

Mental Health In Tennessee Schools:

Trends from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey



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Introduction

According to public data from the [National Survey of Children's Health](#), one in four children in Tennessee has a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder, while one in seven has a chronic illness or disability diagnosis. Schools are the most common setting in which children receive mental health care.¹ In underserved areas, school-based health centers sometimes act as the primary access to basic health care and mental health services.² Tennessee has taken steps to bolster school-based mental health resources including the passing of a [\\$250M mental health trust fund bill in 2021](#), as well as designating [\\$8M from a 2023 school safety bill](#) towards expanding the presence of school-based behavioral health liaisons.

To better understand the experiences of the state's teachers and mental health professionals, this brief overviews responses from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey (TES) that asked school-based teachers, psychologists, and social workers about the supports and resources they use to serve students. TES data provides guidance for school leaders and policymakers to improve the wellness of both employees and students.

¹ Duong et al., 2021

² Arenson et al., 2019

Key Findings

- 1** *About 9 out of 10 teachers and mental health professionals agreed that their school has specific staff members who are trained to address student mental health needs. About 7 in 10 reported feeling that the mental health referral process at their school gets students the help they need quickly.*
- 2** *Teachers and mental health professionals most often identified counseling, psychological, and social services as the area in most urgent need of additional supports and resources, and they most often requested better professional development opportunities in related areas.*
- 3** *Teachers and mental health professionals who said they were familiar with the resources available through their districts' family resource center and coordinated school health office most often reported that counseling, psychological services, social supports, and health services are the most useful resources that these offices provide. However, fewer than 3 in 10 teachers and mental health professionals said they were familiar with these resources.*
- 4** *Teachers who were satisfied with their personal wellness during the 2022-23 school year were more likely to report that they planned to continue teaching at the same school during the 2023-24 school year.*

This brief leverages data from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey (TES), an annual survey administered by the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). This brief primarily examines the working experiences of psychologists and social workers across Tennessee schools, as well as the ways in which Tennessee teachers interact with mental healthcare processes and resources at their schools.

This brief includes information from the Mental Health Professionals core survey and the Student Readiness teacher module. The Student Readiness module covers topics relating to non-academic supports for student readiness, including physical health, mental health, and community engagement. About half of all Tennessee teachers completed the teacher core survey, and 10,391 of those respondents also completed the randomly assigned Student Readiness module. 305 psychologists and social workers completed the mental health professionals core survey.

The 10,391 teachers who completed the Student Readiness module represent all 1,748 public schools and nearly all 147 school districts in Tennessee. To address differences in response rates among school types, regions, and economically disadvantaged students enrolled, we employed analytic weighting to generate findings that better reflect the views of Tennessee's public school teachers and mental health professionals. The 305 mental health professionals who completed the core survey serve students at 178 schools in 78 districts. Over 80% of mental health professionals who responded reported serving students from more than one school.



