

The Mississippi K-12 and Postsecondary Mental Health Task Force



Report and Recommendations

To the Legislature as required by
Section 1 of Senate Bill 2727, Laws of 2024

Report Date: October 1, 2024



The Mississippi K-12 and Postsecondary Mental Health Task Force

Representative Rob Roberson
District 43
Co-Chair

Senator David Parker
District 2
Co-Chair

October 1, 2024

The Honorable C. Delbert Hosemann, Jr.
Lieutenant Governor
Mississippi State Senate

The Honorable Jason White
Speaker of the House
Mississippi House of Representatives

Dear Lt. Governor Hosemann and Speaker White:

This report represents the culmination of the hearings and discussions, both formal and informal, of the Mississippi K-12 and Postsecondary Mental Health Task Force created by Senate Bill 2727 in the 2024 Regular Session.

Research shows in the years leading up to 2020, the mental health of our children and adolescents declined. This was worsened by the pandemic, which caused increased isolation, loss, economic insecurity, and other issues impacting mental health. In schools across the state, educators have reported that the most pressing issues facing our children and adolescents are the decline in mental health and the lack of coping skills required to learn, grow, and succeed despite trauma.

Organized in July 2024, this Task Force was charged with examining state laws and policy aimed at better addressing the issue of declining mental health among children and adolescents. The recommendations established herein represent solutions the Task Force believes are practical and achievable for the 2025 Regular Session and beyond. Each member of this Task Force used their experience in the areas of policymaking, education, psychology, counseling, healthcare, and others to help craft these recommendations.

Thank you for allowing us to serve on this important Task Force. It is our sincere hope the Legislature will seriously consider these recommendations and enact beneficial legislation for our state.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rob Roberson".

Representative Rob Roberson, Co-Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Parker".

Senator David Parker, Co-Chair

Report Contents

Task Force Membership.....	1
Scope of the Task Force’s Review.....	3
Summary of Testimony.....	4
Task Force Recommendations.....	8
School Safety	8
Other School Policies	9
Training	10
Resources	11
Development of Workforce	12
Ongoing Work.....	12

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Task Force Membership

Senate Bill 2727, 2024 Regular Session, created the K-12 and Postsecondary Mental Health Task Force to review and make recommendations to the Legislature to address the mental health of students in Mississippi. The 24-member task force is composed of members of the Legislature, state agencies, and professional/advocacy organizations. Further, Senate Bill 2727 requires staff of the Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER) to provide necessary clerical support for the meetings and the preparation of the report.

Representative Rob Roberson, District 43, Task Force Co-Chair

Chairman of the House Education Committee

Senator David Parker, District 2, Task Force Co-Chair

Chairman of the Senate Accountability, Transparency, Efficiency
Proxy to Dennis DeBar, Jr., Chairman of the Senate Education Committee

Jonathan Baker, MD

Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, University of Mississippi Medical Center

Senator Kevin Blackwell, District 19

Chairman of the Senate Medicaid Committee

Senator Nicole Boyd, District 9

Chairwoman of the Senate Universities & Colleges Committee

Senator Hob Bryan, District 7

Chairman of the Senate Public Health & Welfare Committee

Wendy Clemons

Associate Superintendent, Mississippi Department of Education

Representative Sam Creekmore, District 14

Chairman of the House Public Health & Human Services Committee

John Damon, Ph.D.

CEO, Canopy Children's Solutions

Daniel Edney, MD

State Health Officer, Mississippi State Department of Health

Heather Garrett

Teacher and Science Department Chair, Brandon Middle School

Joy Hogge, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Families as Allies

Emily Johnson, Ph.D.

Clinical Psychologist, Behavioral, Attention, and Development Disabilities Consultants

Sarah Jones

Director of Counseling, Jones College

Melody Madaris, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Communicare Mental Health Center

Representative Missy McGee, District 102

Chairwoman of the House Medicaid Committee

Kate McMillin

Director of the Office of Mental Health, Mississippi Division of Medicaid

Heidi Nelson

Director of Student Counseling, University of Southern Mississippi

Representative Donnie Scoggin, District 89

Chairman of the House Universities & Colleges Committee

Lynda Stewart

Director of the Division of Children and Youth Services, Mississippi Department of Mental Health Services

Julie Thornton

Head Nurse, Pearl School District

Jonathan Tritley

School Psychologist, Jackson County School District

John Robert Walker

Student Member, Mississippi Youth Council

Karla Weir, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor in the Counselor Education Department, Mississippi State University

Scope of the Task Force's Review

Senate Bill 2727 established the Mississippi K-12 and Postsecondary Mental Health Task Force to address growing concerns related to student mental health among children and adolescents.

