
New Jersey School Based Youth Services Program



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New Jersey School Based Youth Services Program Policy Memo #2

Executive Summary:

The New Jersey School Based Youth Services Program (SBYSP) has been in existence for over three decades, offering in-school wrap-around services such as counseling, learning support, employment services, primary, preventive, and reproductive health referrals to all students enrolled in a participating school until graduation. It is a collaborative partnership between the N.J. Department of Children and Families (NJ DCF), local school boards and the community they serve. Nearly ninety participating schools are fully funded and monitored by NJ DCF.

Recently, stakeholders have challenged New Jersey's Executive Branch for their decision to replace the SBYSP program with a statewide student support services program (NJ4S), focused on mental health, which would be made available to all youth in grades K-12 attending schools in New Jersey through a series of assemblies, workshops, mentoring programs and counseling at an off-site location.

Statement of Problem:

As noted in Politico NJ on October 20, 2022, New Jersey's Governor Phil Murphy recently praised the proposed mental health youth services program and the existing school-based services, citing that they could serve as models for other states (Yahoo, 2022). All the while, DCF's department heads in New Jersey, are proposing to permanently eliminate school-based programs and to shift the funding to the new NJ4S mental health services, to serve a larger population of students by implementing the same in all school districts.

Although stakeholders agree that a statewide mental health component would certainly be beneficial for students, parents, educators and for school administrators, they also agree that it should not be at the expense of eliminating the School Based Youth Services Program, a proven and effective initiative that is believed to transform and save lives.

Background:

New Jersey, just like many other states, is still dealing with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Livio, 2022). Students may be depressed, feeling anxiety and/or having thoughts of suicide. Providing a more comprehensive program with a focus on mental health at an early age, can only serve as a catalyst for a healthier childhood, before growing into an adult with greater conflicts that may not be as easy to navigate and to manage.

SBYSP providers, school officials, program recipients and advocates are convinced that a sudden shift in state programming and deviation of funds, would be a disservice to students who may not necessarily seek to participate in NJ4S, as their scope of service would be more limited.

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The current school-based wrap-around program provides for academic, social, recreational, cultural, and medical support.

Program providers are concerned that a change in program would require some mode of transportation to obtain a consultation with an outside counselor, which may be hard to come-by, depending on the individual's financial status among other key situations. Should the school-based program be eliminated, this would also represent a loss of jobs for the highly qualified administrators and social workers of the program who help to foster professional relationships with the students as their trusted advisors, since they already work within the school setting and provide continuity of services until graduation.

Recommendation and Conclusion:

As suggested by The New Jersey Legislative Black and the Latino Caucuses, both the school based, and the mental health programs should be allowed to run simultaneously. This should guarantee that the long-standing SBY services are not interrupted at the end of the school year.

Another recommendation is to introduce a policy geared toward codifying the existing SBYS program into law, to try to ensure a streamlined funding process through the state's annual fiscal budget (New Jersey Legislature, 2022). Once approved and signed by the Governor, many might request data driven research to assess program participation and its achievements prior to considering fully funding the program on an annual basis. Others might argue that what really matters is that we continue to help our youth, regardless of how many at a time.

Advocacy is always instrumental, whether testifying verbally or in writing, starting a letter-writing campaign addressed to legislators and to the governor or initiating a petition signing drive, as well as making calls to local or state public officials, engaging other partners that are impacted by the elimination of the program, conducting a phone bank targeting policy makers, speaking to mass media through a release or a press conference, among other actionable items.

In conclusion, all above noted recommendations seem to indicate that selecting NJ4S over SBYS could reflect poorly on the state, should the new mental health services fail or not meet its full expectations after the roll-out, while also losing students that feel comfortable within the school's haven and who are accustomed to working with a familiar and trusted in-school counselor. Regardless of which approach(es) is considered, keeping in mind the best interest of our students to improve their future outcomes, should always be the priority.

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