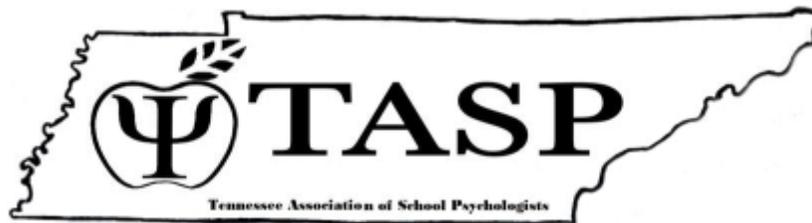


Addressing School Safety in Tennessee

Utilizing the BEP funding formula to improve provision of mental health supports to students in Tennessee



White Paper prepared by: Tennessee Association of School Psychologists

White Paper: Addressing School Safety in Tennessee

Executive Summary

In light of recent events of school violence, the topic of school safety has risen to the forefront of the conversation at the national level and in Tennessee. Policymakers, including the Governor's School Safety Working Group, have proposed various strategies to improve school safety including: increasing physical security; arming teachers; improving threat assessment procedures; improving relationships with local law enforcement; providing more school resource officers; and increasing access to school mental health services, just to name a few. Although efforts to increase the physical security of the school building are understandable, ***physical safety alone will not address the emotional and behavioral needs that contribute to school and community violence.*** Instead, we must balance physical safety with psychological safety to truly create safe schools that prevent violence. Balancing physical and psychological safety is best addressed with preventative efforts such as school-wide social-emotional and behavioral supports, early intervention for students at risk, and coordinated mental health supports for students already identified as having needs. School-employed mental health professionals such as school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses are fundamental to providing these services to students. However, due to high ratios, these professionals have limited ability to fully utilize their knowledge and training to implement comprehensive service delivery systems that include prevention and early intervention. ***Investing in efforts that would allow for school employed mental health professionals to engage in prevention will provide a greater return on investment than investments in physical security and crisis intervention alone.***

**Keep students safe by addressing the Basic Education Plan's funding formula
for school mental health professionals.**

Currently, the BEP provides funding for 1 school psychologist for every 2,500 students. TASP urges the Tennessee General Assembly to adopt a multi-year plan, which would reduce the ratio by 20-25% each year for the next five years, ending at a ratio of 1:700 in 2023.

When schools are inviting, safe places, students thrive academically and socially. In order to foster an environment where students feel valued and comfortable, stakeholders must acknowledge the alarming trends in mental health issues, school violence, childhood trauma, and illicit drug use (i.e. opioids).

- One in 5 young people show characteristics of a mental illness. Tennessee exceeds the national average in percentage of parents who reported that a doctor has diagnosed their child with a mental health issue (i.e. depression, anxiety, or ADHD)².
- 70 percent of young people in state or local juvenile justice systems have an underlying mental illness¹².
- Almost 10 percent of Tennessee's young people have attempted suicide in the past 12 months, which also exceeds the national average². Ninety percent of young people who died by suicide had an underlying mental illness
- One in 4 Tennesseans endorse having three or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs can impact the development of brain architecture and lead to delays in executive functioning and emotional regulation, which leads to a cycle of violence. This cycle can be interrupted by the presences of safe, stable, nurturing relationships¹.
- Students with unmet mental health needs are at greater risk for worse outcomes, including lower educational attainment, lower employment rates, lower wages, and higher rates of crime⁴.

Tennessee's challenges in the areas of mental health, school violence, and illicit drug use are inherently related. In order for Tennessee to ensure all students have access to inviting, safe schools, stakeholders must unite and preemptively battle against these trends. This battle begins in classrooms, with adequate support from school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists, all of whom have specialized training in supporting students with these complex concerns. ***A multi-year reduction in the BEP funding formula towards a state-wide ratio of 1 school psychologist to 700 students would be a powerful step towards addressing these challenges facing Tennessee.***

Build student resilience and safety by addressing the shortage of school mental health professionals caused by attrition and funding disparities within the state of Tennessee.

The issue of effective ratios for school psychologists is rendered even more complex by nationwide and regional shortages in qualified school psychologists to fill open positions¹¹. The most effective supports for students are purposeful, coordinated strategies that increase safety while simultaneously promoting student wellness and resilience⁸. However, shortages among school-employed mental health professionals make it impossible to provide proactive, purposeful, and systematic supports within Tennessee.

- The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends a ratio of 1 psychologist to 500-700 students⁷, but current funding for school psychologists under the BEP formula is 1:2500 students.
 - If LEAs want to provide a more reasonable ratio, they are forced to allocate limited local funding to make up the difference.
 - Actual ratios in Tennessee vary greatly; the average ratio is about *1 psychologist to 1600 students* (TNDOE statistics), but the range falls between 1:800 students in Tennessee's wealthiest districts to over 1:4000 students in other districts.
 - Overall, Tennessee statistics fall well below the national average of 1 psychologist to about 1400 students¹³.
- Both the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) recommend a ratio of no more than 250 students to one service provider to allow effective supports within school buildings. BEP funding for these positions integral to student safety are at 1:350-500 for school counselors and 1:2000 for school social workers.
 - School nurses are funded by the BEP at a rate of 1:3000 students, which is also well below national recommendations of no more than 1:750 healthy students, with a lower ratio required to address students with daily or complex healthcare needs (AAP).
 - The Tennessee Mental Health Collaborative emphasizes the comprehensive and preventative services that these school-based professionals can provide to make schools safer.

School psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, and school nurses are all woefully underfunded within the state, making it even more challenging for schools to address concerns in a proactive and effective manner.

School psychologists have the knowledge and skill set to support students and schools in developing caring communities that foster resilience. The current funding formula for school psychologists and other school mental health professionals does not allow for adequate provision of services.

Solutions

Support increasing student access to educational support professionals (school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses) by adjusting the BEP funding formula. **Adopt a multi-year reduction plan, which would reduce the ratio of school psychologists by 20-25% each year for the next five years, ending at a ratio of 1:700 in 2023.**

- ***One recommendation of Governor Haslam’s School Safety Working Group was to review the BEP and “recommend model staffing [of school social workers, counselors, and school psychologists] to promote and enhance school climate and healthy learning environments.”*** Increased availability of school mental health professionals would allow schools to implement another SSWG recommendation of expanding training areas to include:
 - “Early and periodic screening and identification of student behavioral health needs
 - Strategies for promoting positive behavior and decision-making among all students;
 - Strategies for increasing staff awareness and responsiveness to signs and symptoms of student behavioral and mental health needs.”
- ***Increased funding for preventative services yields a greater return on investment than crisis intervention***^{5,6}.
- ***School psychologists have specialized training and expertise to help schools improve school climate***⁹. Research has consistently demonstrated that positive school climate improves student learning, teacher retention, and school performance (TN DOE); mitigates childhood trauma; supports resilience; improves overall outcomes for children;¹ and prevents school violence³.
- ***Schools are an ideal place to provide mental health services to children and youth.*** Schools offer an optimal context for prevention, intervention, positive development, and regular communication between school and families. In fact, ***research has shown that students are more likely to seek counseling when services are available in schools***¹⁰.

Conclusion

Addressing the need for increased provision of school mental health supports is the first step in creating a safer, healthier Tennessee.

Prevention and early intervention have been shown through countless academic studies to have a greater return on investment than reactively intervening only after a crisis has occurred. Increased staffing would allow for increased collaboration between professionals and fewer missed opportunities to intervene early for students at risk. ***Tennessee has an opportunity to use educational budgets more efficiently by funneling supports for school safety into preventative supports such as school-employed mental health professionals.*** School psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses are best able to support communities due to their intimate knowledge of individual communities and their ability to tailor solutions to community needs. Contracting mental health services to private companies and providing supports only for the physical security of schools will not meaningfully improve school safety. ***School psychologists are uniquely prepared to identify students at risk and support schools in implementing interventions aimed at increasing emotional regulation, prosocial skills, and school engagement.***

Tennessee has an opportunity to be a model of innovation in tackling this national problem of school violence by increasing access to school mental health services now.

Proposed Multi-Year Reduction Plan

Current National Recommendation	Current BEP Funding Ratio	Year 1 25% reduction	Year 2 25 % reduction	Year 3 20 % reduction	Year 4 20% reduction	Year 5 20 % reduction
1:500-700	1:2500	1:1875	1:1400	1:1125	1:900	1:700

Appendix

- A. Building Strong Brains Tennessee - ACES handout
- B. NASP - Building Capacity for Student Success; Every Student Succeeds Act Opportunities
- C. Heckman Equation, University of Chicago - Return on Investment; Cost vs. Benefits
- D. NASP - School Based Mental Health Services⁶
- E. Governor’s School Safety Working Group - Recommendations for Consideration
- F. Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, University of Colorado Boulder - Top Ten Recommendations for School Safety³
- G. NASP - Shortages in School Psychology; Challenges to Meeting the Growing Needs of US Students and Schools
- H. NASP - School Psychologists: Qualified Mental Health Professionals Providing Child and Adolescent Mental and Behavioral Health Services

Documents found at: <https://tinyurl.com/taspschoolsafety>

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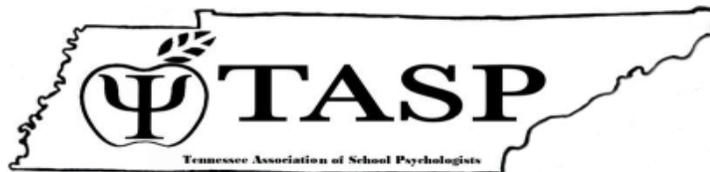
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The Tennessee Association of School Psychologists (TASP) is a professional group representing school psychologists across the state. TASP promotes equitable and quality educational opportunities for all persons and seeks to stimulate interest in and a better understanding of the role of psychology in the schools among professionals and other interest groups.

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