and in the classroom. Mental health initiatives within the schools have been proven to improve academic outcomes - including improving test scores, school attendance, grades, and graduation rates, and decreasing disciplinary rates. Parents in Texas recognize this reality; in a recent Raise Your Hand Texas poll of more than 10,000 Texan adults, the majority of parents believed it was extremely or very important to provide support for students’ emotional health and well-being.⁶

In alignment with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Mental Health Task Force report⁷, we support funding to specifically bolster school-based mental health services. Funding from School Safety Allotment funds, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Project AWARE, and other funding streams should be protected to specifically target students’ emotional and mental health awareness programs.

We recommend that TEA Exceptional Items #1 be funded at a minimum of $40 million to address learning loss and reduce achievement gaps. The Legislature should ensure that, as part of Exceptional Item 1, TEA efforts to combat learning loss include: support for school practices, procedures, and services that help prevent and address learning loss related to stress, grief, trauma, and other concerns.

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have underscored the need for student mental health support. The recent winter storms have as well. Addressing COVID-19 learning losses must address the wide-spread grief, stress, and trauma that students will continue to face. Targeted mental health support and social-emotional learning funding will help students recover from the learning losses of the pandemic, adjust to changing environments, and experience success.

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⁵ https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6945a3.htm

⁶ https://www.raiseyourhandtexas.org/2021poll