

BIRMINGHAM COALITION FOR STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Policy Proposal #1

**Create a strong student mental health support team on
every BCS campus.**

June 2021

The Backstory

Why is the Birmingham Education Foundation (Ed) talking about student mental health? In short, because that's what Birmingham families, students, and educators called on us to do. Well before the pandemic, local education stakeholders had student mental health on their radar. Through Ed-sponsored Network Nights, community surveys, and informal feedback, they named the issue as a top three priority for schools, repeatedly identifying it as a persistent barrier to student achievement. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and numerous, highly-visible episodes of racial brutality and political violence, the importance of prioritizing student mental health grew ever more apparent.

That was before the pandemic. Since then, the unprecedented events of 2020 dramatically intensified a pre-existing crisis -- particularly within low-income communities of color. The catastrophic public health impact of COVID, the socio-economic fallout from the pandemic, and the aftershocks of racial violence that devastated so many US communities also reverberated through our city.

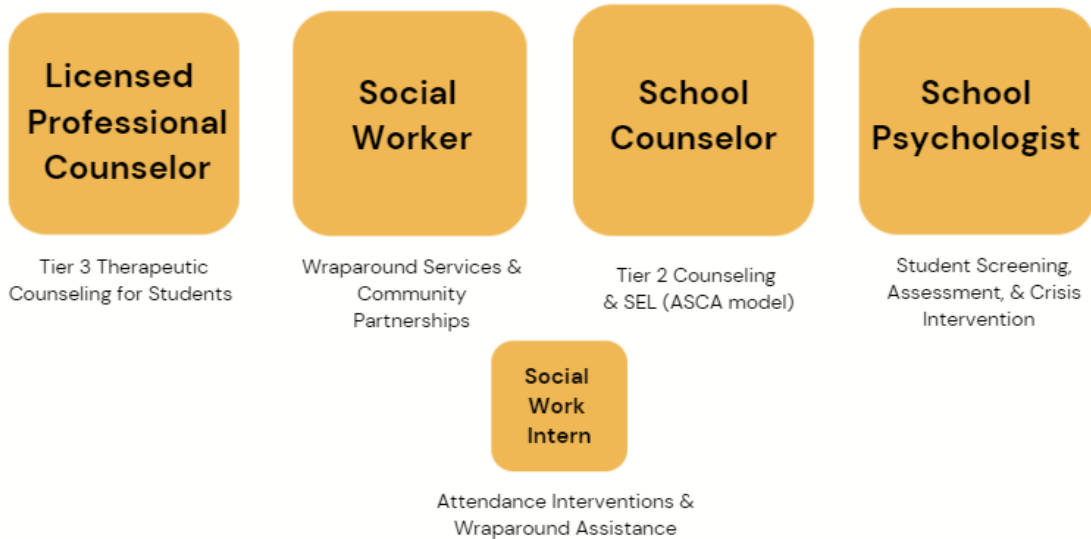
Now more than ever, student mental health demands our attention.

