

Baltimore City Public Schools
Behavioral Health Services Plan Update
November 1, 2022

Introduction

The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future (Section 7 of HB 1300 of 2020/Ch 36 of 2021, as amended by HB 1372/Ch 55 of 2021) includes the following reporting requirement:

On or before November 1, 2022, each local school system shall develop a plan to:

- (1) enhance and expand school behavioral health service availability to ensure that all students have some exposure and access to behavioral health programming and services, considering the community schools’ behavioral health needs assessment; and
- (2) ensure that schools without a school based health center will organize response plans to connect all students to community–based behavioral health and other services, as needed.

This report responds to that requirement, in accordance with the guidance provided by AIB.

Context and Needs

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for behavioral health services and other supports for the social and emotional well-being of students in Baltimore City Public Schools is greater than ever. The challenges brought on by the pandemic have compounded existing stresses and mental health challenges experienced by our young people. In turn, this has put further strain on a system that has been historically underserved, disenfranchised, and subject to underinvestment by the local, state, and federal governments.

Maryland’s Blueprint for Success is an essential first step in beginning to address the glaring gaps and inequities that have resulted from this generations-long underinvestment. The Blueprint’s focus on behavioral health services for students is a particularly important and welcome development. This aspect of the Kirwan legislation, combined with the public’s increased attention to mental health issues generated by the pandemic, creates an unprecedented opportunity for City Schools—together with local, state, and federal partners—to work toward building behavioral health supports to a level that will meet the needs of our students.

Addressing these inequities will be a years-long process. At the same time, we are confronted with a national shortage of mental health clinicians, and a limited pipeline of new social workers and psychologists and other related professionals. City Schools’ plans for expanding behavioral health services must be read in this context—at present, the greatest barrier to

expansion of these supports is the difficulty that the school system, our vendors, and our partners face in hiring qualified personnel.

Needs Assessment

City Schools includes questions about behavioral health in its annual family and student surveys. Results from surveys conducted in the spring of 2022 yielded the following results among families and students that responded:

- 42% of families (3,495) said that resources for mindfulness and stress relief would help their child succeed next year
- 39% of families (3,293) said that mentoring services would help their child succeed next year
- 36% of families (3,619) said that mental health services and resources would help their child succeed next year
- 51% of students (8,810) said it was easy to get mental health or emotional health supports at their school

The Related Services Team in the Office of Special Education (OSE) monitors data regarding services provided in a given school year. Data from monitoring conducted for School Year 2021-2022 included the following highlights:

- 668 Functional Behavioral Assessments/Behavioral Intervention Plans conducted
- 253 Emergency Petitions completed
- 354 referrals to BCARS
- 2424 Crisis Interventions responded to by City Schools Social Workers
- 447.72 hours spent in the Emergency Room

City Schools' discipline data also reflects an increase in behavioral health challenges. For example, in September 2022, there were 1,228 disciplinary incidents, relative to 970 in September of 2021. In addition to this data, we have also heard numerous reports from students, families, and staff that indicate our young people are contending with increased levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. The need to continue increasing access to behavioral health services is clear.

Increased Student Access to Behavioral Health Support

City Schools' effort to enhance and expand behavioral health services is multi-faceted, as described below.

Related Services Support

Every school in Baltimore City Public Schools—regardless of whether they have a School-Based Health Center—has at least one full-time social worker and, in some cases more. The base allocation for Social Work services is 1.0 FTE for up to 650 students (minimum 1.0 per traditional school) to support the entire school. For School Psychology services, the base allocation is 1.0 FTE for every 850 enrolled students. Within the base allocation, the School

Psychologist is expected to spend up to 60% of their time providing IEP required services and completing assessments. If the IEP service caseload exceeds 30, additional time will be allocated in increments of 0.1 FTE for every 5 additional clinical cases.

Primarily, School Social Workers provide individual and group counseling services. They may also serve on interdisciplinary teams, provide resources and support for parents/guardians, and support student achievement by implementing strategies that address social-emotional and behavioral needs. When needed, they lead crisis interventions, conduct home visits, provide teacher consultation, and offer program development services. As City Schools works to grow the reach and impact of Social Work Services, our goal is to provide social work services that strengthen home, school, and community partnerships.

School Psychologists provide a wide range of psychological services within Baltimore City Public Schools. They conduct formal school psychological evaluations of students for educational planning and placement as part of the IEP process, provide consults with school staff, coordinate behavior management planning, and facilitate consultation with, or referral to, additional resources available in City Schools and the community. As City Schools works to expand behavioral and mental health support, School Psychologists will also provide program consultation, counseling, and intervention for students, as well as consultation with parents and staff. As needed, they will provide prevention and intervention services within the classroom setting and offer in-service training for teaching staff in areas of expertise related to school psychology.

Expanded School Behavioral Health

For the past 34 years, the Expanded School-Based Behavioral Health (ESBH) Program has provided trauma-responsive mental health services for the students of Baltimore City. Through ESBH and in partnership with Behavioral Health System Baltimore, several area vendors provide clinicians to support our schools. Mental health services provided by the ESBH Program bolster the behavioral health services offered by City Schools’ Related Services office, and ESBH clinicians work in close partnership with City Schools’ staff to ensure the mental health needs of students are identified and addressed. They also actively work to promote social competencies and positive learning environments by implementing a comprehensive and integrated model of prevention and direct treatment services. A series of evaluations has demonstrated the benefits of ESBH tied to improved student attendance, fewer suspensions, and better performance on benchmark tests of reading and math, in addition to successfully addressing behavioral health issues.

