



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION
Services, Inc.

August 23, 2019

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander:

The American Psychological Association applauds your leadership to address school safety and mental health to ensure the welfare of our nation's schools, campuses and communities. With more than 118,400 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students as members, the American Psychological Association (APA) is the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States. We welcome the opportunity to provide input on evidence-based research and practices founded in psychological science. The following actionable policy and funding recommendations recognize the critical role of safe school environments in maximizing student outcomes alongside the need for comprehensive and strategic community-based approaches to prevention.

Cultivating Positive School Climate

APA recommends an array of evidence-based interventions that promote positive school climate, including social and emotional learning programs, access to school-based mental health services, and training for school personnel to identify, assess, and meet the needs of students, both at the individual and school-wide levels. A comprehensive system of supports and interventions should work together to create safe, supportive, equitable, learning environments as well as to prevent negative outcomes, such as acts of violence.

- To ensure that our students receive a well-rounded education, and access to mental health counseling and programs that foster safe and healthy schools, we request \$1.6 billion for the **Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) block grant under Title IV-A**. APA strongly encourages the Department of Education to focus on initiatives outlined in law that are educational and preventative in nature
- APA urges Congress to **resists calls to arm teachers or school personnel**. Moreover, Congress should consider policies aimed at reducing weapons in schools by incorporating a universal public health prevention approach that promotes state

750 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4242
(202) 336-5500
(202) 336-6123 TDD

APA SERVICES, INC.
A (6) organization serving APA members
and advocating for psychology.

www.apaservices.org
www.apa.org



Please Recycle

wide data collection and infrastructure to support policy development and monitor key outcomes.

- APA strongly recommends integrating **social and emotional learning (SEL)** and school-wide **positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)** into school curriculum. Healthy social and emotional development in childhood has implications for young adult outcomes, including educational success, employment, substance use, and criminal justice involvement.¹
- Promote **comprehensive, school-wide bullying prevention and intervention** programs that address family, peer, individual and environmental factors. In particular, LGBT youth experience high rates of bullying and harassment at school. To address the unique challenges LGBT youth encounter, APA supports **the Safe Schools Improvement Act (H.R. 2653)** which will require school districts in states that receive ESEA funds to adopt codes of conduct specifically prohibiting bullying and harassment, including on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Administered by SAMHSA, **Project AWARE** enhances community partnerships and trains school personnel to support a multifaceted approach for addressing the mental and behavioral health needs of students. APA has supported the **Mental Health Services for Students Act (S. 1122)**, which recognizes the importance of mental health in promoting healthy development amongst youth and aims to expand the scope of Project AWARE. APA recommends \$71 million for Project AWARE in fiscal year 2020.

We recommend reissuing guidance on exclusionary discipline in the classroom. Research demonstrates that exclusionary discipline fails to meet the goals of improving school safety and reducing disruptive student behavior. In addition, removing students from the academic environment in this manner places them at risk for decreased academic achievement and dropout and increased involvement with the juvenile justice system and criminal courts.

- APA **recommends against one-size-fits-all approaches to discipline** for misbehavior, including zero tolerance policies. Zero tolerance discipline policies have been shown to increase the instances of problem behavior and dropout rates, instead of the intended goal of reducing disruption or violence in schools.
- Research also indicates that **exclusionary practices disproportionately impact racial and ethnic minority students and students with disabilities**, a concern only heightened by the overrepresentation of these students in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Instead of feeding the school-to-prison pipeline by driving children out of school, students should be helped to correct their behavior.

We must attend to the mental health of students as we address their physical health. Schools should be adequately staffed with psychologists and other mental health providers who work with all students and teachers to promote conflict resolution and emotional resilience.

¹ Jones, D. E., Greenberg M., & Crowley, M. (2015). Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness. *American Journal of Public Health, 111*(105). 2283-2290.

- Continuing funding for programs such as the **Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program** remains critical to addressing high-need schools with shortages by recruiting and retaining school-based mental health providers.
- APA supports the **School-Based Health Centers Reauthorization Act of 2019 (S.1013)**, which enables the development and expansion of school-based health services, including mental health care.

Addressing Needs in Higher Education

Sexual misconduct has a significant negative impact on learning and achievement and compromises students' ability to complete college and contribute to society as expected. APA supports evidence-based policies that address campus sexual assault, improve campus climate and increase prevention efforts.

The American Psychological Association recently passed a resolution² that identifies the following recommendations to be addressed in the **reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA)** regarding sexual misconduct on campus.

- Invest in better data collection on campus climate and support open access tools for measuring campus climate.
- Improve supportive measures for victims of violence.
- Fund research and support for alternative resolutions, including restorative justice.
- Raise awareness of societal and cultural influences on sexual violence risk.

Likewise, APA recommends increased support, evaluation and expansion of evidence-based **campus sexual assault prevention and education programs**.

The **Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act (GLSMA) programs** increase young adults' access to prevention, education, and outreach services to reduce suicide risk in states, tribes, and institutions of higher education. APA supports \$35.4 million for the State and Tribal Youth Suicide Prevention Program, \$7 million for the Campus Mental and Behavioral Health Program, and \$6 million for the Suicide Prevention Resource Center.

APA also wishes to express its support for the **Education Mental Health Commission Act (S.1204)** which will work to better inform Congress, the Department of Education, and the public about the challenges that post-secondary students with mental health concerns face and the impact these challenges can have on the academic success.

² American Psychological Association. (2019). *Resolution on campus sexual assault*. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/resolution-campus-sexual-assault.pdf>.

Research Funding

To increase knowledge to advance health and education, APA supports the following investments in research for FY 2020.

