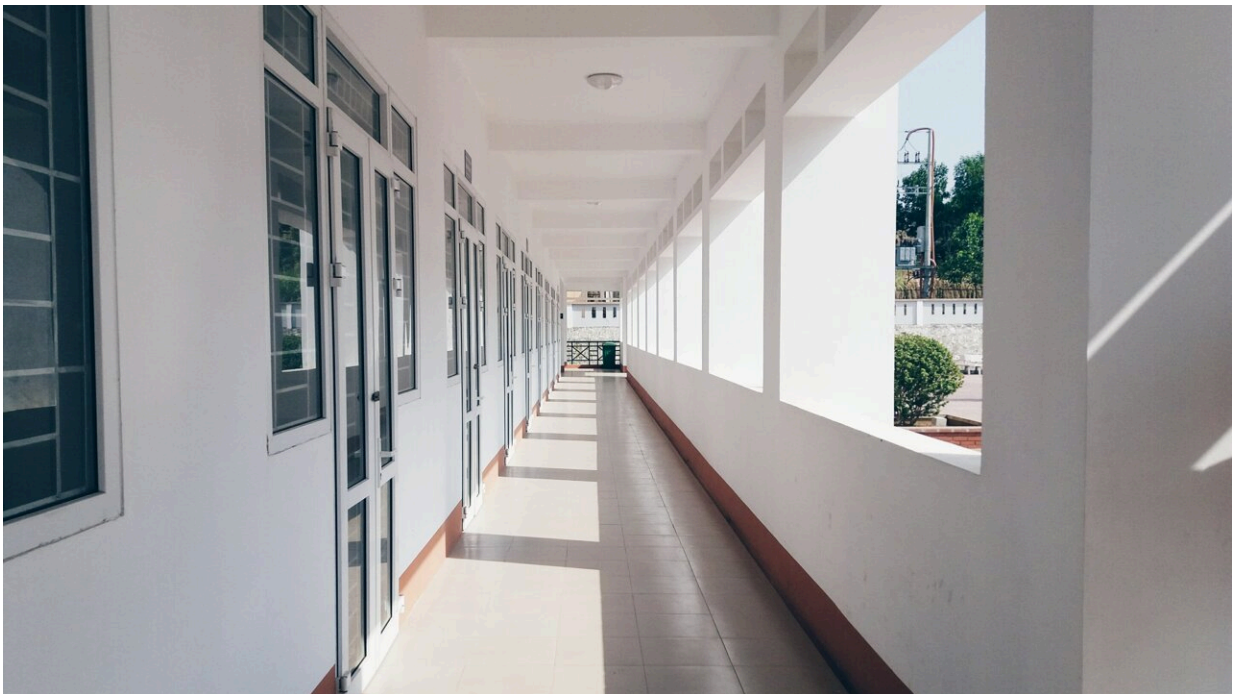


# Schools struggle to staff up for youth mental health crisis

November 18 2022, by PATRICK WALL and KALYN BELSHA of Chalkbeat and ANNIE MA of The Associated Press

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Mira Ugwuadu felt anxious and depressed when she returned to her high school in Cobb County, Georgia, last fall after months of remote learning, so she sought help. But her school counselor kept rescheduling their meetings because she had so many students to see.

"I felt helpless and alone," the 12th grader later said.

Despite an influx of COVID-19 relief money, school districts across the country have struggled to staff up to address students' mental health needs that have only grown since the pandemic hit.

Among 18 of the country's largest [school districts](#), 12 started this school year with fewer counselors or psychologists than they had in fall 2019, according to an analysis by Chalkbeat. As a result, many school mental health professionals have caseloads that far exceed recommended limits, according to experts and advocates, and students must wait for urgently needed help.

Some of the extra need for support has been absorbed by social workers—their ranks have grown by nearly 50% since before the pandemic, federal data shows—but they have different clinical training from other [mental health professionals](#) and many other duties, including helping families. Districts included in the analysis, which serve a combined 3 million students, started the year with nearly 1,000 unfilled mental health positions.

Hiring challenges are largely to blame, but some [school systems](#) have invested relief money in other priorities. The Cobb County [district](#), for one, has not added any new counselors.

"They have so many students that they're dealing with," said Mira, 17. "I personally don't want to blame them. But I also deserve care and support, too."

A spokesperson for Cobb County Public Schools said school counselor positions are based on a state funding formula, and the district strongly supports more funding.

