



September 6, 2022

Mike Morath
Commissioner
Texas Education Agency
1701 N. Congress Avenue
Austin, TX 78701
commissioner@tea.texas.gov

Via U.S. Mail and E-Mail

Dear Commissioner Morath:

We, the undersigned education justice advocacy organizations, write in support of the framework for bolstering school-based mental health services outlined by the White House in July 2022.¹ The coronavirus pandemic continues to significantly impact young Texans and their families, and robust investments in mental health services will support healing for millions of children across our state. We urge the Texas Education Agency to provide local education agencies with significant resources to address the mental health crisis that presently exists for young Texans.

According to the White House’s fact sheet, the Safer Communities Act will dedicate \$1 billion to school-based mental health supports over the next five years. In particular, the Act seeks to double the number of counselors, social workers, and other mental health

¹ See generally FACT SHEET: *Biden-Harris Administration Announces Two New Actions to Address Youth Mental Health Crisis*, July 29, 2022, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/29/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-two-new-actions-to-address-youth-mental-health-crisis/> (last accessed on September 6, 2022)

professionals in schools across America. In Texas, a number of our organizations have noted the inadequate levels of investment in school-based mental health services for years. In a recent policy brief, Texans Care for Children highlighted the alarming statistic from a 2021 pediatrics study that 14,000 children in Texas lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19 in the first 15 months of the pandemic.² That reality alone necessitates a coordinated, multi-pronged effort to prioritize the present and future mental health of all young Texans in their schools.³ These data were underscored by the conclusions of a report issued by IDRA detailing the findings of a youth-led participatory research study which concluded that three out of four students reported struggling with mental wellness issues.

As reflected in the 2022 Mental Health Report Card on America's Schools, Texas woefully fell short of the recommended ratios of mental health professionals to students. Presently, and overall, Texas employs one school psychologist for every 4,962 students, one social worker for every 13,604 students, and one school counselor for every 423 students.⁴ The relevant professional associations recommend one school counselor for every 250 students, one social worker for every 250 students, and one school psychologist for every 500 students. As the 2022-23 academic year kicks off in full force, young Texans deserve an abundant set of psychologists, school counselors, and social workers to address their mental health challenges.

As we prepare for the 88th legislative session in 2023, we recognize that the agency will consider a host of policy ideas to address the need for student support services during this academic year and beyond. We stand prepared to offer our research, analysis, and recommendations on proposed legislation, but we also recognize that the agency has discretion to offer directives of its own that will influence how local education agencies will approach this critical topic. Such guidance could be paired with SB 179 (2021), which took effect last fall and requires school counselors to dedicate 80% of their time to non-administrative duties, to ultimately move away from punitive approaches to school-based mental health challenges.

Following up on the directive from the White House, the Secretaries of Health & Human Services and Education recently sent a letter to Governor Abbott that emphasized a critical point: states should use Medicaid, and public benefits generally, to provide mental health services to kids. We urge you to use every tool within your power to make that critical expansion of public benefits a reality for children across Texas. Moreover, given the unique stressors that

² Josette Saxton, *Texas Leaders Must Help Parents Seeking Mental Health Support for Their Children*, Texans Care for Children, June 22, 2022, available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5728d34462cd94b84dc567ed/t/62b39015de529c420ab8f46b/1655934997320/Children%27s+Mental+Health+Policy+Brief+June+2022.pdf> (last accessed on September 6, 2022)

³ This data was underscored by the conclusions of a report issued by IDRA detailing the findings of a youth-led participatory research study which concluded that three out of four students reported struggling with mental wellness issues: <https://www.idra.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Seek-Common-Ground-Report-IDRA-Sept-2021.pdf>

⁴ See *generally* Hopeful Futures Campaign, *America's School Mental Health Report Card*, February 2022, available at https://hopefulfutures.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Final_Master_021522.pdf (last accessed on September 6, 2022)

young Texans have faced during the pandemic, we encourage TEA to dedicate discretionary funds toward mental health initiatives in local education agencies.

We thank you for your service to the State of Texas, and we invite you to contact our organizations about the tenets of this letter.

Sincerely,

Texas Appleseed
The Arc of Texas
Texans Care for Children
Girls Empowerment Network
Mental Health America of Greater Houston
The Education Trust
MEASURE
Austin Justice Coalition
ONE Houston
Coalition of Texans with Disabilities (CTD)
Dallas Core
Texas Center for Justice & Equity
IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association)
National Association of Social Workers Texas Chapter
Education Austin