The Task Force was charged with developing recommendations to the Mississippi Legislature on changes to policy and laws with the goals of better identifying students at all levels struggling with mental health issues and improving training and other resources for K-12 school, community college, and university personnel, in order to improve mental health outcomes and the probability of success among children and adolescents.

Senate Bill 2727 listed the following areas of concentration for the Task Force:

- Collect and analyze publicly available data and statistics related to the current state of student mental health, K-12 through the community college and university level;
- Explore the impact of trauma and mental health issues on student behavior, dropout and graduation rates, academic achievement, employment, and related issues;
- Evaluate currently available resources for addressing student mental health including, but not limited to, partnerships with nonprofits or experts, telehealth opportunities, inpatient resources, and outpatient resources;
- Review mental health training and professional development provided to K-12 school personnel and school personnel at community colleges and universities for classroom management, identification, referral, intervention, and prevention;
- Evaluate successful strategies for addressing challenges in student mental health in Mississippi and across the nation;
- Review the current workforce landscape as it relates to psychologists, nurses, counselors, behavior interventionists and others who work in schools, community colleges, and universities, and consider strategies to recruit sufficient personnel if there are workforce strategies;
- Explore the effect of a multi-tiered wellness program that is conducive to growth, achievement, cultivating resilience, motivation, and culturally sensitive personal development; and,
- Review any other matters related to the above issues or student mental health in Mississippi.

Summary of Testimony

Hearing participants at all meetings are listed below. Each participant testified about the state of mental health in Mississippi from their perspective, provided an overview of their current services (if relevant), and identified gaps in service or challenge areas which need more resources and attention.

In an effort to increase transparency and encourage public participation, the Legislature streamed and archived all meetings on its YouTube channel located here: www.youtube.com/c/MississippiLegislature/feature. Members of the public were also encouraged to submit written testimony to MHTF@peer.ms.gov.

Wednesday, July 17, 2024

- *Sarah H. Gleason, MD, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Clinical Affairs Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC),* provided testimony on state and national statistics on the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorders among children and adolescents. The presenter discussed how Mississippi ranks nationally on issues such as adverse childhood experiences, major depression, substance use, suicide, and cyberbullying. The presenter further discussed the impact of COVID-19, lack of access to care and how UMMC is addressing gaps in mental and behavioral health for children and adolescents.
- *Wendy Bailey, Executive Director, Mississippi Department of Mental Health (MDMH),* provided testimony on the three components of the mental health service delivery system which included state operated programs/community service programs, regional community health centers, and other nonprofit agencies. The presenter further discussed services offered to individuals through the suicide and crisis lifeline number (988), its usage (i.e., screened, referred, received), and the Mississippi Department of Education's 988 Suicide Prevention Toolkit for schools. In addition, MDMH, makes available youth mental health aid trainings for Mississippi public schools.

Thursday, July 18, 2024

- *Dr. Lance Evans, State Superintendent, Mississippi Department of Education (MDE),* provided an overview of MDE services and discussed the role of professional school counselors, intervention services offered to students, and the department's partnership with UMMC in the Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education grant program. The presenter further discussed recommendations for all school districts for mental health best practices as well as next steps for MDE. One recommendation included determining the need to create a Harm Prevention and Threat Management Training model (patterned after Florida's Department of Education training model). The model is a

systematic fact-based method to identify levels of concern or potential threatening behavior that determines if a student support management plan is warranted.

- *Kimberly Wheaton, Deputy Commissioner of Child Welfare, Mississippi Child Protection Services (MDCPS), provided an overview of MDCPS services and discussed the department's role in addressing child and adolescent mental health through each of the following: assessment, collaboration, referral, funding, education, and training.*
- *Kell Smith, Executive Director, Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB), provided an overview of the MCCB services and discussed mental health services offered which included in-person counseling, telehealth counseling, crisis intervention, health and wellness fairs, referral services, Zen dens, pet partners, and professional development for faculty and staff. The presenter further discussed service gaps and barriers which covered funding limitations, staffing/provider limitation, stigma and cultural norms, space limitation, and affordability for students.*
- *Dr. Al Rankins, Commissioner, Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL), provided testimony on mental health services offered to students at each of the eight public universities which ranged from delivering front line mental health services, tele-mental health, referral to local mental health service providers, and mental health outreach programs. Further, the presenter discussed the most prevalent needs for services which included more licensed professional counseling staff, more training and professional development opportunities for staff, and more student support programming and outreach.*

