

## Ask the DC Council to Expand School-Based Mental Health Services to More Students

April 29th, 2014 | by Wes Rivers

From: <http://www.dcfpi.org/ask-the-dc-council-to-expand-school-based-mental-health-services-to-more-students>

Two weeks ago, the District's Dime reported that the mayor's proposed budget included an expansion of school-based mental health services to more schools next year. However, after clarification from the Department of Behavior Health, it now appears that the number of school-based mental health staff would not increase above this year's level. The staff changes reflected in budget documents apparently are "technical adjustments."

That means it now falls upon the Council to find funds to meet the mental health needs of more of our students. The South Capitol Street Memorial Act of 2012, which created the school-based mental health program, called for every traditional public and public charter school to have a mental health clinician by the 2016-2017 school year. Due to lack of funding, we are less than half-way there right now.

The school-based mental health program places trained mental health professionals in traditional public and public charter schools for all or part of the school week. The staff offer a range of services, from classroom prevention sessions to more targeted student treatment and family counseling. In FY 2014, the Council approved an expansion of the program by 19 schools, for a total number of 72 schools served. The Department of Behavioral health is still in the process of hiring clinicians for those positions and they appear as "new" staff in the FY 2015 budget proposal.

As of this school year, the program has the capacity to serve less than half of DC schools and services are primarily located in Ward 6,7, and 8. Clinicians have delivered 2,500 individual counseling sessions so far this school year, and almost 20,000 counseling sessions since the beginning of the 2011-12 school year. However, the program maintains a caseload of only 629 students, one sixth of the number of referrals received. DC Action for Children estimates between 7,200 and 9,200 District children have severe mental health issues.

Meeting the mental health needs of students is important to their ability to succeed in school. So it makes sense to make progress on the goal of putting a mental health clinician in every school by the 2016-17 school year. That cannot happen through mere technical adjustments, but instead will require the DC Council to find more funds. An increase of \$1.9 million would support 23 additional schools, giving students in about half of DC's publicly funded schools access to needed mental health specialists.