KEY FINDINGS

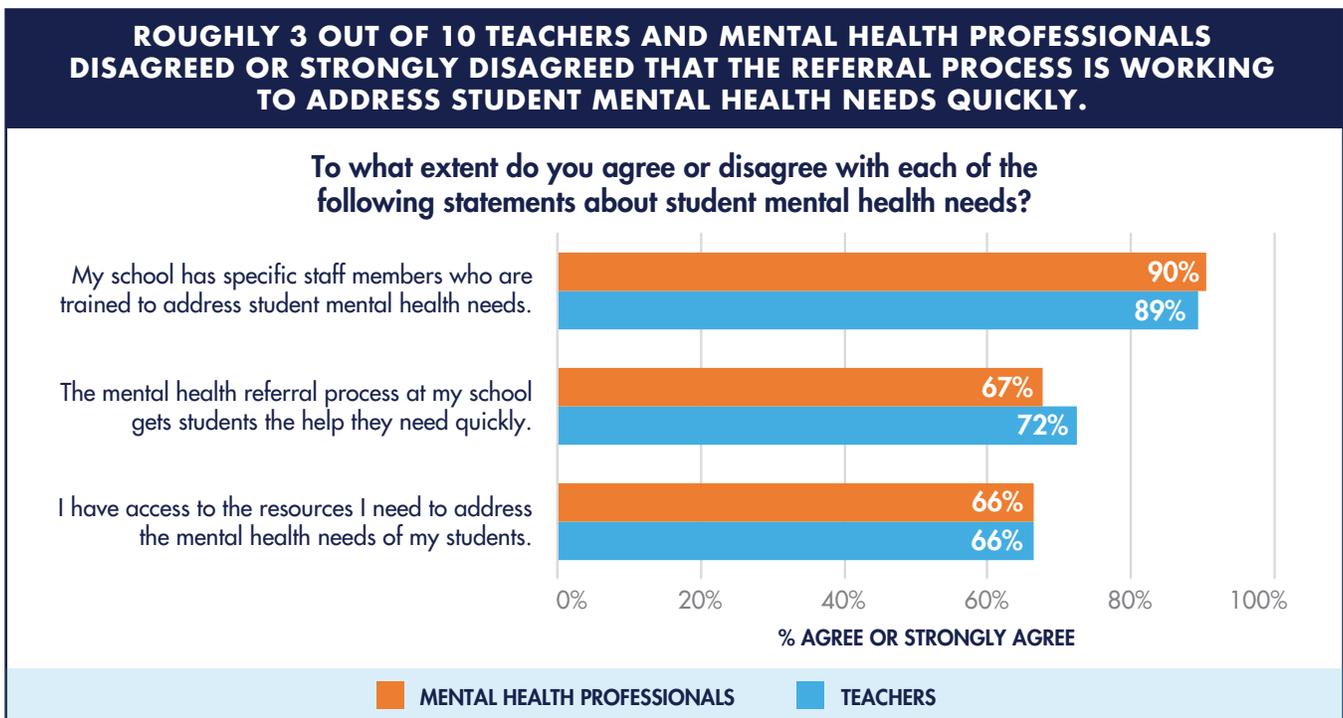


KEY FINDING 1

About 9 out of 10 teachers and mental health professionals agreed that their school has specific staff members who are trained to address student mental health needs. About 7 in 10 reported feeling that the mental health referral process at their school gets students the help they need quickly.

Similar to TES responses from 2020-2022, 89% of teachers and 90% of mental health professionals agreed or strongly agreed that their school has specific staff members who are trained to address student mental health needs, indicating that most schools have at least some mental health professional presence. However, as Figure 1 shows, only 72% of teachers and 67% of mental health professionals felt that the mental health referral process at their school gets students the help they need quickly, while only 66% of both teachers and mental health professionals indicated that they have access to the resources they need to address the mental health needs of their students.

