

New Education Law Creates Funding Opportunities for Behavioral Health Trainings and Services in Schools

The newly enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides schools with resources to help students with behavioral health needs. Under ESSA, federal education funding can be used to carry out behavioral awareness trainings for educators, such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), and to implement school-based behavioral health services. The law, enacted in December 2015, replaces the previous version of the U.S. national education law known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

ESSA addresses the impact that school climate, trauma, and adverse childhood experiences have on student learning by providing targeted resources and tools for educators and clinicians. However, schools have great flexibility in the specific non-academic activities they choose to fund. Therefore, it is important for behavioral health providers and advocates to communicate with local education systems on the importance of prevention, early intervention, and treatment services for students at risk of behavioral health disorders.

Full implementation of ESSA is scheduled for the 2017-2018 school year, but funding is still moving through the Congressional appropriations process and additional advocacy may be needed. Although appropriators must still determine funding levels for ESSA programs, planning is already underway. Providers can begin working with school officials now to identify appropriate behavioral health supports for faculty and students. Provider organizations serving youth and young adults should reach out to their local school districts to begin conversations on potential collaborations for the coming year.

Training for Teachers and School Personnel

Title II of ESSA permits funds to be used for a number of evidence-based professional development activities, including mental health awareness trainings, which may be carried out by external organizations such as community providers.

Importantly, the bill encourages schools to create relationships with mental health provider organizations. It permits school districts to use ESSA funds for programs like Mental Health First Aid and similar initiatives that help educators recognize the signs of trauma and mental health disorders, as well as make appropriate referrals to services.

Title II dollars are allocated to states by a formula. Schools can decide how to use these funds; mental health awareness trainings are one option among a list of eligible professional development activities. Specifically, these funds can be used to carry out in-service training for school personnel on:

- (i) “techniques and supports needed to help educators understand when and how to refer students affected by trauma and children with, or at risk of, mental illness;
- (ii) use of referral mechanisms that effectively link such children to appropriate treatment and intervention services in schools and in the community;
- (iii) forming partnerships between school-based mental health programs and public or private mental health organizations; and
- (iv) addressing issues related to the impact of school conditions on student learning, such as safety, peer interaction, drug and alcohol abuse, and chronic absenteeism....”

Addressing Trauma

Several of ESSA's provisions may accelerate the movement towards more trauma-informed schools. In a trauma-informed school, teachers, administrators, and school staff are prepared to recognize and respond to students who have been impacted by traumatic stress. These students are better supported under ESSA with expanded access to pre-school, reductions in the use of exclusionary discipline practices, and funding for trauma-informed practices.

Children exposed to trauma can have difficulty learning, focusing, and forming healthy relationships while at school. However, preschool can provide children a strong foundation for learning how to regulate and express emotions, as well as form close relationships. ESSA recognizes the importance of early learning with an investment of \$250 million annually in competitively awarded Pre-School Development grants.

Once in school, children with trauma histories are more likely to be suspended and/or expelled. Recognizing that a student's trauma is often the root cause of this misbehavior, ESSA requires schools to re-evaluate their approach to school discipline. A new requirement under the ESSA says states and localities must develop plans to reduce the overuse of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom.

Rather than remove students from the classroom, schools can better respond to student trauma by providing trauma-informed social, emotional, and mental health support for students. Opportunities to fund trauma-informed approaches come under a new Title IV block grant to support "safe and healthy students" with the suggested uses of funds including:

- Schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports
- Trauma-informed and evidence-based school-based mental health services
- Evidence-based drug and violence prevention programs
- Child sexual abuse awareness and prevention programs; bullying and harassment prevention programs; school dropout and re-entry programs
- Training for school personnel in trauma-informed practices in crisis management, conflict resolution, human trafficking, school-based violence prevention strategies, and bullying and harassment prevention

This block grant is called the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants (SSAEG). These funds also support activities aimed at providing students with a well-rounded education and using technology to improve academic achievement. Funds will be distributed to states through a formula. Block grant activities can be conducted in partnerships with nonprofits, community-based organizations, and other entities with a record of success in implementing the above activities.

Behavioral Health Services for Struggling Students

Under Title I of ESSA, behavioral health provider organizations can partner with schools to help students most at risk for school failure improve their academic achievement through specific interventions. These interventions include counseling services, school-based mental health programs, specialized instructional support services, positive behavior interventions and supports, mentoring services, and other strategies to improve students' skills.

These services were not previously eligible uses of Title I funding, but are now among a list of approved strategies schools can use to achieve the goal of Title I, which is to ensure all students have access to a fair, equitable, and quality education and to close educational achievement gaps. States and school districts will be awarded these funds through pre-determined formulas with most funding being driven towards schools with the highest percentages of low-income families.