



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Mayor's FY 2015 Budget Proposes Expansion of Mental Health Services for Students

By Wes Rivers

Making sure that kids get proper health services is critical to their ability to learn and succeed in school. And with so many youth in the District facing mental health issues, it is particularly important for the District to invest in mental health services for students – as the mayor did with the FY 2015 budget proposal.

The need for mental health services is high among the District's middle and high school students, especially in our poorest and lowest-performing schools. Children in poverty experience a high rate of emotional distress, leading to difficulties in the classroom and to more serious mental health issues later in life. DC Action for Children [estimates](#) between 7,200 and 9,200 District children have severe mental health issues.

The South Capitol Street Memorial Act of 2012 authorized the creation of the school-based mental health program – which places trained mental health professionals in traditional public and public charter schools in DC. The staff offer a range of services, from classroom prevention sessions to more targeted student treatment and family counseling.



Source: Getty Images

Proposed FY 2015 funding for early childhood and school-based mental health programming is \$8.5 million, which includes a \$3 million increase to add more school-based mental health professionals and to support projected salary and fringe benefit increases in existing positions. That means 23 more schools could receive services. Additionally, the mayor's priority funding list, which includes initiatives that would be funded if revenues next year exceed current projections, proposes adding \$2 million for 23 more schools, for a total increase of \$5 million and 46 new schools next year.

Lack of funding in the past has made it difficult to create a comprehensive program across the city. Beginning in the 2014-2015 school year, only 72 public schools offered mental health screenings, referrals, and counseling to their students, with more than half operating in Wards 6, 7, and 8. The

good news is that the program has delivered 2,500 individual counseling sessions so far this school year, and almost 20,000 counseling sessions since the beginning of the 2011-12 school year. However, the program maintains a full-time caseload of only 629 students, despite having almost six times that number in referrals.

The expansion to 23 new schools would mean that more than 7,200 DCPS and charter school students would have access to services. If the additional schools on the mayor's priority list are funded, 118 District schools would have access to mental health professionals.

DCFPI applauds the mayor and the Department of Behavioral Health for addressing a critical need among the District's youth and a major barrier to educational success. We hope the Council approves the proposed budget for school-based mental health, and prioritizes the mayor's request for \$2 million in additional funding.