

ACTION 3.21

Invest in school physical health and mental health professionals and school health clinics. Increase school nurse ratios to the national standard in order to identify health issues early, manage connections with community providers, and serve students' families.

INVEST in SCHOOL HEALTH and MENTAL HEALTH STAFF and CLINICS

Children's mental, physical, and emotional health greatly impacts their success at school. School-based health professionals and clinics increase student access to primary and preventative health care, particularly children of color and children living in low-income households. When children can access health care, at school, many barriers, such as lack of financial resources, transportation, and scheduling conflicts for parents, are removed.

Given that during the 2021-2022 academic year, North Carolina, along with many other states, had a statewide average chronic absenteeism rate that was 3x higher than before the start of the coronavirus pandemic it is more important than ever to consider ways that schools can address the strong link between poor health and chronic absenteeism.

WHAT WE KNOW

Despite the known high prevalence of trauma and mental challenges that children face, access to services is limited. The CDC reports that 1 in 6 children aged 2–8 years had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder. In light of the increasing number of young students reporting challenges, the need for comprehensive school mental health systems that are accessible and effective for all students is clear. Without access to preventative and early-intervention services, symptoms of mental illness often escalate and become clinical conditions in later years. Schools can play a critical role in addressing this crisis.

Only 55% of public schools reported providing diagnostic mental health assessment services to evaluate students for mental health disorders, and only 42% offered mental health treatment services, during the 2019–2020 school year.

The most comprehensive solution is school-based health centers that offer preventative and early-intervention primary, physical, dental, and mental health care. When properly staffed, these centers help treat conditions that keep children from attending school, such as asthma, diabetes, depression, and anxiety. The best estimate is that there are over 140 school-based health centers across 28 NC counties; they collectively deliver services to over 130,000 students. Though substantial, many more centers are needed in more schools to meet the number of children who lack access to preventative health care. Government, nonprofit, and private sector organizations are joining forces to increase the number of children who have access to health centers in their schools.

Dive Into the Data

There is limited availability of timely and actionable statewide data on children’s physical and mental health and their access to doctors and dentists. Using [untreated tooth decay in kindergarten](#) as a proxy indicator for early health disparities, we see that 29% of American Indian, 23% of Asian, 18% of African American and Hispanic, 15% of multiracial, and 13% of white children have untreated tooth decay. Explore other indicators related to the health and well-being of NC’s children on the [Pathways Data Dashboard](#).

WHAT WE NEED

Access to a school nurse has steadily improved since the 2019-2020 school year, when there were 1,399 school nurses across the state; by the 2021-2022 school year, this had increased to 1,630 school nurses. Ensuring that each school has at least one nurse is an important investment because, as reported in the [North Carolina Annual School Health Services Report](#), when a student with a health concern sees a school nurse they are more likely to remain in school.

EdNC’s [landscape analysis of the ways that schools across North Carolina deliver health services](#) identified five broad categories of health service delivery in schools: school nurses, school health centers, telehealth, university partnerships, and other miscellaneous programs. They detail how these programs are operating across the state and opportunities to increase access. Telehealth was identified as an emerging model with great potential for North Carolina schools, particularly those located in rural areas. Telehealth minimizes the costs associated with maintaining a large physical space and enables advanced and specialized practitioners located in one facility to provide services to many schools.

HOW TO SUPPORT

In March of 2023, The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, released the [North Carolina School Behavioral Health Action Plan](#) to address the urgent mental and behavioral health crisis facing youth through key investments in our schools.

They estimate that more than half of its youth with mental health disorders do not currently receive necessary care and more than half of the state’s counties do not have a child psychiatrist. The best way to remedy these gaps in service is to meet students where they are—in their schools.

The plan describes six investments in evidenced-based strategies and pilot programs to support the behavioral health of students:

- Increasing capacity of schools to identify and address behavioral health needs through student-focused prevention and support services.
- Training school personnel to better recognize and respond to emerging behavioral health issues.
- Establishing school-based telehealth pilot programs to expand behavioral health care access for approximately 10,000 students in high need and rural districts.
- Flexible funding to local School Health Advisory Councils to support coalitions of parents, school staff and community members investing in behavioral health resources to meet local needs.
- Connecting schools and families with behavioral health partners in their community.
- Funding a new statewide electronic health record system to secure student health records and enable records to transfer when students move.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA

The [Assessment, Support, and Counseling Center](#), coordinated by Appalachian State University, reduces barriers to care across Alleghany, Ashe, and Watauga Counties, by providing high quality supervised mental health services embedded within schools. They provide services, on demand, regardless of the ability to pay, develop the school mental health workforce, and advance discovery of new knowledge about the provision of effective school mental health services, especially in rural or under-resourced communities.

[Visit the Pathways Action Map](#) to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.