



SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE TO PROTECT ALL TEXANS

Educators' number one priority is ensuring student safety and well-being, and TSTA continues to advocate for a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach to keeping schools and students safe. This includes increasing access to mental health services, providing a safe and secure learning environment for all students, and taking meaningful action on gun violence prevention.

INCREASE ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN SCHOOLS

Although lawmakers and educators continue to deliberate over how best to keep students and schools safe, Texas must prioritize funding for counselors and school-based mental health professionals at the recommended provider-to-student ratio. Billions of dollars are misspent annually on security upgrades and police. This leaves schools inadequately resourced to fully fund quality programming and wrap-around services that are proven to reduce violent acts in school and benefit the mental health of teachers and students alike. In Texas, while nearly half of all public schools have a police officer of some description, a full 43 percent of these schools report not having a school-based mental health provider.

While it is a national crisis, 2022 key findings from Mental Health America's *The State of Mental Health in America* report show that Texas children, relative to the youth in most other states, are especially anxious, depressed, traumatized and lonely. Moreover, they are also much less likely to be receiving treatment.¹ According to the report, 363,000 children — or 6 percent of Texas students — suffer major depression. More than 70 percent receive no treatment.

The Hopeful Futures Campaign, a coalition of national organizations, has joined together to ensure that children have access to comprehensive mental health care in schools. The campaign recently published school mental health report cards based on current MHA data as well as an overview of eight policy areas the coalition feels most impact student mental health in schools. **Texas ranks 41.**

In a recent speech, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona called on states to act. "Our schools must offer increased access to mental health supports for students, wrap-around programs, meaningful and authentic parent and family engagement, and interventions for those students who felt the impact of the pandemic more bluntly than others," he said.

Of the eight policy areas that the Hopeful Futures Campaign believes must be present for schools to have a comprehensive mental health system, Texas was lacking across the board. In three of the eight, the campaign

¹ ii. The state of Mental Health in America. Mental Health America. (n.d.). Retrieved February 24, 2022, from <https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america>.

identified that Texas had achieved “little or no progress”: school mental health professionals; skills for life success; and well-being checks. The healthy school climate and funding support indicators come in just above bottom.

Perhaps the most disquieting data concerns school mental health professionals:

- Texas has **one school counselor for every 423 students**. The recommended ratio is 1:250.
- Texas has one school psychologist for every 4,962 students. The recommended ratio is 1:500.
- Texas has one school social worker for every 13,604 students. The recommended ratio is 1:250.

The only areas in which Texas scores sufficient, according to the campaign’s report card, are mental health training of staff and students. But as is evidenced by the numbers, teaching individuals how to identify a problem is meaningless if not bolstered with proper supports.

During the House Select Committee on Youth Mental Health on October 4 of this year, invited witness Dr. Andy Keller of the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute reiterated this point. “Teachers are an essential component [to comprehensive systems], but they should not be frontline. Teachers are not mental health professionals. The only thing we need them to know in mental health first aid is when to call for help.”

PROVIDE A SAFE AND SECURE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL STUDENTS

TSTA supports readying children for unanticipated emergencies through drills implemented according to best practice, but it is necessary to carefully consider the impact on students’ academic and mental well-being in determining drill type, frequency and execution. Not only is time for learning lost on drill days, mental health professionals have expressed concern about the traumatizing effect on children of simulated emergencies. Active shooter drills in particular can be especially upsetting and may do more harm than good.

While TSTA does not categorically reject active shooter drills, there is little evidence to demonstrate that active shooter drills with children are effective at saving lives in an emergency. If a school elects to use this type of drill, steps must be taken to ensure that they are implemented with guidance from parents, educators, and school-based mental health professionals to ensure the content is age and developmentally appropriate. Families, teachers and students must also be notified in advance of a drill and be permitted to opt out.

The epidemic of gun violence is much broader than school shootings, and for this reason policymakers should prioritize proven measures to first reduce gun access and gun violence outside of schools and fully commit to supporting mental health in schools. The fact remains that if students must use what they have learned in an active shooter drill, then we as a society have already failed.

TSTA also opposes arming teachers as a proposed avenue to secure schools. To suggest that teachers are somehow at fault and now need to be in charge of safety on top of everything else is ludicrous. Putting more guns in schools not only creates an unsafe environment for our students, but it also communicates to students that they are unsafe. The job of a teacher is to ensure trusting relationships with our students so that they want to come to school and feel safe doing so. Having a school full of guns will not make students feel safe, and it also will not make them safe. Educators need help from the outside. We want our schools to be fun, loving and safe, not scary.

TAKE MEANINGFUL ACTION ON GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Our kids and communities deserve common sense laws that protect our safety, and this starts with ensuring that guns don’t end up in the hands of people who shouldn’t have them. In order to do this, Texas must pass red flag legislation and require a background check of anyone who wants to purchase a firearm. We must ban assault style

weapons and high-capacity magazines. These are weapons of war and belong only in the hands of certain military personnel. Finally, gun trafficking should be made a federal crime with a harsh penalty.

TSTA respectfully submits the above comments for consideration and urges the Senate Select Committee to Protect All Texans to consider comprehensively what it takes to ensure that Texas schools and school children are safe: learning environments must be kept safe and secure, which requires thoughtful planning around safety drill type, frequency, and execution; school counselors and mental health professionals must be funded at the recommended provider-to-student ratio; and lawmakers must acknowledge and address the fact that too many dangerous individuals have very easy access to very dangerous weapons.