



Tips for Advocating for School Mental Health Needs

How to Advocate:

- **Make a List and Check it Twice**

- Compile a list of policymakers, policy drivers, leaders in education, and/or influencers you'd like to contact. Focus on the contacts who represent your community and state. Find their contact information and make a list of representatives to communicate with.

- **Know Who You Are Speaking With**

- Do some research about the viewpoints, voting record, and careers of the stakeholders you meet with. Weave this information into your pitch.
 - Come to the meeting with an understanding of what power the staff member you are speaking with has to affect change directly or advocate for change with their higher ups and tailor your message accordingly.
 - Adapt your message to fit each individual you meet with.

- **Present Facts and Stories**

- Data from research studies and surveys help tell the story of what large groups of people need, want, and benefit from.
 - Personal stories, from members of your group—especially students, parents, and teachers—help people in power see how an issue is directly impacting someone. Your daily experiences can lend authenticity and authority to your positions.
 - Data about childhood trauma

- [CDC's Vital Signs Report](#) (Merrick et al., 2019)

- 60.9% of adults experienced at least one type of adverse childhood experience (ACE)
 - 15.6% of adults experienced 4+ types of ACEs
 - Over index among Women, Native, Black, and Other racial/ethnic groups
 - Those with greater ACEs have higher odds of having chronic health conditions including obesity, COPD, depression, alcohol and cigarette usage
 - Those with greater ACEs also face more socioeconomic challenges in adulthood including current unemployment

- [National Children's Alliance](#) (2019)

- ~689,000 children victims of abuse and neglect in 2018 (~1% of population)
 - 61% of victims experienced neglect only (most common form of abuse), 10% experienced physical abuse only, 7% experienced sexual abuse only
 - 15% of victims experienced 2+ forms of abuse



- 78% of children were victimized by a parent
- [Child Trends](#) (2019)
 - Most common forms of adverse experiences children experience are economic hardship (25.5%), divorce or separation of a parent (25%), living with someone with an alcohol or drug problem (9%), parental incarceration (8%), and living with someone with a mental illness or suicidality (8%)
 - Children from poor families are 2x more likely to experience 3+ ACEs than children from affluent families
- **Make Your Ask Clear**
 - In a quick and direct manner, state your goal. *i.e., We want funding for more school social workers in our school district.*
 - Tell your audience what they can do to help you achieve your goal. *i.e., We have looked at the district's budget for the next school year and we believe that money currently spent on school resource officers would be better spent on social workers.*
 - Set a timeline and explain why your issue is urgent. Ask them for a follow-up appointment or to call/e-mail you with a response by a certain date.
- **Follow Up**
 - A "thank you" can go a long way, so send a text, e-mail, or card to let the person you spoke with know you appreciate them taking the time to hear your opinion.
 - If you haven't heard back from the person you spoke with after some time, give them a call or send them an e-mail asking about progress on the issue.
 - When a stakeholder is unresponsive after a long period of time, going into their office to set up another meeting may show how passionate you are about your issue and let them know that you will not back down.

Where to Advocate:

- **School Staff and Administrators:** For issues related to policy, procedure, and other decisions in your school building, try reaching out directly to teachers, school mental health professionals, and administrators with power to affect change.
- **Local School Boards and District Administration:** When an issue has not been addressed in your school building, or if the issue affects multiple schools in the district, contact school board or district administrators and attend school board meetings.
- **Local Community:** If an issue in your local school hasn't been addressed after contacting administrators at the school, district, and city level, you can reach out to members of the community by contacting your town's newspaper or news station, meeting with local organizations that may be interested in your issue, or planning town halls or peaceful demonstrations in areas visible to the wider community, such as parks and pavilions.



- **State, Regional, and Federal Legislators and Administrators:** To affect change in policy, procedure, and funding mechanisms on a wider scale, you will want to meet with lawmakers at various levels and/or government officials who have the power to make these changes, possibly at the Department of Education or the Department of Mental Health.
- **The World at Large:** Many issues that students, families, and educators care about are relevant not only across America, but around the world. To share ideas with a broader audience, start a social media campaign, build a website, make a documentary or short public service announcement video, write opinion pieces in national newspapers, contact national news programs, and connect with other organizations around the world doing work similar to yours.

Power in Numbers

Getting the Parent Teacher Association involved in issues that affect families and local teachers unions or professional organizations involved in advocacy for issues that affect school staff can increase likelihood of success since those in positions of power are more likely to listen when they know a large number of people care about an issue. And, remember, to build coalitions—with like minded individuals, community-based organizations, faith-based institutions, nonprofits, etc. With an expanded base of support, you gain networking and information sharing opportunities, and potentially, increased access to resources.