- APA recommends a \$2 billion increase, to \$41.2 billion, for the **National Institutes of Health (NIH)**, and proportional funding to its 27 Institutes and Centers, including the **National Institute of Mental Health** for their work on addressing mental health and mental disorders, and the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development* for their work on child development and behavior, and pediatric trauma and violence.
- APA recommends a topline appropriation of \$8.22 billion for **Center for Disease Control (CDC)** including \$700 to the **National Center for Injury Prevention and Control** and \$50 million for the **Division of Adolescent and School Health** safe and supportive school environment programs.
- APA recommends \$50 million in funding for firearm injury and mortality prevention research at **CDC** and **NIH**.
- APA requests \$670 million for the **Institute of Educational Sciences (IES)**, which helps develop the research base for and evaluates the effectiveness of U.S. education programs. The funding would help support IES's Research, Development and Dissemination efforts, including research on school climate and the impact on behavioral and academic outcomes.

School, Community and Family-Based Prevention

Violence is not limited to school settings. Many are affected by violence in their homes and communities and we urge further consideration into the broader context of gun violence in our society. APA strongly opposes unfounded and stigmatizing efforts to blame school violence and mass shootings on mental illness. Research has shown persons with serious mental illness commit only a small proportion of firearm-related homicides; the problem of gun violence cannot be resolved simply through efforts focused on serious mental illness³. The rates of mental illness are roughly the same around the world, yet other countries are not experiencing gun homicides as often as we face them⁴. One critical factor is access to, and the lethality of, the weapons that are being used in these crimes. Accordingly, we recommend research-informed actions to limit access to firearms by those at risk of committing violent acts.

- APA recommends passage of the HR 8, **Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2019** and urges the Senate to bring this important legislation to a vote. AP

³ Webster, D. W., Vernick, J. S., McGinty, E. E., & Alcorn, T. (2013). Preventing the diversion of guns to criminals through effective firearm sales laws. In D. W. Webster & J. S. Vernick (Eds.), *Reducing gun violence in America: Informing policy with evidence and analysis* (pp. 109–122). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴ Alpers, P., & Wilson, M. (2013, August 14). Global impact of gun violence: Firearms, public health and safety. Retrieved from <http://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region>

- APA supports federal efforts to provide funding for states to **implement and execute extreme risk protection laws**. These laws, which have been shown to help prevent suicides⁵, should focus on identifying specific high-risk behaviors instead of solely concentrating on an individual's mental health diagnoses or behavioral history. Additionally, these laws should work to refer the respondents to services, supports and treatments.
- APA supports broad based prevention through programs and services which strengthen families and enhance protective factors for children, including those who have experienced violence. APA recommends additional support for states and child welfare agencies as they transition to the **Family First Prevention and Services Act**. Additionally, APA urges the Senate to take up reauthorization of the **Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act**, as passed by the House in May of 2019.
- In line with our recommendations to enhance K-12 school climate, APA supports social emotional learning and mental health promotion beginning in early childhood. **The Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program**, the **Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Grant Program** and both **Head Start and Early Head Start** are examples of vital federal programs which could be expanded to further promote healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development in children, even before they are school-aged.

For students who may be at risk of violence, **threat assessment** teams that include law enforcement partners allow schools to identify them and intervene before it is too late. When adapted for school settings, threat assessment allows the students in need of mental health services and other services to be identified and helped, instead of pushed out of the learning setting.

- Legislation supporting the use of threat assessment in schools should specify the use of **evidence-based practices for assessment and intervention**. Schools should monitor the impact of threat assessment programs on groups defined by race, ethnicity, special education status, or other vulnerable groups, and take appropriate steps to remedy unjust disproportionalities.

Investing in the Mental Health Workforce

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) projects a shortage of 14,300 psychologists by 2030 to address the growing needs for behavioral interventions⁶. APA recommends robust investments in the Bureau of Health Workforce, which supports critical interprofessional behavioral health workforce training programs.

⁵ Kivisto, A., & Phalen, P. (2018). Effects of risk-based firearm seizure laws in Connecticut and Indiana on suicide rates, 1981-2015. *Psychiatric Services, 69*(8).

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, National Center for Health Workforce Analysis. 2018. State-Level Projections of Supply and Demand for Behavioral Health Occupations: 2016-2030, Rockville, Maryland.

- The **Graduate Psychology Education (GPE)** Program supports the interprofessional training of doctoral-level psychology trainees in integrated care settings to serve our nation's most vulnerable populations. APA supports maintaining level funding of \$18 million in fiscal year 2020 for the GPE Program.

The **Minority Fellowship Program (MFP)**, administered by SAMHSA, supports training for minority mental health professionals to provide culturally competent, accessible mental health and substance use services to diverse populations. APA recommends a \$2 million dollar increase of \$15.2 million in fiscal year 2020.

Given the heavy burden of student loan debt, APA supports added investments in programs supporting graduate study. The following Department of Education programs are critical to keeping the doors of educational opportunity open for many students with financial need.

- \$23 million for the **Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN)** Program, where psychology has been recognized as a national need area.
- Maintaining the **Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF)** Program during the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to strengthen our public sector workforce including psychologists working in schools and community health centers.

APA is deeply committed to ensuring that policies and prevention practices be rooted in psychological science. We commend your efforts to address this challenge and encourage that you continue to seek out our member psychologists to guarantee that policies be informed by the most recent research. As new ideas and legislation come forward, APA stands ready to be a resource. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact Ben Vonachen at bvonachen@apa.org.

Sincerely,

Katherine B. McGuire
Chief Advocacy Officer