FIGURE 1



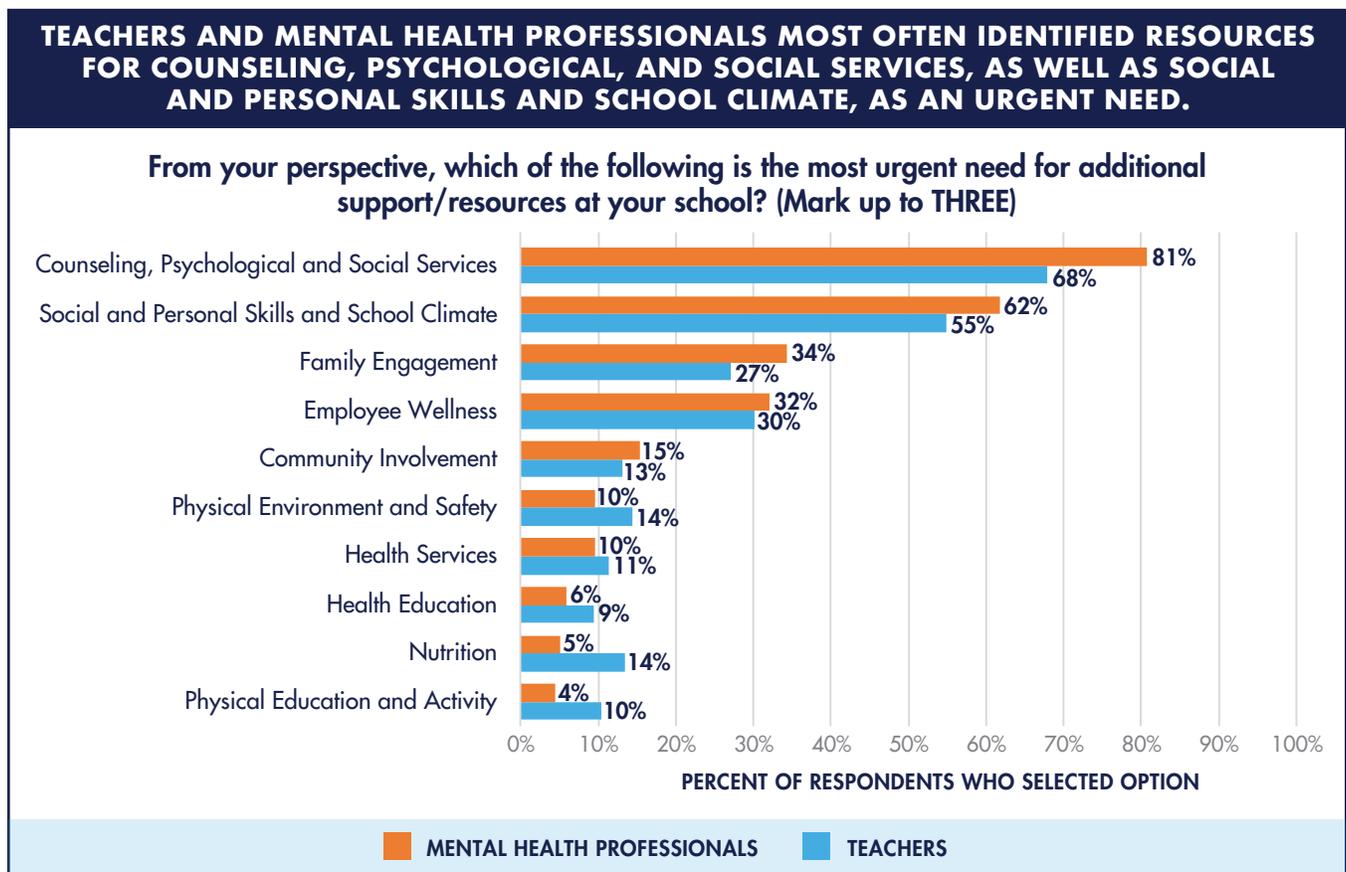
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KEY FINDING 2

Teachers and mental health professionals most often identified counseling, psychological, and social services as the area in most urgent need of additional supports and resources, and they most often requested better professional development opportunities in related areas.

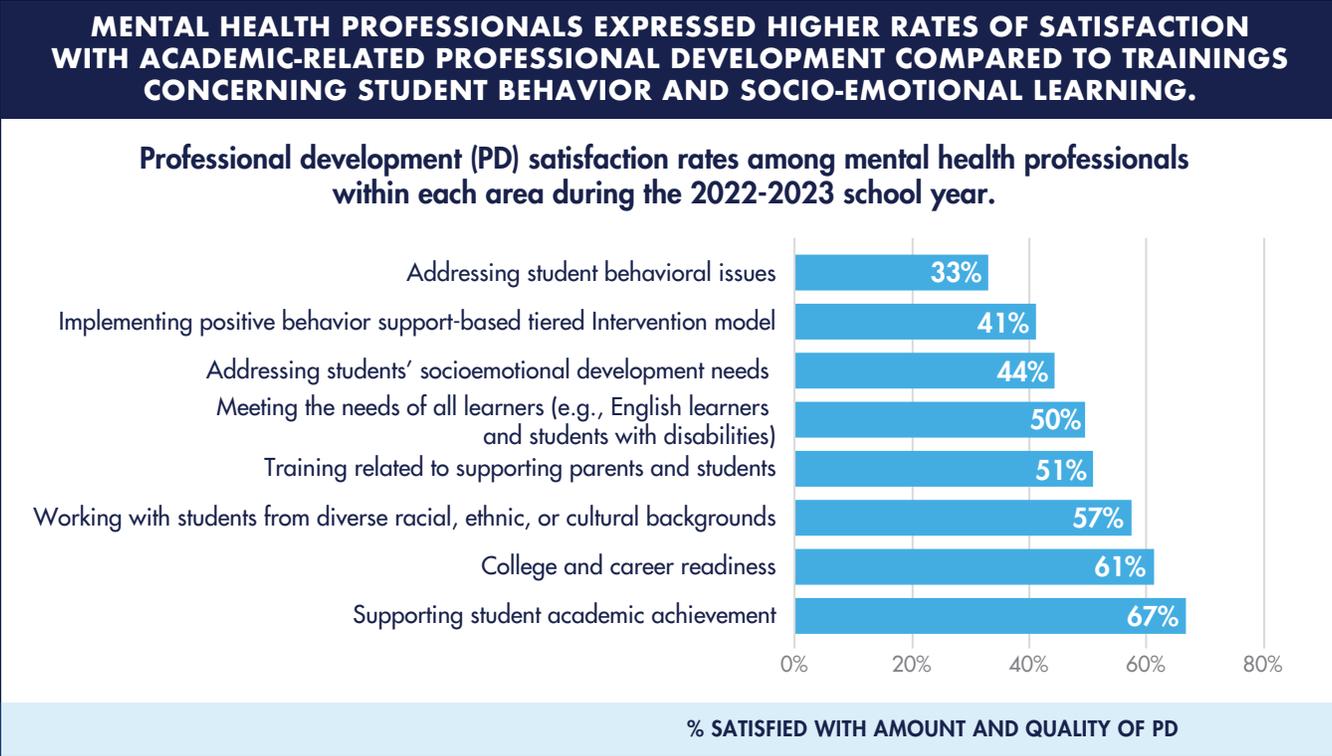
Teachers and mental health professionals were asked to identify up to three areas at their schools that are in the most urgent need of additional support. As shown in Figure 2, teachers most often selected counseling, psychological, and social services (68% of respondents), and social and personal skills and school climate (55%). Mental health professionals cited the same two areas as the most urgent need with 81% of respondents selecting counseling, psychological, and social services and 62% selecting social and personal skills and school climate.

