

Access to Professional Support Personnel in Massachusetts Public Schools

Research Brief and Recommendations

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) licenses Professional Support Personnel in four areas— School Counselor, School Psychologist, School Social Worker/Adjustment Counselor, and School Nurse. These professionals are employed by the local and regional public school districts throughout Massachusetts. This research brief compares the current staffing ratios of different types of Massachusetts public schools with the recommendations of national professional organizations. It offers policy strategies to address gaps in access to services for students in the Commonwealth.

Access to School-based Professional Support Personnel Services

The Safe and Supportive Schools Framework is organized around six elements: 1) Leadership, 2) Professional Development, 3) Access to Resources and Services, 4) Academic and Non-academic Supports, 5) Policies, Procedures, and Protocols, and 6) Collaboration with Families. The focus of this research brief is related to *access to resources and services*, defined as “identification, coordination, and creation of school and community behavioral health services that improve the school-wide environment.” This brief focuses solely on the numbers of licensed professionals who have the skills to design and implement social, emotional, and behavioral health services in schools. DESE offers Professional Support Personnel licensure for school-based services in four fields, each of which requires professional and/or graduate training accompanied by supervised field experiences:

- School Counselor (Levels: PreK-8; 5-12)
- School Social Worker/School Adjustment Counselor (All Levels)
- School Psychologist (All Levels)
- School Nurse (All Levels)

Based on available data from DESE, during the 2018-2019 school year, the 406 public school districts¹ employed **7475** Professional Support Personnel in schools to meet the needs of 950,203 students. The 2048 school nurses provide a range of health services, while the remaining **5427** support personnel provide school-based counseling, academic guidance, health, and behavioral health services.

| Professional Support Personnel License | Number of Professionals in MA Schools | Ratio of Staff: Student | National Recommended Ratios |
|--|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| School Social Worker/ School Adjustment Counselor | 1777 | 1:536 | 1:250 |
| School Counselor | 2353 | 1:404 | 1:250 |
| School Psychologist | 1297 | 1:734 | 1:500 |
| School Nurse | 2048 | 1:465 | 1:750 |

When compared to the staff-to-student ratios recommended by each of the professional fields², Massachusetts public schools are currently **under resourced** in the specializations of School Social Worker/Adjustment Counselor, School Counselor, and School Psychologist. Correspondingly, in general, students in Massachusetts public schools are adequately staff for access to services provided by School Nurses.

¹406 public districts comprised of 291 Local and regional school districts (LEAs), 84 Charter Schools, 29 Vocational/Technical Schools, and 2 Online schools

² Professional ratio recommendations collected from the National Association of Social Workers, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, and National School Nurse Association.



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It is noteworthy that this research brief only focuses on Professional Support Personnel employed directly by local educational agencies; and, it does not include data on community providers or partnerships with area agencies. It is also important to note that there is inconsistent application of the skills and competencies of Professional Support Personnel to support students' social, emotional and behavioral health. This can be due to many factors, including district structures, staffing capacity issues, and insufficient of training, though further study of current practices throughout the Commonwealth is needed.

Conclusion

Most people experience the first onset of a mental health disorder in childhood or adolescence. Public schools possess a unique constellation of opportunities for health promotion and illness prevention. For the public schools in Massachusetts to emphasize prevention and promote positive academic and social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, comprehensive services require adequate staffing of Professional Support Personnel. Based on these findings, students in the Commonwealth are lacking an adequate level of access to school-based behavioral health supports.

Recommendations

The recommendations are designed to enhance access to school-based behavioral health supports to meet the needs of children in the Commonwealth. These recommendations include:

- **State Budget Funding** – Given the inequity in local resources, funding resources provided by the state could reduce barriers for access to social, emotional and behavioral health by supporting the hiring and training of school-based professional personnel.
- **Support Workforce Development Opportunities** – The hiring of key personnel requires a pool of highly, qualified school-based behavioral health professionals – and national reports suggest that there are labor shortages in these fields. State resources could support pre-service and in-service training to build a cadre of licensed professionals, with a unique focus on efforts to diversify the workforce.
- **Adoption of MTSS Framework** – In addition to having qualified school behavioral health staffing, an essential key is the implementation of multi-tiered prevention and intervention frameworks. This allows school professionals to complete screenings, implement interventions, and monitor progress for students in need of services.
- **Expanded Behavioral Health Partnerships with Community Agencies** – Schools cannot do this work alone and partnerships can assist in meeting the needs of students and families. Blended funding resources could support the development of behavioral health partnerships between districts and community agencies to expand access to services and enhance capacity of schools.

Authors and Contact Information

The research brief has been created by the Behavioral health Integrated Resources for Children Project (BIRCh Project). It represents a collaboration between the University of Massachusetts Boston and the University of Massachusetts Amherst and is funded by Boston Children's Hospital. More information is available at www.umb.edu/birch, or contact us at Birch.project@umb.edu.