The Chalkbeat analysis is based on school staffing and vacancy data obtained through open records requests. The 31 largest districts in the U.S. were surveyed, but some did not track or provide data.

Some school systems used federal relief money to add mental health staff, but others did not because they worried about affording them once the aid runs out. Districts have limited time to spend the nearly \$190 billion allocated for recovery.

"Here's this conundrum that we're in," said Christy McCoy, the president of the School Social Work Association of America. "It's like we are trying to put a Band-Aid on something that needs a more comprehensive and integrated approach."

Many of the schools that have wanted to hire more mental health workers simply can't find them. School psychologist positions have been particularly hard to fill.

Chicago, for example, added 32 school psychologist positions since fall 2019 but ended up with just one additional psychologist on staff this fall. Dozens of positions couldn't be filled.

Schools in Hillsborough County, Florida eliminated dozens of unfilled psychologist positions, leaving schools with 33 fewer psychologists this fall than pre-pandemic. Houston schools also cut more than a dozen psychologist roles it couldn't fill before the pandemic. Instead, the district used the money to pay outside providers and hire psychologist interns.

With their extended training, school psychologists are relied upon to provide intensive one-on-one counseling and help determine whether students are at risk for suicide.

In Maryland, a shortage of psychologists at Montgomery County Public Schools has kept the short-staffed department focused on crisis intervention and providing legally mandated services like special education assessments, said Christina Connolly-Chester, director of psychological services. That has meant they cannot keep up with other, less urgent counseling services.

"If that psychologist has more schools because there are vacancies and they're not able to spend as much time in their assigned schools, then things like counseling go away," she said.

The district sought to hire staff to address increased student needs such as anxiety, depression and struggles with conflict management, but still had 30 vacant psychologist positions, a district official said this month.

Even before the pandemic, some schools struggled to find psychologists. New practitioners have not been entering the field fast enough, and others have been switching to telehealth or private practices with higher pay and often better working conditions.

"We can't afford to pay professionals enough to make it a desirable position," said Sharon Hoover, a psychologist who co-directs the National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland.

Counselor staffing has been a challenge for some districts, too, with nine of the large districts down counselors this year, while another nine saw increases.

Where hiring has been toughest, schools have turned to alternatives. In Hawaii, which had 31 vacant counselor positions and 20 vacant psychologist roles at the start of the year, the state has trained educators to spot signs that a student is in distress—an increasingly common practice—and pays a private company to provide tele-mental health

services.

It isn't just hiring challenges that have led to smaller-than-expected staffing increases. Some school systems spent most of their federal aid on more lasting investments, such as technology or building repairs. And many opted not to add new mental health workers at all.

In the Chalkbeat analysis, half of the 18 large districts budgeted for fewer counselor or psychologist positions this [school year](#) than they did in fall 2019.

In April, just [4 in 10 districts reported hiring new staffers](#) to address students' mental health needs, according to a [national survey](#).

"For all the talk about mental health, the actual money they're spending on it is not that high," said Phyllis Jordan, associate director of FutureEd, a think tank at Georgetown University that tracks school spending. School districts only planned to spend about 2% of the largest round of federal COVID aid on mental health hiring, according to the group's analysis of more than 5,000 district spending plans.

One bright spot in the school mental [health](#) landscape, though, is the increase in social workers.

Montgomery County in Maryland, Gwinnett County in Georgia, and Orange, Broward, and Palm Beach counties in Florida all started the year with dozens more social workers than they had in fall 2019. Chicago added the most—nearly 150 additional social workers—in part due to staffing promises in the latest teachers union contract.

The Chalkbeat analysis echoes national data collected by the White House that show the number of school [social workers](#) was up 48% this fall compared with before the pandemic, while the number of school

counselors was up a more modest 12% and the count of school [psychologists](#) inched up 4%.

In Houston, staffing increases meant nearly every school started this fall with a counselor or social worker.

Newly hired social worker Natalie Rincon is able to meet one-on-one with students who are in crisis and teach other students calming strategies, such as tracing their hand with a finger while breathing.

Still, need often outstrips capacity at Rincon's [school](#), where many students are refugees or recent immigrants coping with trauma. She often has to prioritize helping students with urgent issues, leaving less time to check in on others.

"I want to be able to meet with a kindergartner just to talk about how they're feeling," Rincon said. "Those are the kind of things that I think slip through the cracks."

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Citation: Schools struggle to staff up for youth mental health crisis (2022, November 18) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-11-schools-struggle-staff-youth-mental.html>

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