FIGURE 2



Further, when asked about their professional development experiences, mental health professionals indicated a desire for additional mental health and behavioral health-related training opportunities. As shown in Figure 3, while roughly two-thirds of mental health professionals expressed satisfaction with both the amount and the quality of professional development related to college and career readiness and supporting student academic achievement during the 2022-23 school year, only one-third indicated they were satisfied with professional development related to addressing student behavioral issues. Similarly, less than half of mental health professionals were satisfied with both the amount and the quality of trainings related to implementing positive behavior support-based tiered intervention models (41%) or addressing students' socioemotional development needs (44%).

FIGURE 3



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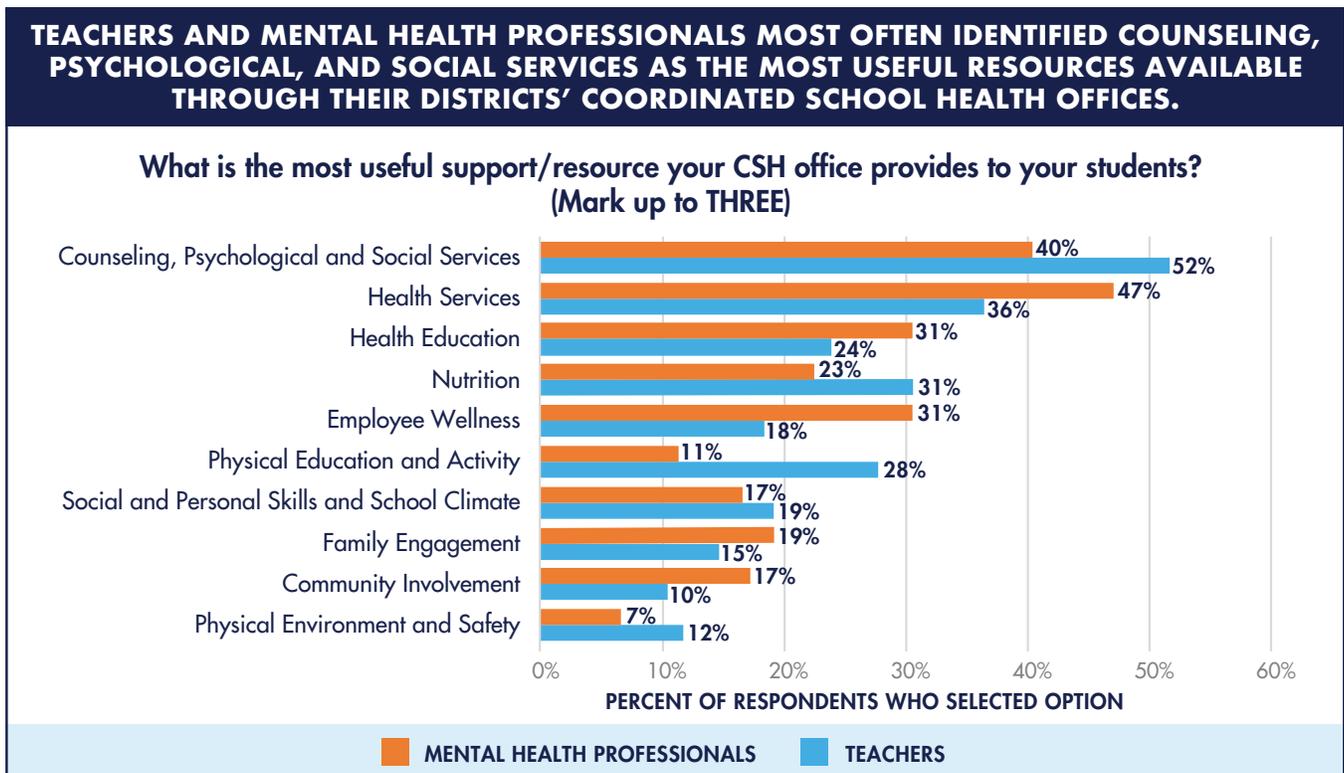
KEY FINDING 3