The Birmingham Coalition For Student Mental Health

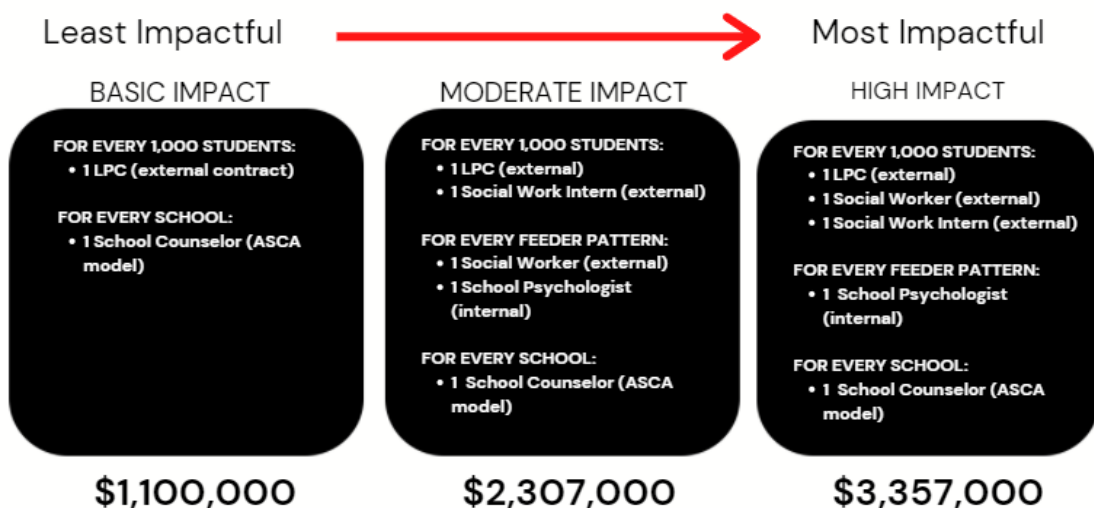
It was this call to action that led to the creation of the Birmingham Coalition for Student Mental Health (BCSMH). Formed in the fall of 2020, BCSMH is a diverse group of students, families, educators, community members, and organizations who joined together to reimagine what school-based mental health support could look like in our area. The Coalition began its work by getting an updated snapshot of student mental health in the Magic City. Over 800 participants completed an online survey and 220+ contributed to 24 community conversations -- hour-long discussion groups held across the Birmingham metro.

We translated the survey results, comments, and feedback into specific findings and then married the findings with our earlier work exploring national best practices. What emerged was the Student Mental Health Policy Playbook. The top policy priority from that Playbook? ***Create a strong mental health team on every Birmingham City School campus.***

POLICY PROPOSAL #1: Create a strong student mental health support team on every campus. Increase the number of school-based mental health professionals directly supporting Birmingham City students and expand/refocus the mental health support services being offered by current student support staff. Participating professionals will receive culturally-appropriate, trauma-informed care and evidence-based anti-bias training. The ideal support team would include the following roles:



Potential Models & Cost Per Year



The Case For A Strong Mental Health Team

- *In the wake of COVID-19, experts anticipate a sharp rise in the level and range of students' immediate foundational needs. Having these teams in place to meet these needs will ensure that school leaders and educators can focus on the most important task at hand: **accelerating student learning to overcome the loss that occurred during the COVID pandemic.***
- *Establishing these school-based teams will ensure the greatest impact on the greatest number of students.*
- *Current Birmingham City Schools (BCS) school-based mental health professional staffing levels cannot adequately support the broad and growing mental health needs of students. [In 2019-2020](#), BCS served just over 22,500 students. District mental health professionals included:*
 - *1 School Psychologist*
 - *5 Social Worker-style positions (1 SW + 4 Prevention Specialists)*
 - *15 Therapists (serving 287 students)*
 - *53 School Counselors (in 43 schools)*

Though BCS maintains a dedicated and committed Student Support Service Team, they do not yet have the personnel to address the mental health issues emerging in the classroom.

*"We need to recognize that the mental health of faculty, staff, and students is paramount to reviving this district's ability to effectively educate and prepare students for the future."
-BCSMH survey participant -*

