

## Increase Access to School Mental Health Services

**Goal:** Improve student success by strengthening school-based mental health supports and practices to foster a safe school climate and ensure school safety policies do not target students with disabilities and/or mental health issues

**Youth with intellectual developmental disabilities are 3 times more likely to experience trauma and abuse than their peers without disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Studies show that untreated trauma can place children at increased risk for further developmental delay.<sup>2</sup>**

### Background

Unaddressed mental health conditions can impede students' academic success and compound existing developmental delays. Students with disabilities and/or mental health challenges are often unidentified and do not have adequate access to or receive treatment. School mental health personnel shortages, inappropriate discipline practices, and an uncoordinated effort between schools and mental health systems all contribute to the lack of identification and treatment for students. The trauma of Hurricane Harvey provided impetus for the Legislature to address school mental health. Following recent school violence tragedies in both Florida and Texas, Governor Abbott convened a series of roundtable discussions and released a School Safety Action Plan. Subsequently, Senate and House committees held hearings and released interim reports on school safety. The theme of each directive and report highlights the need for increasing mental health supports and strengthening school climate tools in Texas' schools.

### Recommendations

The legislature should direct the TEA and HHSC to address student mental health needs by providing multi-tiered systems of support that help schools promote positive behaviors and interventions. Disability Rights Texas and The Coalition of Texans with Disabilities support strategies that foster safe and healthy schools for all students. The recommendations below align with priorities put forth by the Senate Select Committee on School Safety, the House Committee on Public Education, and the Texas Education Agency's Safe and Healthy Schools Initiative.

- Allocate funding from the TEA Safe and Healthy Schools Initiative to address the shortage of mental health professionals on school campuses.
- Expand mental health and disability training for educators. The State Board of Educator Certification should ensure that current and future teachers are adequately trained to help all students in their classroom reach their full potential regardless of disability or mental health concerns. SBEC would benefit by adding a special education representative to the board.
- Ensure that when schools implement evidence-based threat assessment models or mental health screening programs, they include a special education professional and create a documented referral protocol for voluntary services that meet the identification, evaluation, and service needs for students with suspected or known disabilities.
- Expand the number of school resource officers trained to work with and support students with disabilities by lowering the current district enrollment threshold, and develop best practice guidelines for new school safety initiatives, such as iWatch, that avoid targeting students with disabilities for disciplinary action.
- Assist schools in forming school mental health services and strengthening effective partnerships with community-based mental health providers and developing referral pathways to link students to appropriate services.

### For more information:

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<sup>1</sup> Sullivan, P.M., Knutson, J.F., Maltreatment and disabilities: a population based epidemiologic study. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2000, 24, 1257-1273.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, M., Jivanjee, P., & Koroloff, N. (2010.) *Paving the way: Meeting transition needs of young people with developmental disabilities and serious mental health conditions*. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health.