



Expanding and Improving School-Based Mental Health and Substance Use Services

Community Catalyst and our Youth Advisory Board work together to raise awareness and build solutions that address the crisis of youth mental illness, substance misuse, and addiction in the United States. Combining expert policy analysis with the knowledge of youth lived experiences, we work to build a behavioral health system that is accessible to all of us, easy to navigate, and affirming of our lived experiences and identities.

Schools can play an important role in connecting youth to needed health services. Yet, when it comes to youth mental illness and substance misuse, a lack of service option, limited provider capacity, and punitive discipline create barriers to care.

What needs to be fixed?

- **There are two few prevention and early intervention services.** Schools are well positioned to identify youth experiencing early stages of substance misuse and mental illness. By expanding supportive screening and early intervention programs, youth can be connected to care before a problem becomes a crisis.
- **There is a shortage of school-based behavioral health providers and a lack of care coordination with the broader health care system.** Overall, there are too few school-based behavioral health providers and even fewer that offer quality, trauma-informed, and culturally-affirming care. Beyond that, many schools do not have the capacity to support smooth transitions to community-based services, allowing many students to fall through the cracks.
- **Schools rely on punitive models** that suspend and expel students – especially students of color, with low incomes or disabilities – for substance misuse and other behaviors rooted in mental illness and trauma. This exacerbates behavioral health issues and increases barriers to care.

Our Recommendations:

- **End zero tolerance and other punitive models, and replace them with supportive prevention and early intervention services** such as [SBIRT](#), multi-tiered systems of support, and restorative justice programs. Schools should have a clear policy for responding to youth substance use and possession, and those policies should be in alignment with public health approaches.
- **Support schools in expanding their behavioral health provider workforce – including near age peer specialists – to meet recommended student-to-provider ratios**, and in hiring diverse providers that reflect the identities and experiences of the student body, including providers of color, LGBTQ+ providers, and those with disabilities and lived experiences of substance misuse and mental illness.

- **Offer schools best practices for supporting students with mental illness and substance use challenges**, including increasing care coordination between schools and community-based clinics, making sure transportation is available for students who need to receive services off-site during the school day, having a clear policy on excused absences so that students can seek treatment without fearing being held back, and protecting student privacy and confidentiality.
- **Fund drug education programs that are rooted in harm reduction** and provide honest information about drug and alcohol use.
- **Offer guidance and training to school based providers on best practices for culturally affirming care** for BIPOC and immigrant youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth with disabilities.

Community Catalyst is a national non-profit organization working to build the power of people and communities to create a health system rooted in racial equity and health justice. Our Substance Use Disorders and Justice Involved Populations Program has helped expand youth substance use prevention services across the county. The Youth Advisory Board is youth ages 16-23 with lived experiences of mental illness and substance misuse.