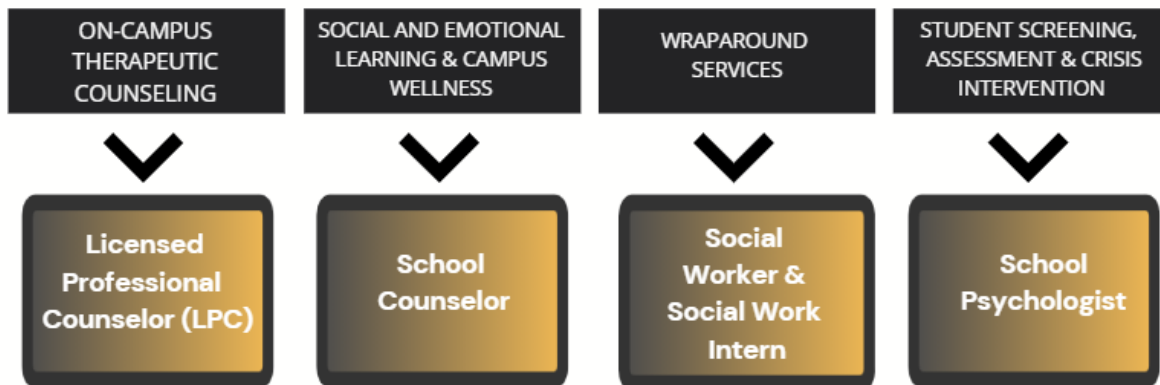
The Research

What does the research say? What does our community want?

1. **We need these professionals for a strong return to school post COVID-19.** In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and corresponding economic crisis, researchers across the country are advocating for [a stronger focus on student/educator mental health and more school-based counseling services](#). In the vast majority of research focusing on the COVID response in K-12 schools, researchers specifically call for district leaders and policy-makers to invest in [additional human resources](#).
2. **[A school-based support team can address out-of-school learning barriers and have the potential to increase academic outcomes when paired with other academic interventions, like extended learning time.](#)** They can also have an impact on **improved attendance rates, academic achievement, and decreased disciplinary incidents** when combined with the other pillars of the [community school model](#).
3. **[Schools offer a uniquely effective space to provide mental health services.](#)** Providing mental health services at schools normalizes treatment, increases participation, decreases stigma, and improves student behavioral and academic outcomes.
4. **There is broad support for this proposal among Birmingham education stakeholders.** Community research conducted over the past three years repeatedly ranks improving student mental health supports as a top priority among Birmingham students, families, and educators.

The Student Mental Health Team

The Keys to Strong Student Mental Health Support:



Licensed Professional Counselor

The Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) is a FT therapist who provides timely, campus-based, trauma-informed therapy and counseling services to students.

- The LPC is based on the school-based counselor model currently offered by [The Enrichment Center in Northern Alabama](#). An independent 501(c)(3) serving schools in Madison and Lawrence Counties, the Enrichment Center provides licensed therapists to serve as on-site counselors in designated partner schools. In 2019-20, the group's 8 counselors provided nearly 4,000 individual counseling sessions to 408 students.
- In-school programs eliminate transportation hurdles, lessen stigma, and reduce delays in access to counseling services. Students do not need a diagnosis or a behavioral referral in order to receive counseling services. Students may even self-refer.
- Since insurance is not billed, counselors have the flexibility to meet with students as often as their services are needed.
- LPCs can establish trusting, long-term relationships with the entire school community. As one participant noted, "No student is going to trust (their) fears and challenges with a stranger."
- With student mental health support needs predicted to rise dramatically in the aftermath of the pandemic, the LPC can help students to transition back to traditional learning.

School Counselor

School Counselors (SCs) already exist as FT on-site positions in 38 of Birmingham's 42 schools (4 share a counselor), but the day-to-day responsibilities of BCS School Counselors and the number of students they are expected to serve can vary tremendously from school to school. If schools are to build strong student mental health teams, SCs must play a clear, consistent and central role within that structure.

- SCs should oversee the school's Social and Emotional Learning efforts, coordinate student academic support activities, offer parent mental health support workshops, oversee mental health screenings, and serve as the home/school liaison regarding student well-being.
- While the activities of a SC's duties might vary somewhat depending on the needs at a given school, the SC role should always remain within the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) guidelines.
- **National best practice suggests that providing a high-quality, FT, on-site School Counselor who follows the ASCA service model remains one of the most cost-effective steps that states and districts can make to improve student wellness in schools.**

Social Worker

The Social Worker (SW) serves as the coordinator for all community partnerships for the school.

