



IMPROVING HEALTH AND
MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS
**National
Quality
Initiative**



**SCHOOL-BASED
HEALTH ALLIANCE**
The National Voice for School-Based Health Care

Recruitment and Retention of School Health and School Mental Health Staff:

Innovations from the School Health Services National Quality Initiative

As part of the School Health Services National Quality Initiative, the School-Based Health Alliance (SBHA) and the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH), with guidance from the Health Resources and Services Administration's Maternal and Child Health Bureau, worked with states to increase state policies and programs that promote quality, sustainability, and growth of school-based health services, specifically school-based health centers (SBHCs) and comprehensive school mental health systems (CSMHSs).

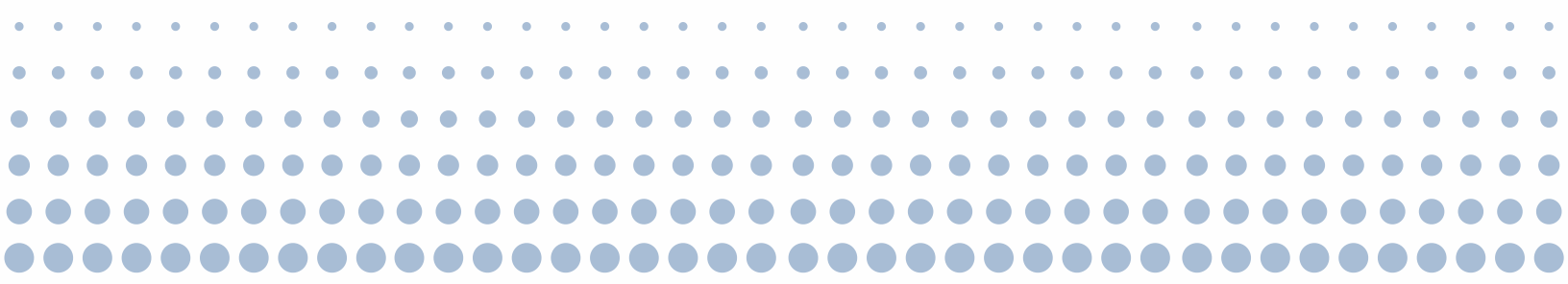
We hosted a three-year, quarterly learning community of 24 states, the District of Columbia, and the Bureau of Indian Education and Indian Health Service. Participants included representatives from state departments of education, health or public health, and mental/behavioral health; Title V/Medicaid; other state-level agencies or organizations such as SBHA state affiliates and managed care organizations; and family organizations, youth, and other leadership.

This document provides a topical overview, highlights shared policy or practice innovations, lessons learned, and resources related to the recruitment and retention of school health and school mental health staff.

SBHCs: School-based health centers complement existing school health services by facilitating access to primary care and often behavioral health, vision, and other services through school-community partnerships for children and youth nationwide who experience barriers to accessing care because of discrimination, their family income, or where they live.

CSMHSs: In strategic partnership between schools, families, and communities, comprehensive school mental health systems use a multi-tiered system of support framework (MTSS) to promote positive school climate, social and emotional competencies, and mental health and well-being, while reducing the prevalence and severity of mental illness.

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Topic Overview



Public schools nationwide face critical shortages of mental health staff, including school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists. An overwhelming majority of states across the country do not meet nationally recommended ratios of students to mental health staff. According to the [2022 School Pulse Panel](#), a study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau, 88 percent of schools reported that they did not strongly believe they could effectively provide mental health services to students in need. According to the survey results, insufficient staff coverage and lack of access to licensed mental health providers were the top two factors that limited schools' ability to provide mental health services to students. These shortages can significantly undermine the ability of schools to offer mental health services and support to students and their families.

Through partnerships with local healthcare organizations, SBHCs provide children and youth who experience barriers to healthcare access because of discrimination, their family income, or where they live with primary care, behavioral health, oral health, and vision care where they spend most of their time – at school. Shortages of healthcare workers, including medical assistants, registered nurses, and physicians, limit adequate staffing of SBHCs and the number of students who receive care. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a [National Academy of Medicine](#) study found that burnout had reached "crisis levels" among the U.S. health workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated burnout among healthcare providers, as record numbers of healthcare workers reduced working hours, quit, or intended to quit. In SBHA's [2021-22 National Survey of School-Based Health Centers](#), 38% of responding SBHCs reported experiencing staff relocation, furloughs, or layoffs.



Innovations Spotlight



Nebraska

Creating a Behavioral Health Care Provider Pipeline in High School and College

In 2009, the Nebraska legislature created the [Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska \(BHECN\)](#) to address the shortages of trained behavioral health providers in rural and underserved areas. BHECN's mission is to increase the number of licensed behavioral health professionals across the state through four focus areas: engage and recruit; prepare and train; retain and support; and workforce overview and analysis. To achieve their objectives, BHECN partners with many groups and organizations, including state government, community agencies, academic institutions, and providers.

As part of their engagement and recruitment efforts, BHECN established a pipeline program in 2012 called the BHECN Ambassador Program. High school and college students are introduced to behavioral health careers through various activities, conferences, and mentorship events. Through a partnership with the Nebraska Department of Education, BHECN developed a high school-level course titled "Introduction to Behavioral Health I & II." BHECN also created a publication, "Pathways to a Career in Behavioral Health," to help disseminate information about behavioral health careers and the academic programs available in Nebraska. Further, through the Ambassador Career Engagement Awards, BHECN provides schools, groups, and organizations a yearly opportunity to apply for funding through a competitive process. This funding supports teaching young people about mental health topics and introducing them to careers. To document the reach of the pipeline programs, BHECN uses the [National Student Clearinghouse's Student Tracker for Outreach](#).

