Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

New York State Implements New Law Mandating Mental Health Education in Public Schools

Behavioral Health

Date Posted:

Nov 26, 2018



An innovative New York law is now mandating that all public schools include mental health education as a fundamental part of their school curriculum. New York's bill went into effect on July 1, making it the second state (following Virginia) to require mental health education alongside physical health education. Many mental health experts think that this legislative reform marks an important moment for behavioral health awareness and prevention.

Mental and behavioral health conditions are prominent and often begin in childhood. In the United States, 13 percent of adolescents have experienced a major depressive episode in the past year, and nearly one in three has experienced some type of anxiety disorder in their lifetime. Researchers have estimated that 50 percent of mental illness begins by age 14, and 75 percent begins by age 24.

Unfortunately, research also shows that many children and adolescents with mental health difficulties do not receive treatment. Architects of the New York law hope it will ensure young people learn about mental health to "increase the likelihood that they will be able to more effectively recognize signs" and seek treatment earlier. Ultimately, this new policy could help halt development of these conditions and reduce the number of youth who are affected as adults later in life.

This law represents an important way that systems—such as the school and health care systems—can collaborate to produce effective policy changes. Together, the New York State Education Department and mental health advisory committees laid out key principles that guide schools on how to integrate this new

curricula. The law gives latitude to individual districts, schools and classrooms to decide how to design curricula and lesson plans within certain parameters to meet the needs of their student population. Previously, the education guidelines included information on: alcohol, drug and tobacco abuse; and prevention and detection of certain cancers. With the implementation of this new law, educators and administrators added to their curriculum signs of mental health problems and appropriate resources to access help in the time of crisis, as well as materials to address the negative stigma associated with mental illness.

Mental health education in schools also has the potential for numerous other benefits to youth. For instance, open conversations can help to reduce the stigma and negative attitudes toward mental illness that can prevent those who are suffering from reaching out for help. Further, in addition to supporting students' health, this type of curriculum could have a positive impact on their academic achievement. Over 50 percent of students with behavioral disorders drop out of high school and of those who do remain in school, only 42 percent graduate. Also, as we've previously written, more than 80 percent of students struggling with emotional or behavioral disorders scored below the general population in reading, writing and math.

The bottom line: the New York legislature and education system are taking an important step to reduce disparities in educational attainment among those with mental health conditions and the general population.

We at PolicyLab are excited to see what happens as a result of this law. In bringing the conversation to the forefront, New York recognizes the importance of mental health prevention for students' social, emotional and academic functioning. We should continue to consider how novel, evidence-based policies can better support the integration of behavioral health services into various systems that touch children and adolescent's lives.

Georgia Reilly is PolicyLab's communications intern. She is also an undergraduate student at the University of Pennsylvania studying health and societies and health services management.

Jami Young
Jami Young
PhD
Faculty Member