Wednesday, August 7, 2024

- *Phaedre Cole, Executive Director, Life Help/Region 6 Community Mental Health Center (CMHC), discussed "Strengthening Youth Mental Health: A Governor's Playbook," created by the National Governor's Association which focused on the four pillars for strengthening youth mental health as well as the Mississippi School Safety Act of 2019 which in part, through MOU, required MDMH to provide mental health services to local school districts. Further, the presenter provided testimony on the current challenges faced by CMHCs which included the following: no universal screening in schools, finding adequate space in schools to perform services, not all schools taking advantage of services offered, and behavioral health workforce challenges. In addition, the presenter discussed three considerations for strengthening the existing MOU with school districts which were: 1) requiring every school to partner with their local CMHC, 2) expanding mental health screening to all students, and 3) expanding curriculum to manage stress and anxiety to all grades.*
- *(Co-presenters) Crystal Brewer, Chair, and Dr. Ebonee Magee-Dorsey, Assistant Chair, Magnolia State School Counselor Association, provided testimony on the role of professional school counselors in addressing youth mental health. The presenters identified challenges within their profession, including staffing shortages, high student to school*

counselor ratios, the lack of a mandate requiring school counselors in every school, and confusion among leadership about the role of a professional school counselor. The presenters noted that due to these challenges, college students are choosing not to go into this profession. For example, USM graduated their last cohort of graduates for school counselors in 2024. The presenters identified possible solutions to overcome these challenges, which were: mandate school counselors for K-12, provide access to universal screeners to identify students with mental health needs, and assistance to spread the message that school counselors need to be used effectively in the overall collaborative work in community mental health.

- (Co-presenters) *Dr. Hannah Allen, Assistant Professor of Public Health and Director of the Substance Use and & Mental Health Research Lab, and Dr. Erica Montgomery, Program Director of the Counselor Education Department University of Mississippi*, provided an overview of child and adolescent mental health challenges, scope of problems, where Mississippi was falling behind in improving mental health outcomes as well as exposure to adverse childhood experiences. The presenters provided statistics on mental health challenges of high-risk groups (ages 12 to 17) in Mississippi to that of high-risk groups regionally and nationally in the following areas: alcohol use, binge alcohol use, tobacco products, illicit drug use, depression, and attempted suicide. The presenters recommended three possible solutions to improve youth mental health which were: 1) address the economic and social barriers that contribute to poor mental health for young people, families, and caregivers, 2) ensure all children and adolescents have comprehensive and affordable coverage for mental health and substance use, and 3) invest in prevention programming and policy.
- *Flora Fouladi, Policy Associate, Health Program, National Conference of State Legislators*, provided a national overview on youth mental health legislation with an emphasis on school level by age group beginning with early childhood and lower school (ages 5 to 12), middle and high school (ages 13 to 17), and postsecondary (ages 18 to 25). The presenter discussed how states were addressing mental health issues that exists within each of the age groups/school levels and provided examples of policies and program preventions/interventions that are currently being implemented in states across the nation to address and improve the mental health and wellbeing of children and adolescents. In addition, the presenter noted that legislative policies aimed at improving mental outcomes in schools vary widely but generally focus on a few key areas such as: early intervention and prevention, mental health education and training, school-based health services, telehealth, and crisis intervention.

Thursday August 8, 2024

- *Sheriff Thomas E. Tuggle II, Sheriff of DeSoto County, Mississippi*, introduced himself and each member of his team in attendance (6 individuals), which included School Resource Officers (SRO). Sheriff Tuggle provided a brief overview of the mentorship program that is being piloted (began in 2024) in DeSoto County schools. The presenter noted that the goal

of the program is to have SROs as mentors (full-time) in every school in the county beginning with the fourth grade and continuing through the eighth grade. Mentors who are assigned to fourth graders will work with them until they reach the eighth grade before taking on another cohort of fourth graders. The mentors will teach students about patriotism, being productive members of society, and respect for self and country. The presenter also noted that if we do not influence students prior to the eighth grade, it's no longer considered an opportunity, it becomes a challenge. The presenter then turned over the presentation to other members of his team to expound on the need for the mentorship program.