To learn more about BHECN's engagement and recruitment programs and their other focus areas, visit the [BHECN website](#).



Wisconsin

University Grant Program to Recruit, Diversify, and Retain School Mental Health Staff

Wisconsin's School-Based Mental Health Professionals (SBMHP) Grant Project focuses on the recruitment, diversification, and retention of school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists. The program aims to improve school-based mental health staff-to-student ratios in "high-need" districts and to diversify the workforce. The SBMHP Project selected high-need districts based on staffing shortages; historical recruitment deficits for pupil services staff; and disparities in the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity between pupil services staff and students. To recruit and retain staff, the SBMHP Project aims to create and expand pathways to pupil services licensure, increase the recruitment and retention of pupil services staff in high-need districts, and to increase diversity of these positions.

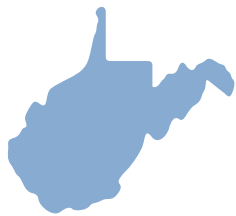
To expand pathways to pupil services licensure, the SBMHP Project formed partnerships with 10 universities to increase pupil services program accessibility. The SBMHP Project works with the University of Wisconsin Pupil Services Programs to increase their capacity through virtual instruction, hybrid programs, increased recruitment, and student financial support.

To increase recruitment and retention of pupil services staff, the SBMHP Project works with 11 high-need districts to remove barriers for pupil services candidates. Grant funds have been used for recruitment marketing, tuition assistance, retention bonuses, sign-on bonuses, relocation fees, and professional development. Districts can also use funds from the SBMHP Project to encourage current district employees or residents to pursue licensure in a school-based mental health profession.

To sustain these efforts, the SBMHP Project focuses on professional development and support for school-based mental health professionals. This includes the development of field supervision and mentoring programs through partnerships with state organizations.

Additionally, one of the University of Wisconsin program partners with the SBMHP Project has developed an online Psychological First Aid for Schools curriculum for all school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers free of charge with the goal of increasing the retention of new and early pupil services professionals.





West Virginia

Adopting a Team-based Approach for Provider Satisfaction

COVID-related burnout and staffing shortages have put recruiting and retaining primary care providers at the top of mind for the West Virginia Primary Care Association (WVPCA), which leads school-based health center work in the state. The team found it necessary to ground themselves in the organization's mission and to intentionally bring a sense of purpose to the daily work routine. This meant considering how to bring joy into the workplace for employees while simultaneously enhancing the patient experience. They achieved this by adopting a team-based approach at the health center level for providing patient care and at the state level for supporting workplace wellness. The team-based approach enhanced professional satisfaction because everyone was responsible for the outcomes. To address workplace wellness, several health centers provided reciprocal employee assistance services for different health centers across the state. This approach gave staff an increased sense of privacy and comfort discussing challenges compared to providing these services "in-house." The biggest lesson learned was to "think outside the box."



New Mexico

Learning Community for Providers

Like many across the country, school-based health centers in New Mexico are often small in staff and isolated from others doing similar work. The New Mexico Alliance for School-Based Health Care (NMASBHC) took a proactive approach to build community and a sense of purpose among staff through their TeleEcho for School-Based Health Centers. The program, which began in May 2021, meets twice a month and features educational and professional development sessions on topics ranging from clinical care to marketing. It supports and builds a community of practice for school-based health provider teams. Participants can connect with those doing similar work in different places in the state, having similar challenges, or who have already solved a problem and lean on each other to solve and answer questions. The partnership created by the program helps staff know that they're not facing challenges alone and that they can look for answers outside of their local community.

For more information, please visit the [New Mexico Alliance for School-Based Health Care TeleEcho webpage](#).

Lessons Learned



Focusing on recruitment and retention will help build a strong school-based health services workforce. State leaders can support these efforts by addressing barriers, creating opportunities in systems, and supporting individual growth and development. Opportunities to foster these approaches include developing school-to-field pipelines, reducing barriers to healthcare pathways, supporting organizational strategies for workplace wellness, and creating opportunities for collaboration.

Resources



➤➤ [Recruitment and Retention of School Mental Health Providers: Strategies and Key Resources](#)

An overview of strategies to improve recruitment and retention of school mental health providers.

➤➤ [Assessing Workforce Diversity: A Tool for Mental Health Organizations on the Path to Health Equity](#)

A self-assessment to help mental health organizations explore their workforce diversity strategies in six areas: Leadership and Governance; Recruitment; Orientation, Onboarding, and Ongoing Training; Retention and Professional Development; Communication; and Partnership and Community Goals.


➤➤ [National Counsel for Mental Wellbeing Trainings](#)

This two-part webinar series explores trauma-informed care concepts and strategies that behavioral health providers and staff can carry beyond the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance resilience among themselves and their school communities.

- [Compassion Fatigue and Resilience Strategies for School-Based Health Center Providers](#)
- [Tips and Tools for Leveraging Trauma Informed Care Techniques to Reduce Stress of Students, Teachers, and Providers](#)

➤➤ [Addressing Health Worker Burnout: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Building a Thriving Health Workforce](#)

This advisory includes are recommendations about how to address the factors underpinning burnout, improve health worker well-being, and strengthen the nation's public health infrastructure.



Suggested Citation



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