



Policy Recommendation #1: *Every school, every child*

Expand school-based behavioral health services to every Georgia public school and to every child who needs it.

Why?

Georgia's children have a challenging time finding the behavioral health services they need. Two in five Georgia children have trouble accessing mental health treatment. School-based programs provide services when children need them and in public schools where they can access them. Georgia's existing school-based programs help students overcome common barriers to mental health services, including lack of transportation, complicated family scheduling, poor awareness of available services, distrust of providers and certain state agencies, and community stigma.

Georgia's existing Apex Program provides state seed funding for school-based behavioral health. Data shows that participation in the Georgia's existing Apex school-based programs improves school climate and decreases discipline problems, compared to non-participating schools. Apex and other school-based programs keep children in class learning, increasing academic success.

What can you do?

1. **Leverage Medicaid and private insurance to fund school-based behavioral health.** Schools, school systems, service providers, and state policy makers should develop funding models that bill Medicaid and private insurance to fund service delivery for individual students.
2. **Provide mental health awareness training to every teacher in Georgia.** Every public-school teacher should be trained in mental health awareness, including trauma and suicide prevention, so that teachers can identify and refer children to school-based behavioral health and related services.

What do Georgians Say?

"We must have more services in schools, with intervention social workers trained to identify kids who need help. Kids spend 6-8 hours per day in school, so this is where problems are most likely to be noticed, and where services should be initiated. We need trained individuals who can provide kids with a safe space to talk, and who can develop relationships with the kids."

– Georgia schools' consultant

"Providing teachers with more training on how to identify behavioral health issues and manage them in the classroom is a must. Teachers would love this training."

– Principal of public school

"[Without accessible mental healthcare], a child who experiences trauma or emotional neglect has difficulty paying attention at school, then becomes labeled, then is sent to an alternative school, then becomes involved in the juvenile justice system, then drops out of school, then becomes involved in criminal activity."

– Georgia government employee

Georgia Appleseed developed this policy recommendation as part of our Bridges to Behavioral Wellness project. Our staff and volunteers traveled across Georgia and listened to diverse groups of youth, parents, school personnel, law enforcement, juvenile courts, partner organizations, and other stakeholders. These Georgians identified barriers to supporting school children with behavior and learning challenges, as well as potential policy reforms that could overcome those barriers. With these recommendations, we incorporate identified reforms that we believe are achievable in Georgia and prioritize policy approaches that build on strengths in Georgia's education and behavioral health system.

Policy Recommendation #2: *Community Engagement*

Engage community leaders with school-based behavioral health, school climate, and school safety programs.

Why?

Schools and school systems should work with community leaders to develop and implement strategies that support student learning, keep children safe in school, and reduce the number of children involved in the juvenile justice system.

What can you do?

Georgia school systems across the state have partnered with local juvenile courts and school police to develop strategies to keep children in class and out of the criminal justice system. Here are some immediate steps:

1. **Convene climate committees.** In partnership with the local Juvenile Court, school system, law enforcement and social services partners, Superior Courts should convene Student Attendance and School Climate committees to create and implement a plan of action to encourage student attendance and positive school climate. See *O.C.G.A. Section 20-2-690.2, State Board Rule 160-5-1-.10 Student Attendance*. Also see [Department of Education School Attendance School Climate Committees protocol](#).
2. **Follow Trauma Impact Rule.** Local school systems should comply with the Trauma Impact Rule, which requires schools to partner with local DFCS offices to identify the potential impact of past trauma on any newly enrolled student in care's education. They must decide which supports the school must provide to help the child succeed in class. For more information, view Georgia Appleseed's associated resource: [Trauma Impact Rule Overview](#).
3. **Follow Case Management Rule:** Local school systems should comply with the [Case Management Rule \(Rule 160-4-8-.17. Case Management Consultation for Agency Placed Transfer Students\)](#), which requires schools to work with state child welfare agencies to assess any problems or services needed in the transition of a newly enrolled student.
4. **Engage school-justice partnerships.** Juvenile courts, school administrators, and law enforcement should engage in school-justice partnerships to develop and implement strategies to address student misconduct. School-justice partnerships address student behaviors through school, family and community support strategies.

What do Georgians Say?

"Services need to be more accessible, and community based. There is a need for specialists who can come out and talk directly with the communities/PTAs to make the community comfortable."

--Georgia Non-Profit Director

"Real justice for children must include opportunities for them to grow into adults who are independent and productive citizens. Juvenile justice cannot be accomplished without a partnership with schools as they hold the keys to a brighter future for every child."

--Georgia Juvenile Court Judge

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Policy Recommendation #3: *Workforce Development*

Educate and expand the workforce needed for school-based behavioral health.

Why?

Georgia has a shortage of qualified mental health professionals to staff school-based programs. There are only eight (8) adolescent psychiatrists for every 100,000 children in Georgia.

What can you do?

Urge policy makers and state and local leaders to pursue the following:

1. **Fully Implement the Mental Health Parity Act.** Implement the workforce provisions of the 2022 Mental Health Parity Act, including the actions below:
 - the Georgia Student Finance Authority should implement “service cancelable loans” for behavioral health professionals; and
 - the Georgia Board of Healthcare Workforce should create and maintain a behavioral health care workforce database and establish a minimum data set survey to assess the strength of the behavioral health workforce.
2. **Expand training.** Expand behavioral health training programs at Georgia’s higher education institutions.
3. **Expand telemedicine.** Encourage providers to expand the use of telemedicine to deliver behavioral health services so that more children, particularly those in rural areas, can access services.
4. **Connect with peer support.** Encourage parents and caregivers to connect to certified peer specialists' programs.

What do Georgians say?

“The best way to improve mental and behavior health services would be for school districts to form school-based mental health departments from which coordinated care and treatment plans would flow. This should be the ultimate goal!”

– School Coordinator for
Social and Emotional Health

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Policy Recommendation #4 *Every school, every child*

Increase funding and coordination of services for children with serious behavioral health challenges.

Why?

Georgia's system of care lacks sufficient funds to meet the needs of many children with intense behavioral needs. Poor coordination among state agencies deprives children of the care they need. This lack of effective care leads to behavior challenges that push many children out of school and into the criminal justice system.

What can you do?

Georgia should build upon 2022's Mental Healthy Parity Act with these immediate steps:

1. **Create a complaint system.** The Department of Community Health and the Georgia Office of Insurance and Fire Safety Commissioner should create and implement the system by which mental health parity complaints are received, tracked and reported.
2. **Collaborate across agencies.** The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) should establish the state MATCH Team to facilitate collaboration across state agencies to meet the complex needs of children.
3. **Share data.** The Georgia Department of Human Services should implement a statewide system for state agencies to share data relating to children in care.
4. **Increase reimbursement.** Medicaid should increase reimbursement rates in Georgia to encourage providers to provide intensive services to children.

What do Georgians Say?

"Treating children with complex behavioral needs requires a coordinated system of care that can ensure continuity of care and that focuses on both the child and his or her family and caregivers"

– Georgia Juvenile Court Judge

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