- The Social Worker completes a school community needs assessment, develops an action plan for identifying, recruiting, and coordinating extended services, and manages all volunteer groups, local agencies, churches, businesses, and other non-profit organizations working to connect students and families to critical wraparound services.
- These services might include connecting families to basic needs such as housing, employment, food, or needed healthcare services; or academic resources, including tutoring and mentoring.
- The SW would supervise the Social Work Intern.

Social Work Intern

The Social Work Intern (SWI) assists the Social Worker to address out-of-school learning barriers.

- SWI responsibilities could include actively monitoring school attendance, interfacing with families to develop an attendance intervention plan, supporting weekly food assistance distribution, maintaining a resource/clothing closet, coordinating and tracking school-based health screenings (including family follow-up), and coordinating mentorship opportunities.
- This role could be filled by a student in a Master's of Social Work program, through partnerships with University of Alabama, UAB, Samford, Montevallo, or an AmeriCorps VISTA.
- There is currently a shortage (and huge demand) for social work placements in Alabama, especially in schools.

School Psychologist

School Psychologists (SPs) serve as district-level resources for school-based student mental health services. Trained in all aspects of student mental health -- from student assessment and behavioral interventions to improving school climate and strengthening family-school partnerships -- SPs help to oversee and implement student behavioral and psychological support services within a school system. Though they aren't based on campus, SPs 'float' between schools, providing a critical consulting role that helps schools to improve student mental health at both an individual and a systemic level.

- SPs ensure that districts have an effective universal mental health screening and evaluation process.
- SPs ensure that students receive appropriate, individually-designed interventions. They also monitor the progress of those interventions.
- Following a student's absence from school for mental health treatment, SPs support successful student transitions back into the classroom.
- SPs connect students and schools to critical training, information, and community resources that help to support positive behavior and supportive school climates. They are often instrumental in identifying and implementing quality restorative justice, anti-bullying, and violence reduction efforts in schools.
- SPs oversee crisis intervention services and can develop intervention plans for particularly challenging and complex behavioral situations.

Basic Impact Model

- 1 Full-time Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) per 1000 students.
- 1 Full-time School Counselor (SC) following the ASCA model. SCs are already based at most schools & already covered.

Role	Costs per role	Total #	Cost
Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)	\$50K (<i>External Contract</i>)	22* (1 per 1,000 students)	\$1,100,000
School Counselor	Funding for SCs Based on Each School's ADM**	Total will vary by school ADM	No additional cost***
ANNUAL ADDED POSITIONS/COST		Positions Added: 22	\$1,100,000

ANNUAL PER PUPIL COST: \$50*

*Based on anticipated total BCS ADM of 22,000 students.

**SCs exist in all but 4 BCS schools & are already paid for through current resources.

***Additional costs would apply only for schools who do not currently fund a FT School Counselor or those whose declines in ADM prompt a shift in their former Alabama Foundation funding levels.

Moderate Impact Model

- 1 Full-time Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) per 1000 students. *External contract.*
- 1 Full-time Social Worker (SW) per feeder pattern (7 total). *External contract.*
- 1 Social Work Intern (SWI) per 1000 students. The SWI would be supervised by the SW.
- 1 Full-time School Psychologist (SP) per feeder pattern (7 total). *Internal contract.*
- 1 Full-time School Counselor (SC) following the ASCA model. SCs are already based at most schools & already covered.

Role	Costs per role	Total #	Cost
Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)	\$50K (<i>External Contract</i>)	22* (1 per 1,000 students)	\$1,100,000
Social Worker (SW)	\$70K (<i>External Contract</i>)	7	\$490,000
Social Work Intern (SWI)	\$5000/intern + \$5000 (est. supervision costs)	22* (1 per 1,000 students)	\$115,000
School Psychologist (SP)	\$86K	7	\$602,000
School Counselor (SC)	Funding Based on Each School's ADM**	Total will vary by school ADM	No additional cost***
ANNUAL ADDED POSITIONS/COST		Added: 51****	\$2,307,000

ANNUAL PER PUPIL COST: \$105*

*Based on anticipated total BCS ADM of 22,000 students.