The ESBH model relies on a combination of direct billing to Medicaid, supplemented by grant-funded services (including for uninsured students):

Billable Services:	Grant Funded Services:
Individual Therapy	Teacher & Classroom consultations
Family Therapy	Classroom activities

Psychiatric Evaluation	Prevention Group Activities
Referrals to hospital or community-based intensive services	In-Service presentations on relevant behavioral health topics
	School team meeting participation
	Family Outreach Activities
	Supporting School Crisis Response
	Addressing ACE's
	Evidence Based Assessment data collection

With the onset of the pandemic, ESBH vendors struggled to staff to baseline levels due to social worker shortages. To support our vendors in hiring and retaining clinicians, City Schools amended their contracts, increasing pay limits.

ESBH also made it possible for vendors to increase access to behavioral health support for homeless and uninsured students by providing them with grant funds to compensate for expenses that could not be billed. ESBH ultimately provided support to more students in SY21-22 (9,091) than in the prior year (6,929).

For SY23-25, we have added two vendors, taking us from five to seven. The current vendors include Associated Catholic Charities, C&C Advocacy, Family Services, Hope Health System, Johns Hopkins Bayview, Time Organization, and University of Maryland, Baltimore. We have increased our total FTE from 78 to 92 to increase support at schools with large numbers of referrals for services and larger enrollment numbers. While ESBH is currently present in 131 schools, our goal is to expand ESBH to every school in the district, pending availability of funding and available behavioral health clinicians.

Student Wellness Support Teams

While we work to increase access to behavioral health services across schools and populations of students, City Schools has also made a commitment to increase coordination among support personnel in schools. Every school is now required to have a Student Wellness Support Team (SWST), which brings together social workers, psychologists, ESBH clinicians, guidance counselors, nurses, student wholeness specialists, and others, where appropriate. The SWSTs have three primary functions:

- 1) to improve collaboration among support personnel by bringing them together on a regular basis to identify and collectively address student behavioral health needs;
- 2) to increase awareness of available internal and external support services, resources, and personnel through joint communications outreach to students, staff, and families; and
- 3) to bring greater visibility to social-emotional well-being and mental health by integrating messaging and activities into on-going school forums, such as assemblies and morning announcements.

As of the end of SY21-22, 85% of schools had an SWST. Our goal moving forward is to ensure that every SWST meets on a regular basis and succeeds in increasing awareness of and access to behavioral health and other supports among all students.

Behavioral Health Crisis Response

In addition to on-going, services and supports across all schools, City Schools also provides more intensive support when a school community experiences a crisis, such as the loss of a student or staff member or a violent incident on or near campus. At present, when such an incident occurs, City Schools' central office coordinates the deployment of a crisis response team. This team is typically composed of qualified central office staff, social workers, and psychologists from the affected school (and, where necessary, pulled temporarily from other schools), and ESBH clinicians.

During one crisis response effort at the start of SY22-23, City Schools also pulled in added support personnel from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), Baltimore Child and Adolescent Response System (BCARS), Baltimore Crisis Response, Inc. (BCRI). These added resources significantly enhanced City Schools' capacity to provide sufficient levels of trauma and grief counseling to meet the immediate needs of both students and staff.

City Schools is now working on developing a plan for improving and expanding our crisis response capacity. This includes exploring the creation of more formal, on-going partnerships with local partners to assist with crisis response. It will also include clarified guidance for school leaders and clearer communication protocols, both for engaging with internal stakeholders and for communicating with students and families.

External Behavioral Health Supports

City Schools cannot and should not attempt to meet all the many behavioral health needs of our students. To ensure that all young people receive the support they need, we must create an ecosystem of care throughout the city and beyond. City Schools already works in close collaboration with numerous community partners, not only through our ESBH Program and crisis response, but also on a day-to-day basis, as our teams refer students and families to appropriate external behavioral health and other partners and providers. Schools citywide will connect families with Baltimore Child and Adolescent Response System (BCARS) for brief community-based mental health services or the Here2Help Hotline provided by Baltimore Crisis Response, Inc. (BCRI) for crisis support. Given the community-oriented nature of our schools, additional referral options will vary depending upon the organizations and resources available in each area of the city to support students and families. Moving forward, our goal is to expand and deepen our partnerships with other agencies and behavioral health providers.

Social-Emotional Learning and Well-Being

While we strive to ensure that all students have access to the behavioral health services they need, City Schools is equally committed to creating school environments and experiences that nurture all students' social-emotional learning and well-being continuously. This includes providing professional development for staff on topics such as social-emotional learning, restorative practices, trauma-informed and healing centered engagement, and de-escalation

strategies. It also means integrating opportunities for reflection, social connection, and collaboration throughout the school day and prioritizing efforts to create safe, welcoming, and joyful school cultures.

This year, City Schools has also established a requirement that all schools offer regular morning meeting (at the elementary level) or advisory (for middle and high schools). These sessions establish a dedicated space and time where students can check in on how they are feeling, build relationships and community, engage in conversations about what is happening in their own lives and the world around them, and exercise their own voice and leadership. By getting to know a smaller group of students more deeply over time, adult advisors are also better positioned to identify students that may need behavioral health services and ensure that they are connected to the appropriate resources.

City Schools has also required that every school have an individualized Student Learning Plan, which is created by each young person together with one or more adults in the school, and includes an opportunity to set goals related to the student's social-emotional well-being and development.

Furthermore, with investments made possible by the Blueprint for Success, City Schools is increasing students' access to athletics, arts, and other engaging and enriching programming during and after the school day. For many students, participation in these types of activities is central to building positive social connections and fostering mental health and well-being.