

House Children & Youth and Education Committees Joint Hearing

“Projected Mental Health Needs of Public School Students”

August 25, 2021

Good morning, Chairwoman Delozier, Chairwoman DeLissio, Chairman Sonney, Chairman Longietti, and members of the House Children & Youth and Education Committees.

My name is Dr. Sherri Smith, Acting Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education and former superintendent of Lower Dauphin School District. With me today is Dr. Dana Milakovic, a mental health specialist, alcohol and other drug specialist, and trauma lead in the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Before joining the department, Dr. Milakovic served for 15 years as a school psychologist and two years as the supervisor for psychological services at the Harrisburg School District, as well as 15 years as an evaluator with community mental health agencies. Thank you for inviting us to discuss the critically important topic of student mental health.

Throughout the pandemic, PDE collaborated with the state Intermediate Units and other interagency state partners to provide universal supports for educators, families and students. We expect there to be even greater needs next school year as students fully return to in-person instruction.

After 17 months of frequent transitions to remote learning for students across the Commonwealth, additional stressors and trauma have impacted student mental and physical well-being. During the pandemic, schools continued to focus on providing safe, supportive learning environments for all students. Yet, students have lost the feeling of routine and safety that school provides. While mental health data from the pandemic continues to be collected, we know that prior to the pandemic over 20 percent of students were experiencing some level of mental health concerns and that number has risen. We know from our schools and families that more students are being reported as chronically absent and more students report feeling disconnected from school staff. Research and our experience tell us that chronic absenteeism and lack of connection to school staff negatively impacts students’ mental health, as well as their academic and social success.

It is our responsibility, as mental health professionals, educators, and policy makers, to do everything within our power to help every student. It is with this focus that we have taken several critical actions to assist schools.

As part of a [larger roadmap for school leaders and communities](#), in the fall of 2020 PDE developed a [Staff and Student Wellness Guide](#) for schools. Then in April of this year, PDE released a new toolkit and professional learning series entitled, “Accelerated Learning through an Integrated System of Support” to provide school leaders with research and a systemic process for addressing academic and emotional well-being of students in preparation for the upcoming school year.

In March, PDE received a [\\$1 million federal grant from the Institute for Education Sciences \(IES\) to study the impact of COVID-19 on K-12 students](#). The findings from

this research will help policymakers and educators in Pennsylvania understand the challenges faced by students most harmed by COVID-19, identify ways to respond to possible future epidemics, assess whether some remote-learning strategies are more effective than others, consider recruitment and retention strategies for teachers who may be most effective for disadvantaged students, and better identify students at risk of dropping out.

The Department also will be using American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) funds to address the social-emotional and mental health needs of students and is encouraging schools also to use ESSER funding for this purpose.

As part of our written testimony today, we provide a list of resources that are readily available to students and educators, highlight additional resources that have been developed and future efforts and needs.

With nearly half of Pennsylvania's adult population fully vaccinated and students ages 12 and older approved to receive vaccinations, schools are expected to return to full in-person instruction this fall. Students are eager to learn and return to a sense of normalcy. But to do that, we must continue to develop partnerships and expand efforts to support and enhance the social-emotional wellness and mental health services provided to students and families through schools and communities.

In the interest of time, we will submit the testimony as if read in its entirety and move right into questions from the members.

The pandemic impacted every family, community, educator, and student differently. As such, it's critical that schools have access to a variety of interventions that can be used to assist students of all ages, backgrounds and grade levels. Below are several state-level resources and initiatives available to schools and educators.

- **Collaborative Interagency Partnerships**

Through interagency partnerships and partnerships with federal agencies, PDE offers a wide variety of [resources](#) and supports that schools can use to develop or enhance positive learning environments, to implement social-emotional learning programs, to address equity and inclusion, and to connect students and families with mental health supports and services.

Supports for families and students were specifically designed to address self-care, addressing emotions during times of stress, development of a positive learning environment in the home, and addressing grief and loss. In addition, [PDE's website](#) provides contact information for various state and national support services that can offer help 24 hours a day/7 days a week, including the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, PA Support and Referral Helpline, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Helpline, the Trevor Project Lifeline for LGBTQ+ Youth and connections to other state agencies to promote ease of access to services.

- **Student Assistance Program (SAP)**

An interagency collaboration between PDE and the Departments of Human Services and of Drug and Alcohol Programs, the [Pennsylvania Student Assistance Program](#) (SAP) is a systematic team process used to mobilize school resources and remove barriers to learning for students with alcohol, tobacco, drug, and mental health issues.