- *Michael O'Neil, Founder and CEO, GetWellNetwork, Inc.*, provided an overview of his organization which was created to leverage technology to put people and patients at the center of their care and arm them with digital tools to connect directly to those skilled to care for and to educate/empower them to access and navigate resources. The presenter provided national statistics on hopelessness among youth and discussed ways to help them overcome and navigate through their life journey and mental health challenges. Further, the presenter discussed the development of an app which provides comprehensive mental healthcare services for youth (ages 13 to 18) through self-guided digital resources, coaching, and coordinated access to physician resources.
- *Mental Health Task Force Roundtable*. Non-legislative Task Force members who attended the meeting in person were provided five minutes to discuss takeaways and potential solutions, if any, from testimonies presented by speakers over the course of the four meetings to help with recommendations on improving child and adolescent mental health and to move the state forward. Members' takeaways and areas of improvement for children and adolescents' mental health covered a wide range of points and topics.

Task Force Recommendations

The following recommendations reflect information and suggestions provided by hearing participants and task force members. These recommendations are organized into the following categories: school safety, other school policies, training, resources, development of workforce, and ongoing work.

School Safety

Recommendation #1

Update the School Safety Act of 2019, House Bill 1283 (2019 Legislative Session), as follows:

- Provide that the School Safety Grant Program, as established in **Mississippi Code Section 37-3-83**, may fund mentoring or other community-based policing programs formed in partnership between school districts and local law enforcement agencies;
- Provide that the School Safety Grant Program, as established in **Mississippi Code Section 37-3-83**, may fund the implementation of a mental health screener for students, with a preference for high quality resources at the lowest and best cost, including free resources. Allow school districts the autonomy to choose a screener suitable for their district, provided the screener has been approved by the MDMH;
- Allow an income tax credit for any outside contribution paid to support a mentoring or other community-based policing program formed under the revised School Safety Grant Program;
- Amend **Section 37-3-83** to require all school districts to adopt and implement a policy addressing sexual abuse of children (Erin's Law Awareness), as developed by the Attorney General's Office, MDMH, and MDE;
- Reestablish the pilot programs, created under **Section 37-3-83** and interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which used evidence-based curriculum to provides students in Grades K-5 with skills to manage stress and anxiety. Allow a two-year pilot in 12 school districts, with at least one school district from each congressional district and a preference for any school district that previously participated in the pilot program. Require results to be reported by the MDMH each year to the Legislature;
- Amend **Section 37-3-93** to require school districts and local law enforcement agencies within the school district's territory to enter into memorandum of understandings requiring the local law enforcement agencies to conduct an annual inspection and threat assessment of each school according to the School Crisis Management Program curriculum developed by the Mississippi Office of Homeland Security;

- Expand funding for the Mississippi Community Oriented Policing Service in Schools (MCOPS) grant program, established in **Section 37-3-82**, to provide at least one grant for one SRO in every school district;
- Amend **Section 37-3-82** to allow SROs funded through MCOPS to train at any state-recognized law enforcement training academy; and,
- Require school districts to appoint key personnel or navigators to a coordinating council to oversee a risk assessment program (i.e., Behavior Threat Assessment and Management) to help identify, screen, and triage students in need of mental or behavioral health support and connect students with resources within the school district or community.

Recommendation #2

- Amend **Mississippi Code Section 37-7-321** to require standardized law enforcement officer training and SRO training to be employed as an SRO in a school district. This should include instruction on an SRO's mentoring role and how to develop relationships with school personnel, students, parents, and the wider community.
- Additionally, encourage SROs to serve as mentors, as part of a school district's mentorship program, in schools to fill gaps and to provide necessary support and guidance to aid in improving students' academic performance and mental health outcomes.

Other School Policies

Recommendation #3

- Mandate all school districts to implement policies prohibiting the use of social media, cellphones, smart watches, and other technology unrelated to classroom learning, during classroom instruction. Allow school districts local autonomy to decide how to implement such policies.

Recommendation #4

- Prohibit cancelling recess time for K-5 students as punishment for behavioral or other mental health or disciplinary issues. Mandate a certain amount of time for recess per day for elementary school students, as recommended by the MDE and MDMH.

Recommendation #5

- Require the MDE, in collaboration with the MDMH, to evaluate mental health resources and infrastructure when a school or district is taken over by the state pursuant to **Mississippi Code 37-17-6**. This should include evaluating relevant personnel including school nurses, counselors, and school psychologists and examining the district's relationship with its CMHC or other private providers and recommending best practices moving forward.

