



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Council Should Fill Gaps in Mental Health Services for Students with FY 2015 Budget

By Wes Rivers

Two years ago, the District set a goal of having a mental health professional in each DC Public School and public charter school. That's important in a city where child poverty exceeds 50 percent in some neighborhoods and where many children come to school with [challenges](#) that interfere with their ability to learn. The District has made progress, but two-thirds of schools in the city are still without a mental health clinician.

The DC Council is now setting its final budget priorities, with a budget on May 28th. One priority should be to improve access to mental health services within schools. It would be a cost-efficient way to help DC's children and complement the city's tremendous investments in classrooms.

School is one of the most natural settings to bring services to children. And there clearly is a need for more mental health services for children. The Children's Law Center recently released a [report card](#) which found that the District has made progress but that there is more to do for the 5,000 children not receiving the mental health services they need.

DC's School-Based Mental Health (SBMH) program can help. It places professionals in traditional public and public charter schools, who offer one-on-one counseling, screening, and classroom-based prevention activities. Clinicians have 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.

But lack of funding limits the program's ability to identify or treat children. This next school year, the program will be located in just 72 schools — roughly a third of all schools — with services primarily located in Ward 6, 7, and 8.

Improving access to mental health services is not only important to helping children succeed in school. It also can help kids avoid interaction with the criminal justice system. A national study found that the [vast majority](#) of children in the juvenile justice system have at least one mental illness.

These improvements cannot happen unless the District makes investments in programs like School-Based Mental Health. The DC Fiscal Policy Institute recommends that the DC Council add \$1.9 million to support 23 additional school-based clinicians. This would bring the District to serving half of all DCPS and public charter schools and put us closer to the goal of serving all schools.