



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Helping DC Students Facing Mental Health Challenges

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Living in poverty can create tremendous pressure on families, which affects their children and makes it harder for them to go to school ready to learn. In Sunday's [Washington Post](#), DCFPI highlighted how addressing the impact of poverty on children is key to unlocking opportunities and closing the achievement gap in DC.

In particular, schools need to be prepared to help children who face [emotional or mental health](#) challenges. Low-income children are more often exposed to trauma and stress, which makes it more likely they will miss school, get suspended or drop-out. Repeated exposure to trauma and stress is especially harmful, leading to “toxic stress” with physiological effects that interfere with development of key learning skills, including memory, attention, and language.

Schools are a logical place to identify students with mental health needs, yet as many as 5,000 DC children [may not be getting](#) the mental health services they need. Children are more likely to engage in mental health services in a school setting compared to other outside services, so improving mental health services provided through schools is critical to improving school outcomes in the District.



The District provides a variety of services to address the mental health challenges of students in schools, but they are not found at all schools, and many schools have mental health staff with caseloads that are too large to provide adequate services. The District should increase services and funding to better meet the mental health needs of students in the following ways:

- **Expand Access to School Mental Health Programs:** The District set a goal of having a mental health program in every school by 2016-17, but currently only 36 percent are covered.
- **Increase the Availability of School Social Workers and Psychologists:** More than one-third of DC schools have too few social workers and psychologists to meet the needs of their students.
- **Expand the Use of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports to all Schools:** These programs focus on encouraging desired behaviors rather than punishing negative behavior, and

they can increase attendance and reduce suspensions and special education referrals.

- **Create Trauma-Sensitive School Environments in All Schools:** DCPS uses a number of programs that can help students address trauma, but not system-wide and often serving only a small number of students with the greatest needs. Schools in Massachusetts, San Francisco, Washington State and Wisconsin engage in all-staff training to be sensitive to students affected by trauma and to understand how to respond.

You can read more about what DC schools can be doing to help low-income children succeed [here](#).

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