



Ask Council to Expand School-Based Mental Health Services in the FY 2014 Budget

By Wes Rivers

Every school in DC should have a mental health professional to help students deal with issues that could get in the way of learning. Yet, currently only 51 public and public charter schools — less than one-third — participate in the city's school-based mental health (SBMH) program. A proposal now before the DC Council would expand SBMH to an additional 19 schools in the fiscal year (FY) 2014 budget, but for now this proposal is on a contingency list and will get funded only if the city's projected revenues increase.

The District's school-based mental health program provides schools with a part-time or full-time mental health clinician, who provides a range of services — from prevention and screenings to more serious therapy and counseling. Prevention activities include education on mental health, sexual abuse and violence prevention, while treatment services focus on family and individual counseling and therapy for social-emotional functioning. The school-based clinicians also act as a referral source for intensive community mental health services. The program is active in 40 DCPS schools and 11 public charter schools, with more than half located in Wards 6, 7, and 8.

The program prioritizes the lowest performing schools and schools with fewer or no existing social workers, counselors, and/or psychologists. But many of those schools still do not have a mental health clinician on staff. Currently, there is a waiting list of schools, serving 12,000 District students, that would like to participate in the program, including 17 of the lowest performing DCPS schools and 10 charter schools targeted by the program.

Demand is high and need is great for these school-based services. Since the beginning of the 2011-12 school year, clinicians have performed over 12,600 individual student counseling sessions and about 800 family counseling visits. Mental health screenings at Early Childhood Centers suggest that half of the 2,600 children, in grades pre-kindergarten to second grade, need some type of mental health service.

Currently, expansion of SBMH services to 19 additional schools is on the mayor's "contingency funding list" — which includes items that will get funded if the city's revenue improves. The expansion would help pursue the goal set in the 2013 South Capitol Street Legislation of expanding school-based mental health services to all District schools by the 2016-2017 school year.

To meet this goal and to address the unmet needs of District children, the DC Council should move the expansion of school-based mental health services off the contingency list and fund it directly in the FY 2014 budget.