**SCs exist in all but 4 BCS schools & are already paid for through current resources.

***Additional costs would apply only for schools who do not currently fund a FT School Counselor or those whose declines in ADM prompt a shift in their former Alabama Foundation funding levels.

****These figures represent the full cost of model implementation but do not account for current district staffing levels already in place. Consequently, the total projected "added cost" may be lower than listed.

High Impact Model

- 1 Full-time Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) per 1000 students. External contract.
- 1 Full-time Social Worker (SW) per 1000 students. External contract.
- 1 Social Work Intern (SWI) per 1000 students. The SWI would be supervised by the SW.
- 1 Full-time School Psychologist (SP) per feeder pattern (7 total).
- 1 School Counselor (SC) following the ASCA model. SCs are already based at most schools & already covered.

Role	Costs per role	Total #	Cost
Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)	\$50K (<i>External Contract</i>)	22* (1 per 1,000 students)	\$1,100,000
Social Worker (SW)	\$70K (<i>External Contract</i>)	22* (1 per 1,000 students)	\$1,540,000
Social Work Intern (SWI)	\$5000/intern + \$5000 (est. supervision costs for 22 interns)	22* (1 per 1,000 students)	\$115,000
School Psychologist (SP)	\$86K (Internal Contract)	7	\$602,000
School Counselor (SC)	Funding Based on Each School's ADM**	Total will vary by school ADM	No additional cost***
ANNUAL ADDED POSITIONS/COST		Positions Added: 73****	\$3,357,000

ANNUAL PER PUPIL COST: \$153*

* Based on anticipated total BCS ADM of 22,000 students.

**SCs exist in all but 4 BCS schools & are already paid for through current resources.

***Additional costs would apply for schools who do not currently fund a FT School Counselor or those whose declines in ADM prompt a shift in their former Alabama Foundation funding levels.

****These figures represent the full cost of model implementation but do not account for current district staffing levels already in place. Consequently, the total projected "added cost" may be lower than listed.

Funding & Revenue Sources

- For Licensed Professional Counselors, Social Workers, Social Work Interns, and School Psychologists:
 - Now (Current):
 - BCS will receive over **\$119 million** from American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) III funds. This money can be used for three school years, through **September 2024**.
 - Mayor Randall Woodfin's 2021-2022FY budget includes **\$1 million** to the Birmingham Board of Education (BOE) to fund more school-based mental health professionals in Birmingham City Schools.
 - Next (Future):
 - If these mental health support teams are found to have demonstrated value, they could be sustained through modifications to the Foundation funding formula for Alabama Title I schools.
 - Absent that change, position funding could come from a combination of state line items, district Title I dollars, and/or reappropriation of current funds for programs that are being eliminated.

- For School Counselors

Since Alabama's Foundation program provides some guaranteed funding to pay for School Counselors (SCs), SCs do not require a new funding stream. However, many BCS schools must use a portion of their Title I funds to pay for a FT SC in their building.

 - Now:
 - Dedicate a portion of ESSER III funding to support schools with overburdened School Counselors and unreasonably high student-to-counselor ratios.
 - Next:
 - Begin conversations with ALSDE about improving the equity and cost-effectiveness of current state-based student mental health efforts.
 - Consider legislation ([other state models](#)) to ensure stronger SC-to-student ratios. Adjust current ratios in the Alabama Foundation Funding Formula.
 - Encourage ALSDE to establish a grant-funded [School Counselor Corps](#).

Final Considerations

Though our research indicates that permanently establishing an on-site mental health support team would provide critical support services to BCS students, **guaranteeing sustainability need not be a barrier to initial implementation**. With ESSER III funds, districts have a unique opportunity to provide an intensive intervention at scale, evaluate its impact, and determine whether the efforts warrant a long-term, systemic investment.