Advocating for School Mental Health Services

- **Support the advocacy skills of others.** You can support students, families, and new teachers with becoming more skillful advocates. Consider direct instruction for students using a specific self-advocacy curriculum, and involve parents and teachers in advocacy projects (school meetings, parent groups) to strengthen their skills (The Inclusion Lab, 2018).
- **Present the problem:** Before COVID-19, youth mental health was becoming a crisis with the number of youth experiencing serious mental health challenges and suicidal ideation rising exponentially year after year. The global pandemic has exacerbated this problem. Use facts, figures, and personal stories to explain why increasing school mental health services is an urgent need.
 - [Well-being of Parents and Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A National Survey](#) (Patrick et al., 2020)
 - “Since March 2020, 27% of parents reported worsening mental health for themselves, and 14% reported worsening behavioral health for their children.”
 - Parents’ mental health and children’s behavioral health worsened alongside one another in one in ten families; these families typically reported changes in insurance status(es), worsening food security, and the loss of regular child care.



- [Kids may face mental health issues as school begins amid pandemic](#) (Basu, 2020)
 - “...remote learning requires a level of sustained attention and emotional regulation that is a very big demand, developmentally, for kids in middle school and younger.”
 - “Right now, our physical safety as well as our social connectedness are being challenged...worries about safety can activate the limbic system, which can interfere with learning in school.”
 - “In younger kids, psychological distress might manifest as new or worsening behavioral problems, difficulty separating from parents or caregivers, or somatic symptoms such as aches and pains or changes in sleep or appetite.”
 - “Older kids can also experience somatic symptoms, as well as fear, nervousness, stress, irritability, and hypervigilance.”
- [Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19](#) (Lee, 2020)
 - “In a survey by the mental health charity [YoungMinds](#), which included 2111 participants up to age 25 years with a mental illness history in the UK, 83% said the pandemic had made their conditions worse.”
 - “26% said they were unable to access mental health support.”
 - “Going to school had been a struggle for [some children with depression] prior to the pandemic, but at least they had school routines to stick with’...for some children with depression, there will be considerable difficulties adjusted back to normal life when school resumes.”
- **Give Solutions:**
 - Increase funding so that schools can hire the necessary amount of staff to address students’ mental health needs and so that classroom teachers are not burdened with high class sizes, which make it difficult to address the holistic needs of all students.
 - Pass legislation to allow students and staff to take mental health days, such as the [bill passed in Oregon in 2019](#).
 - Reform policy so that coordination between healthcare centers and schools supporting student mental health is not inhibited by HIPAA and other similar measures, while maintaining the privacy levels desired by families.
 - Convene state and regional committees to discuss potential solutions. Include multiple stakeholders on these committees, including but not limited to students, parents and family members, teachers, administrators, school mental health professionals, healthcare workers, and community organizations.
- **Point to Success Stories:**
 - The state of California put [\\$50 million behind school-based mental health centers](#) in 2019 and has been seeing results. In [San Francisco](#), [Los Angeles](#), and other districts in the state, schools have been partnering with healthcare centers to



bring mental health services into the building, and have been paying for it using [Medicaid funding](#).

- The [Comprehensive Behavioral Health Model](#) being used in Boston Public Schools brings behavioral health specialists from Boston Children's Hospital and University of Massachusetts-Boston into Pre-K-12 schools to support holistic well-being for schools. Share a [fact sheet](#) about the program or [data](#) showing academic and social emotional gains with stakeholders to show them a relatable model that has been successful!
- **Demonstrate the Number of Organizations/Individuals Who Support Your Ideas:**
 - [National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\)](#)
 - [Child Mind Institute](#)
 - [American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry \(AACAP\)](#)
 - [The Jed Foundation](#)
 - [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
 - [Case Study on the 12 Core Curriculum Concepts for Childhood Trauma](#)
 - [National Federation of Families](#)
 - [The Trevor Project](#)

Access the National Association of School Psychologists' [Ready to Learn, Empowered to Teach](#) for tips specific to school mental health professionals' advocacy efforts. Their seven guiding principles are (NASP, 2021):

1. Review, evaluate, and reconstruct or replace existing school structures, policies, and procedures that lead to inequitable outcomes.
2. Combine high expectations for all students with high-quality instruction across a well-rounded and culturally responsive curriculum for general and special education students.
3. Create positive school climates that balance physical and psychological safety for all students.
4. Provide access to comprehensive school-based mental and behavioral health services and ensure adequate staffing levels of appropriately trained school-employed mental health professionals.
5. Increase family and community engagement to support student success.
6. Create systems that support the recruitment and retention of properly trained and prepared professionals that reflect the diversity of the school community.
7. Create accountability systems that use a broad set of measures to inform specific actions that improve school quality and provide an understanding of how specific outcomes were achieved.



References and Resources

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New England (HHS Region 1)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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