A school's SAP team members are trained to identify issues, determine whether the presenting issue lies within the responsibility of the school, and to make recommendations to assist the student and the parent. When the issue lies beyond the scope of the school, the SAP team assists the parent and student with accessing community services.

- **Accelerated Learning**

As part of a [larger roadmap for school leaders and communities](#), in the fall of 2020 PDE developed a [Staff and Student Wellness Guide](#) for schools that includes methods of communication with stakeholders; universal practices to address social and emotional needs; practices to create safe, welcoming and equitable learning environments; and conditions for monitoring and supporting identified staff and students demonstrating needs related to social-emotional and psychological supports.

Recognizing educators and students will require more help as they prepare to return to classrooms in the fall of 2021, particularly as it relates to learning gaps, last month PDE released a new toolkit and professional learning series entitled, "Accelerated Learning through an Integrated System of Support". This new resource provides school leaders with research and a process for addressing academic and emotional well-being of students in preparation for the upcoming school year.

The Accelerated Learning program was developed in cooperation with the state's IUs and the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) and includes the following components, with a focus on equity for all students:

- Identifying and planning for a reset of school operations systems including health and safety, instructional models (in-person, virtual) teaching and learning;
- Building a welcoming, safe and supportive community for students and teachers in all learning settings;
- Identifying where students are entering school academically;
- Aligning assessments, curriculum, and instruction to help each student progress; and
- Developing teachers to support all students, particularly those most vulnerable.

Students who feel safe in school are less likely to experience significant depression or have suicidal ideation. Thus, the Accelerated Learning modules address mental wellness by building positive learning environments for

students, establishing comprehensive mental health frameworks, and addressing staff capacity and retention.

It's important to recognize staff have also experienced increased levels of stress, exposure to trauma, and burnout this past year. For this reason, positive learning environment resources address staff and student wellness without adding to staff capacity demands and increasing stress. Concrete strategies and resources were designed to support schools in planning based on models that have been shown to work through the National Center for School Mental Health.

- **Standards Aligned System (SAS)**

The Standards Aligned System (SAS) is the Department's digital curriculum and instruction resource site for educators. SAS is comprised of six distinct elements which provide a common framework for continuous student, teacher, and school and district growth: Standards, Assessment, Curriculum Framework, Instruction, Materials and Resources, and Safe and Supportive Schools. SAS includes numerous courses focused on equity and mental health issues.

- **Trauma-Informed Education**

Act 18 of 2019 (Act 18) amended the Pennsylvania School Code to mandate trauma-informed approaches and training throughout educational entities. This summer PDE will add trauma-informed education courses, including a dedicated module for self-care, in SAS that address all aspects of Act 18. PDE also provides direct training, services, and technical assistance to schools and educators locally through the regional IUs. Points of contact at each IU support schools with developing safe learning environments with particular focus on school climate, bullying prevention, and equity. Trauma-informed-care values and work are tied into all training and technical assistance provided by IU staff so that equitable, trauma-informed care values are integrated into all aspects of school environments.

- **Professional Development for School Leaders**

PDE's [PA Inspired Leadership Program \(PIL\)](#) includes a 10-week course for school administrators and leaders entitled, "Comprehensive Mental Health for School Leaders". During 2020-21, the course was offered in six of eight PIL regions across the commonwealth; the course is scheduled to be delivered in seven regions during 2021-22 school year. PDE is developing a second course on mental health planning for schools and creating safer, supportive schools for staff and students aligned with equity and informed by school SAP and threat assessment teams. The course is tentatively scheduled for the 2021-2022 school year.

- **Institute for Education Sciences (IES) Study**

In March 2020, PDE received nearly [\\$1 million in federal grant money from the Institute for Education Sciences \(IES\) to study the impact of COVID-19 on K-12 students](#). This [two-year grant](#) includes identifying inequities in education across Pennsylvania as a result of the pandemic and recommending educational

strategies to help students and schools move forward. The findings from this research will help policymakers and educators in Pennsylvania understand the challenges faced by students most harmed by COVID-19, identify ways to respond to possible future epidemics, assess whether some remote-learning strategies are more effective than others, consider recruitment and retention strategies for teachers who may be most effective for disadvantaged students, and better identify students at risk of dropping out.

Throughout the global pandemic, Pennsylvania has demonstrated a commitment to documenting the educational and other harms experienced by students, educators, and families. The Department understands the impact the global pandemic has on learning and is doing as much as possible to mitigate learning gaps and to offer social and emotional supports during these unprecedented times.

As the General Assembly continues its efforts to safely return our students to school, we respectfully ask that you consider efforts that increase access to mental health supports for all Pennsylvanians, beginning with increasing the number of qualified social workers and mental health clinicians in schools.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss such an important issue for our educational communities.