Teachers and mental health professionals who said they were familiar with the resources available through their districts’ family resource center and coordinated school health office most often reported that counseling, psychological services, social supports, and health services are the most useful resources that these offices provide. However, fewer than 3 in 10 teachers and mental health professionals said they were familiar with these resources.

Coordinated School Health (CSH) offices across the state are intended to improve students’ health and their capacity to learn through the support of families, communities and schools working together. Similarly, family resource centers (FRCs) are meant to proactively engage their communities and act as resource hubs to bridge resource gaps when necessary. The survey asked teachers and mental health professionals whose districts were flagged as having an FRC about their familiarity with the FRC as a resource, as well as their familiarity with the CSH office. However, only a small percentage of mental health professionals and teachers responded that they were familiar with the resources available through each. About 26% of mental health professionals and 22% of teachers said they were familiar or very familiar with the supports available through their CSH office, while only 37% of mental health professionals and 17% of teachers were familiar with FRC supports.

Respondents who reported that they were familiar with the supports available through their district’s CSH office were asked to indicate which resources were most useful for students. As shown in Figure 4, the most common selections were counseling, psychological, and social services (52% of teachers and 40% of health professionals familiar with CSH office supports), and health services (36% of teachers and 47% of mental health professionals familiar with CSH office supports). Given the gap in available mental health resources identified by teachers and mental health professionals in other survey items, increasing awareness of FRC and CSH office resources could aid in bridging the gap while longer-term solutions are formulated and implemented.

