



Access to Professional Support Personnel based on Student Economic Need in Massachusetts Public Schools

Research Brief and Recommendations

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) licenses Professional Support Personnel in four areas - School Social Worker/Adjustment Counselor, School Counselor, School Psychologist, and School Nurse. These professionals are employed by the local education agencies (LEAs) throughout Massachusetts, and this research brief compares the staffing ratios in schools based on the level of economic need of the students. It then compares these findings with the national professional organization recommendations. Finally, it offers policy solutions to address the inequities in access to services for students in the Commonwealth.

Varying Access to School-based Support Services

Students who grow up in areas of high poverty are at greater risk for negative school outcomes such as poor academic achievement, school dropout, and behavioral problems. The level of student need varies across schools, districts, and communities. “Economically disadvantaged students” are defined by DESE as students who participate in one or more of the following state-administered programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Transitional Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC); the Department of Children and Families’ (DCF) foster care program; and eligible MassHealth programs (Medicaid).” Access to school-based Professional Support Personnel services can diminish these negative outcomes, though there is great variability in access to these supports.

The research brief *Access to Professional Support Personnel in Massachusetts Public Schools* highlighted the staffing ratios in Massachusetts. Based on available data from DESE, during the 2018-2019 school year, the 406 public school districts¹ employed **7,475** Professional Support Personnel in schools to meet the needs of 950,203 students. The 2,048 school nurses provide a range of health services, while the remaining **5,427** support personnel provide school-based counseling, academic guidance, health, and behavioral health services. 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. In addition, the quarter of LEAs educating students with the greatest level of economic need also provide these services to the largest number of students. In other words, these LEAs educate 321,528 students which comprises more than a third of the students in the Commonwealth.

The research suggests there is great variability in access to behavioral health supports and corresponding staff positions based on the level of students’ economic need, particularly in regard to Social Workers and School Psychologists. It is noteworthy that this research brief only focuses on Professional Support Personnel employed directly by LEAs; 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 across schools, districts and the grade span. This can be due to many factors, including

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

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

district structures, staffing capacity issues, and insufficient of training. Further study of current roles and practices throughout the Commonwealth and a resource map of community providers is needed.

Table 1. Staff Ratios by Quartile Level of Economic Need

	Economic need quartile			
	Lowest	Mid-low	Mid-High	Highest
SW/SAC* <i>Recommended ratio 1:250</i>	1:693	1:588	1:437	1:478
School Counselor <i>Recommended ratio 1:250</i>	1:358	1:404	1:380	1:458
School Psychologist <i>Recommended ratio 1:500</i>	1:540	1:661	1:738	1:1065
School Nurse <i>Recommended ratio 1:750</i>	1:486	1:441	1:473	1:441

*Social Worker/School Adjustment Counselor

Conclusion

Students who are economically disadvantaged are at greater risk for negative school outcomes. For the public schools in Massachusetts to serve students and emphasize prevention and promote positive outcomes, adequate staffing of Professional Support Personnel is required. Based on the results of this study, all schools exceed the national recommendations for staffing of School Social Workers/Adjustment Counselors, School Psychologists, and School Counselors.

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 access to Professional Support Personnel, funding resources provided by the state could reduce barriers for access to social, emotional and behavioral health by supporting the hiring of school-based professionals.
- **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 training to build a cadre of licensed professionals with targeted efforts to diversify personnel.
- **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). The mission of the BIRCh Project is to provide professional development and resources for schools and strengthen the coordination of behavioral health supports provided by school and community agencies. 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.