Training

Recommendation #6

- Mandate Mental Health First Aid training, updated and approved by the MDMH, for all teachers and administrators beginning in the 2025-2026 school year. Require the MCCB and IHL to identify key community college and university personnel, such as healthcare providers, counselors, and resident assistants, to receive similar mandated training. Require the MDMH to ensure such training is updated over time.

Recommendation #7

- Require the MDMH to review and update school district policies, training curriculum, and other resources related to suicide prevention required for school district personnel under Mississippi Code Sections 37-3-101 and 37-3-103.

Recommendation #8

- Mandate all 6th and 9th grade students, upon entering middle and high school, receive an orientation with other students (either in an assembly or in larger groups, but fewer than the entire grade) about support services offered at the school including career coaches, counselors, school psychologists, nurses, telehealth, and others. Require information to be shared on the district antibullying policy, technology (phone/computer policy), substance abuse, and other age-appropriate information related to or impacting mental and behavioral health and wellbeing. Develop a plan for providing this information to new students who transfer to the school district after an orientation is offered.
- Direct the MDMH in collaboration with the MDE to develop information and materials to distribute at the orientations, and materials to distribute in similar recommended assemblies for parents, caretakers, and relevant members of the community.

Recommendation #9

- Mandate all public community colleges and institutions of higher learning conduct orientations for new students about support services offered on campus including counseling centers, health clinics, telehealth, and others. Require information to be shared on college or university policies related to the mental and behavioral health and wellbeing of students. Develop a plan for providing this information to new students who transfer to the community college or university later in their academic career.
- Direct the MDMH in collaboration with the MCCB and IHL to develop information and materials to distribute at the orientations, and materials to distribute to other stakeholders, such as parents or other members of the community.

Resources

Recommendation #10

- Require the MDE, MCCB, IHL, and MDMH to provide guidance to school districts, community colleges, and universities regarding appropriate screening resources for students.

Recommendation #11

- Require school districts, community colleges, and public universities to partner with CMHCs, including Crisis Intervention Teams, or private providers, with a preference for high quality resources at the lowest and best cost, including free resources.

Recommendation #12

- Implement pilot peer-to-peer programs to help students deal with trauma and promote mental health wellness at the high school, community college, and university levels with appropriate oversight from personnel including administrators and mental health professionals.

Recommendation #13

- Require the MDMH, with the assistance of the MDE, to submit a report to the Legislature within one year inventorying all programs aimed at improving child and adolescent mental health in the state supported by state funds. Provide recommendations on how to consolidate programs or ensure maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

Recommendation #14

- Create an internet-based mental health resource guide at the state level and school district level and designate personnel to maintain the resource guide. Mandate each individual school and school district place a visible mental health resource button on the home page of their website.

Recommendation #15

- Require future identification cards printed for middle and high school students to include the 988 suicide and crisis hotline number beginning in the 2026-2027 school year.

Recommendation #16

- Encourage schools, community colleges, and universities to plan for space within currently existing structures for counselors and therapists to confidentially provide mental health services to students. Require entities expanding physical space or building new facilities to consider designating confidential space for mental health services.

Development of Workforce

Recommendation #17

- Amend **Mississippi Code Section 37-19-7** to add school psychologists to the list of professionals which may receive a \$6,000 salary supplement from the state. School counselors and nurses currently receive a supplement.

Recommendation #18

- Create a loan repayment program for licensed counselors, school psychologists, and adolescent psychologists/psychiatrists, mirroring the Winter-Reed Loan Repayment Program established in **Mississippi Code Section 37-106-36**, with an incentive to serve in low-performing schools.
- Create a loan repayment program for licensed counselors on college campuses, mirroring the Winter-Reed Loan Repayment Program established in **Mississippi Code Section 37-106-36**.

Recommendation #19

- Research the efficacy of other targeted actions to develop the mental health workforce throughout the state, including, but not limited to, creating a tax incentive for providers, increasing reimbursement rates, or utilizing new waivers.

Recommendation #20

- Require MDE to set staggered goals aimed at increasing the number of school counselors and school psychologists operating in public schools across the state, with the intent of moving toward one school counselor per 250 students in every school district.

Ongoing Work

Recommendation #21

- Continue the work of the K-12 and Postsecondary Mental Health Task Force by extending its repeal date during the 2025 Regular Legislative Session.