



# School Safety Issue Brief

## Background

Mental health experts believe that remote instruction during 2020 and 2021 will lead to increased mental stress on students. A review of research from 1946 to 2020 found that “Children and adolescents are probably more likely to experience high rates of depression and most likely anxiety during and after enforced isolation ends...Clinical services should offer preventive support and early intervention where possible and be prepared for an increase in mental health problems.”<sup>1</sup> This study confirms the importance of school mental health support personnel (School Psychologists, Social Workers, Counselors, and Nurses). The nationally recommended ratios of mental health support staff to students was presented to the North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force by the Department of Public Instruction’s (DPI) Dr. Ellen Essick in January 2021<sup>2</sup>, leading to increased funding for school mental health personnel being included on the Task Force’s 2021 Action Agenda.<sup>3</sup>

	<b>Nationally Recommended Ratio</b>	<b>North Carolina Ratio</b>
School Counselors	1 : 250	1 : 353
Schools Psychologists	1 : 550	1 : 1,798
School Social Workers	1 : 250	1 : 1,289
School Nurses	1 : 750 (or 1 per school)	1 : 1,007

In the 2020 NCSBA Legislative Survey, 71.1% of respondents chose mental health support personnel as their top funding priority for 2021-2022.<sup>4</sup>

## **Student Health**

The following surveys provide a snapshot of the mental and physical condition of North Carolina’s school children prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- I. The 2018-2019 National Survey of Children’s Health reported that 23.8% of North Carolina children ages three to seventeen had one or more emotional, behavioral, mental, or developmental conditions.<sup>5</sup> The survey also found that 30.7% of children were obese, 21.8% had two or more lifelong problems such as asthma, 14.5% had oral health problems, and 12.4% of the State’s children had ADHD.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19, Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Volume 59, Issue 11

<sup>2</sup> Presentation to the NC Child Fatality Task Force on January 11, 2021, Dr. Ellen Essick, Section Chief, N.C. Healthy Schools, N.C. Department of Public Instruction

<sup>3</sup> North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force 2021 Action Agenda, <https://www.ncleg.gov/DocumentSites/Committees/NCCFTF/in%20the%20spotlight/CFTF%202021%20Action%20Agenda.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> 2020 NCSBA Legislative Survey (unpublished), North Carolina School Boards Association, Governmental Relations Office

<sup>5</sup> 2018-19 National Survey of Children’s Health, Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

- II. The 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey of North Carolina high school students found the following
- 36.3% feel sad or hopeless
  - 15.4% had made a plan about how they would attempt suicide and 9.7% actually attempted suicide
  - 14.8% are being electronically bullied and 18.9% are being bullied on school property
  - 7% had experienced dating violence
  - 12.5% currently binge drink
  - 22.1% currently use marijuana<sup>7</sup>

### **School Resource Officers**

Many agree with DPI's assessment that School Resource Officers (SROs) reflect "a community's desire to ensure that its schools are safe, secure, and orderly. SROs represent a proactive strategy designed to bring prevention and intervention into the schools."<sup>8</sup> In 2018, there were 1,167 SROs<sup>9</sup> in the State's 2,455 traditional public schools.<sup>10</sup> The Governor's Crime Commission recommended in 2019 that a SRO be assigned to each school in the State.<sup>11</sup> It was estimated that it would take \$84.4 million recurring to place a SRO in the remaining traditional public schools.<sup>12</sup> The General Assembly appropriated \$12 million recurring in 2018<sup>13</sup> and an additional \$3 million recurring in 2019<sup>14</sup> to increase the number of SROs in elementary and middle schools and for additional training of SROs. DPI reported that the additional \$15 million in SRO funds were used for "the employment of and/or training for 445 school resource officers" in both traditional and charter schools in 2019.<sup>15</sup>

The SRO program is not without its critics, especially in the African American and Hispanic communities. SROs are accused of making arrests for minor offenses that funnel students into the school to prison pipeline. DPI understands a "SRO's work is quite different than policing in communities, so it is important that SROs are consistently receiving training on adolescent development, crisis intervention training, and youth mental health first aid."<sup>16</sup> The Governor's Crime Commission recommended enhanced mental health training for SROs, including but not limited to community specific Crisis Intervention Training.<sup>17</sup> The General Assembly

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<sup>7</sup> Youth Risk Behavior Survey US 2019, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

<sup>8</sup> NC Center for Safer Schools, Department of Public Instruction

<sup>9</sup> School Safety Personnel Summary April 2018, Department of Public Instruction and Fiscal Research Division of the General Assembly

<sup>10</sup> Highlights of the North Carolina Public School Budget February 2019, Department of Public Instruction, Division of School Business

<sup>11</sup> Report of the Special Committee on School Shootings, Governor's Crime Commission, NC Department of Public Safety

<sup>12</sup> School Safety Personnel Summary April 2018, Department of Public Instruction and Fiscal Research Division of the General Assembly

<sup>13</sup> Session Law 2018-5, Section 7.27(e)

<sup>14</sup> Session Law 2019-222, Section 3.1(d)

<sup>15</sup> School Safety Grants Program, Report to the General Assembly April 1, 2020, NC Superintendent of Public Instruction

<sup>16</sup> School Safety Grants Program – Report to the General Assembly, April 1, 2020, NC Superintendent of Public Instruction

<sup>17</sup> Report of the Special Committee on School Shootings, Governor's Crime Commission, NC Department of Public Safety

recommended that SRO training include “instruction on research into the social and cognitive development of elementary school and middle school children”.<sup>18</sup>

### **NCSBA Position**

NCSBA encourages the General Assembly to continue its efforts since 2018 to fund adequate levels of mental health support personnel (School Psychologists, Social Workers, Counselors, and Nurses) in our public schools. The ratios of students to mental health personnel in North Carolina do not come close to meeting the nationally recommended averages. Increased pay for these mental health support personnel is also important to enabling LEAs to recruit highly qualified candidates for these critical positions.

NCSBA requests additional SRO funding to expand protection for all students, staff, and volunteers. Prior year grants for school safety equipment and SRO training were nonrecurring but should be reauthorized as recurring grants in 2021. Additional SRO training is also extremely important based on the unique role of law enforcement in schools. Well trained SROs play a vital role in the safety of the school community.

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<sup>18</sup> Session Law 2018-5, Section 7.27(e)