

Policy Brief in Support of Bill H5112
Brown University Initiative for Policy Mental Health Team Analysts

Introduction

We write this policy brief in support of Bill H5112 to require the development and use of a mental health curriculum for seventh-grade students. The common mental health struggles faced by adolescents across the state and nation necessitate directed education efforts as preventative measures and guided resources for students.

Why is Mental Health Curriculum Needed?

Mental health curriculum is essential in schools because a significant percentage of youth struggle with mental, emotional, or behavioral challenges. 19.5% of adolescents aged twelve to seventeen experienced a major depressive episode in 2023¹, and 22% of high school students seriously considered taking their own lives during the year, with even higher rates for women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals². Specifically, over 50% of students in large urban schools experience learning, behavior, or emotional difficulties³. Without proper education and support, these challenges can hinder academic success and personal development. Education on such topics during adolescence is critical and could aid in preventing the development and worsening of these disorders⁴. By integrating mental health education into the school curriculum, students can learn about coping mechanisms, emotional control, and seeking help when needed.

Early intervention through education can reduce stigma, encourage open discussions, and equip students with the tools to manage their mental well-being effectively. According to the biopsychosocial model of mental health, psychiatric illnesses develop due to a combination of innate biological factors and external environmental forces⁵. By providing students with a healthy environment and alleviating external harms, the likelihood of a student developing a serious mental illness decreases⁶. Schools may encourage a more comprehensive and knowledgeable approach to well-being by instructing both students and educators about adolescent mental health. This strategy guarantees students receive the appropriate help, whether it be through skill development, environmental modifications, or counseling. A well-crafted curriculum for mental health empowers children, builds their emotional resilience, and creates a more encouraging learning environment.

Mental Health Education in Schools: Outcomes and Influence

Schools play a pivotal role in fostering positive mental health for these students. Instead of addressing mental health only after issues arise, schools can foster preventative measures by providing students with instruction on emotional health, stress management, and coping mechanisms. A well-designed mental health curriculum normalizes conversations, lessens

stigma, and promotes early intervention. To address these issues, integrated strategies that combine community resources, counseling, and education are needed to promote students' healthy development. With the implementation of a mental health curriculum, students may feel encouraged to seek help when necessary. Enhanced education will validate their experiences while providing useful resources specific to their individual needs. Schools are also essential for maintaining student safety, performing mental health evaluations, and offering necessary interventions.

Similar Measures

The Mental Health Education Act in New York, effective in 2018, incorporated a mental health curriculum in schools. Proponents of the bill argued that mental health education will help students recognize their own symptoms and encourage them to seek help. These conversations also aid in destigmatizing mental health⁷. Virginia law §22.1-207 outlined similar curriculum requirements. A new VA bill in 2018 was introduced to ensure the implementation of specific grade-level content, recognizing the varying needs of students across the ages. These examples highlight the widespread need for mental health curriculum in schools and also inform the approach Rhode Island must take. Legislation that outlines implementation procedures and provides age-level specificity, such as for seventh-grade students, will effectively support students' mental health education⁸.

Recommendations

We are writing this brief in support of bill H5112, requiring the Department of Education to develop and make available for use in all schools four hours of mental health curriculum for seventh-grade students.

- Mental health and suicidal thoughts affect many adolescents in Rhode Island and the United States as a whole
- Education on mental health topics aids in destigmatizing mental illness and encourages adolescents to seek help
- This bill outlines a plan for mental health education specific to seventh graders; such details are critical for successful implementation
- These four hours could be incorporated into health classroom curriculum or through grade-wide events led by guidance department staff, at minor, if any, additional cost to the school. **This simple measure could provide critical lessons to at-risk students.**
- Topics could include symptoms and signs associated with these disorders to help students identify potential mental health struggles for themselves and their peers

References

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