Mental Health and School Climate

Legislative Priority: Increase access to student mental health supports inside and outside schools to promote student well-being and academic success.

Policymakers should consider the following during the 2020 legislative session:

• Increasing resources for access to mental health supports for students, including telemedicine access to counseling in rural and hard-to-staff districts.

• Increasing funding for mental health professionals such as school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists to bring ratios down to recommended best practices.

• Increasing funding for training for classroom teachers to support students with mental health disorders.

• In conjunction with the school security grants, policymakers should bolster the safety and security of Georgia’s schools by ensuring the availability of funding for a school resource officer at every Georgia school.

Background: Students’ academic outcomes are influenced by their mental health and the climate of their schools. Georgia lawmakers took important steps to begin addressing both issues, but gaps remain. According to Mental Health America, 87,000 Georgia children ages 12-17 suffered at least one major depressive episode, and more than half—57.5 percent—did not receive mental health services. More than 39,000 sixth through 12th graders in Georgia’s public schools reported attempting suicide at least once in the previous 12 months on the 2018-2019 Georgia Student Health Survey.

Improving student safety is an essential first step in cultivating a positive school climate. More than one quarter of sixth through 12th graders who responded to the health survey, indicated they felt unsafe at school or going to and from school. The General Assembly provided every school in the state with one-time $30,000 grants to increase school security during the 2018-2019 school year. School and district leaders used the funds for two-way portable radios, security cameras in schools and on buses, security fences, access control systems, and a variety of other security features.

Need: Addressing students’ mental health and safety needs requires enough well-trained professionals in schools and districts. This is particularly critical in high poverty communities where students frequently face challenging circumstances that can derail academic success, as well as in rural communities, which often face the additional challenge of a shortage of mental health professionals.

The American School Counselor Association recommends schools have one counselor for every 250 students. The General Assembly funds one counselor for every 450 students through the state’s K-12 funding formula, the Quality Basic Education formula. In 2019, the General Assembly approved $1 million
for additional counselors in the state’s Title I high schools. Georgia funds one school social worker for every 2,475 students, nearly 10 times higher than the ratio of one per 250 recommended by the National Association of Social Workers.⁴

Georgia lawmakers also fund school psychologists at a ratio of one for every 2,475 students. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends one school psychologist for every 500 to 700 students enrolled in the schools they serve.⁵

In a recent survey of PAGE members, more than seven out of 10 educators responded that they believe an increased focus on student mental health needs will improve educational outcomes as well as school climate. When asked about the type of mental health supports needed in their schools, about 69 percent of educators identified training for parents and guardians. Approximately 56 percent of survey respondents called for additional school counselors and a close third was wraparound services for families, which was recommended by 54 percent of educators.

Educators recognize the urgency of addressing student mental health needs and supporting healthy child development. However, the services students need are often beyond educators’ training and outside the core focus of their work: developing challenging and relevant curriculum and delivering engaging instruction. Increasing the number of mental health and other support professionals and expanding students’ access to them will improve students’ well-being and their academic success.