FIGURE 4



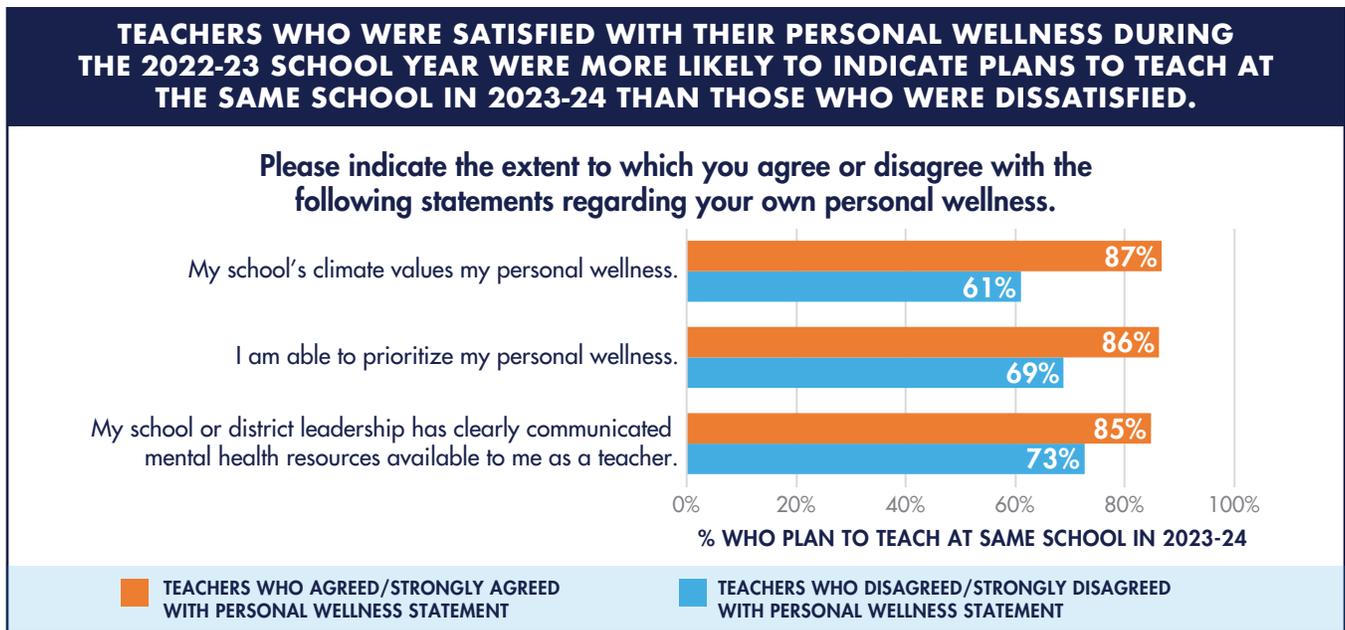
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KEY FINDING 4

Teachers who were satisfied with their personal wellness during the 2022-23 school year were more likely to report that they planned to continue teaching at the same school during the 2023-24 school year.

Teachers and mental health professionals expressed similar levels of satisfaction regarding their personal wellness, with roughly one in three indicating that they are not able to prioritize their personal wellness. About 80% of teachers overall indicated they intend to continue teaching at the same school during the next school year (2023-2024), however, as seen in Figure 5, teachers who felt satisfied with their personal wellness during the 2022-23 school year were more likely to report that they planned to continue teaching at the same school during the 2023-24 school year than colleagues who were unsatisfied with their personal wellness. While 87% of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed that their school’s climate values their personal wellness said they plan to teach at the same school next year, only 61% of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed said they plan to return to teach at the same school. Similarly, those who said they were able to prioritize their own personal wellness were more likely to report plans to teach at the same school next year (86% compared to 69% of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed). Finally, teachers who were satisfied with their school or district leaders’ communication of available mental health resources were more likely to report plans to continue teaching at the same school next year compared to dissatisfied colleagues (85% compared to 73%). Differences such as these may be important in retaining teachers and reducing training and recruitment-related expenses.

FIGURE 5



CONCLUSION

Responses from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey highlight important challenges that districts face in providing mental health resources and supports for both students and staff. Though nearly all teachers, psychologists, and social workers indicated their schools had at least one specific professional who is trained to address student mental health needs, fewer felt they had the resources needed to address the mental health needs of their students. About one-third of teachers and mental health professionals reported they were unable to prioritize their personal wellness, and those respondents were less likely to say they planned to continue working in their schools the following year. The Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) is set to replace the Basic Education Program (BEP) as Tennessee's school funding formula beginning in the 2023-24 school year, providing an opportunity for decision-makers to address the needs of teachers and staff across the state.

An additional measure that could improve the quality of mental healthcare provided to students and staff is increasing staff's familiarity with their district's family resource centers and CSH offices. When asked about family resource centers and CSH offices, most teachers, psychologists, and social workers indicated they are not familiar with the available resources at each. Increasing awareness of these CSH office resources could aid in bridging the reported gap in available mental health resources.

Findings from this survey align with state efforts to improve health-related experiences of employees and students. Some of these efforts include increasing mental health supports for uninsured children in 2020, expanding coverage of the Tennessee suicide prevention network, and granting funding to programs aimed at promoting youth and young adult mental health. The passing of a [\\$250M mental health trust fund bill](#) in 2021, as well as [designating \\$8M from a 2023 school safety bill](#) towards expanding the presence of school-based behavioral health liaisons, are among the most recent state efforts. Going forward, the Tennessee Educator Survey can continue to provide invaluable information as the state advances efforts to improve the mental health of its students and public school staff.



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