

Community-Based Mental Health Services and School-Based Partnerships to Treatment Access February 19, 2025

Over the last two years, Governor Shapiro has committed \$100 million dollars a year for school-based mental health services. The governor is once again proposing a \$100 million investment for this coming fiscal year. These significant dollars will continue to address only one part of the mental health continuum.

The use of these school-based mental health funds has gone to a variety of programs meant to address student mental health. Unfortunately, one of the unintended consequences has been the inability to build upon the existing partnerships and programs between school districts and the community-based mental health providers. Consequently, school districts have used these funds to hire social workers and professional counselors from the small pool of clinical staff that serve our communities, essentially consuming one mental health system for another. Building upon the existing framework of the PA community-based system of care ensures services are delivered by the most qualified, most highly-trained certified and licensed staff in the state.

RCPA and many others agree that these funds provide a key component of the mental health landscape. However, a more defined strategic blueprint in the allocation and eventual treatment services that expands on the existing community-based mental health system is needed. This will result in direct mental health services to students.

These outlined strategies will build the required partnership and collaboration in planning, developing, and implementing the delivery of quality treatment and service, so that a “secondary” mental health system in the school is not built. The following programs are examples of how school-based mental health grant funds have been successfully implemented in our communities.

Alternative Community Resource Program in Western PA developed a model with local school districts that optimizes the state philosophy of braiding and blending funds to provide services across systems. ACRP currently has contracts across their 6-county service that are to provide mental and behavioral health services in schools. They currently provide therapy in the schools, IBHS – individual and ABA staffing, and mental health support staff.

CenClear School Support Therapist Program was designed in partnership with 6 school districts in Central PA. These programs are designed specifically to meet the needs of the schools and the individual treatment goals for the students. This program has been serving this region for more than a decade with the help of school-based mental health grant dollars and the creative blending of existing funding resources.

TrueNorth Wellness has been serving the Central PA Communities for nearly 50 years, including school-based therapy and outpatient treatment services in 6 regional school districts that focus on a holistic approach with the child, family, and school. TrueNorth’s partnership with the schools and the utilization of school-based grant dollars helps offset costs to students and reduce barriers to access.

RCPA offers the following recommendations for future school-based mental health funding:

- The need to coordinate community-based and school-based mental health services is the key to building a sustainable footprint of mental health in our schools.
- Through collaboration and planning, these entities can plan, design, and implement strategies that meet the needs of their student's population and community.
- Funding should be invested into rebuilding the Student Assistance Programs in the schools. They are mandated and yet underutilized and outdated. This is the first line of defense to addressing student mental health.
- There should be a focus on building mental health programming, not mental health infrastructure.
- Dedicate funds to training school staff on adolescent behavioral health through mental health first aid and youth/teen mental health first aid.