



Tuesday, April 25, 2023

On behalf of the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU), we would like to thank you for your continued advocacy and support of key education initiatives. As part of our **Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units (PAIU) Day on the Hill**, we thank you for your efforts championing our priority advocacy areas.

As a review, those four advocacy areas included:

- **Mental Health Funding for School-Based Programs and Services,**
- **Early Childhood Funding (Early Intervention, Pre-K Counts, Head Start),**
- **Personnel Shortages,** and
- **State Mandate Relief.**

We realize there are many priorities that all legislators in the General Assembly navigate on a daily basis. We appreciate your efforts to provide funding to support quality education programs in the form of essential legislation for the 70,000+ children in Berks County.

Please let us know how we can support you by contacting us at any time if we can be of assistance or if you need additional information. Thanks again!

Sincerely,

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**BERKS COUNTY
COLA**

Committee on Legislative Action

THE ISSUE:

Mandated Training

As stated in the Public School Code, school district personnel are required to participate in mandatory trainings in a variety of critically important topics. However, the cumulative impact on time, for training, tracking, and management requires school administrators to continually revisit how to provide the mandated training in a thorough and efficient manner. Addressing the number of mandated training hours is essential. **Ultimately, taxpayers are the ones paying educators' salaries and subsequently are paying for all mandated trainings.**

PRIORITY:
Provide access to a high-quality education for the 70,000+ students in Berks County

TARGETED ADVOCACY AREA: MANDATED TRAINING

DATA
POINTS

\$3 million

spent annually by Berks County school districts on mandated training

\$685

spent per educator on mandated training each year

27

TRAININGS
required by law
for PA educators

15%

INCREASE
of training hours devoted to
fulfilling state mandates
SINCE 2021

Data points provided are from the 2022-2023 school year to date.

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KEY TALKING POINTS | POLICY PRIORITIES

- **Mandated trainings are time-consuming for school districts**, not only for those participating in the trainings, but also for those responsible for the coordination, management, and tracking of training sessions.
- There is a layering effect to this legislation as more mandated training hours are being added each year. **Currently there are 27 trainings required by law for educators in Pennsylvania, totaling 13 hours.** Most recently, three hours of mandated trainings required annually were added in 2022 to address School Safety and Security.
- Based on the number of hours, Berks County school districts are **spending a combined \$3.0 million annually** on mandated training for employees.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS | IDEAS FOR MOVING FORWARD | ACTION NEEDED

- **Provide a framework and proposed components for each mandate.** There is no question that all of the required trainings are critically important, but rather than focusing on the amount of time spent on each training, the emphasis should be on the required content to be addressed. This will allow school districts to retain a greater local control while still following the state's guidance. It will also alleviate the time spent on tracking and management of hours.
- **Consider the impact on educators of additional trainings.** Acknowledging that there will certainly be additional topics in the future that merit mandated trainings, legislators are encouraged to consider the layering effect on the time of educators and district personnel including the subsequent cost to taxpayers for any future mandated trainings. Relief from mandated hourly requirements can help to save school districts' and taxpayers' money.



BEHAVIORAL + MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

CRISIS PREVENTION + RESPONSE

Crisis Management Flight Team

The Berks County Crisis Management Flight Team provides counseling and emotional support to schools in Berks County. The team is comprised of 159 dedicated local counselors, psychologists, teachers, and administrators who provide support to students when crisis events occur within the school or community. The Flight Team is designed to provide immediate aid to promote healthy coping skills and referrals for more intensive care. The Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU) partners with the Berks County Office of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities (MH/DD) to support school Flight Team requests. MH/DD coordinates the Emergency Behavioral Health (EBH) team.



**B E R K S
C O U N T Y**
crisis management

Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG)

The BCIU's CSTAG training team provides professional development on Threat Assessment to Berks County schools and community agencies that provide services to students. CSTAG is an evidence-based model for schools to use in conducting threat assessments and identifying interventions in K-12 schools. This model equips school-based teams with a legal and mental health framework to address threats made by students in schools.

PREPaRE Training Curriculum

The BCIU provides training through the PREPaRE Model, 3rd Edition curriculum, developed by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). The PREPaRE training curriculum emphasizes preparation and crisis team activities across five mission phases of a crisis: prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery. The PREPaRE model includes two workshops for school teams and professionals:

- Comprehensive School Safety Planning: Prevention Through Recovery (WS 1)
- Mental Health Crisis Interventions: Responding to Acute Traumatic Stressors in Schools (WS 2)

PREPaRE emphasizes the following set of hierarchical and sequential activities, which are highlighted in the program acronym: Prevent, Reaffirm, Evaluate, Provide and Respond, and Examine.

These workshops are designed for school mental health professionals and educators who are members of school district crisis response teams.

FOR
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BEHAVIORAL+ MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

PARTNERSHIPS + PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Student Assistance Program (SAP) Coordination

The BCIU coordinates and facilitates SAP team collaboration meetings for both Elementary and Secondary SAP teams in all 18 Berks County school districts. SAP teams are designed to assist in identification and intervention of the following barriers to student success: alcohol, tobacco, drugs, mental health concerns, and other barriers to school attendance and participation.

11,562

student assistance referrals were reported by Berks County schools in 2022-2023

The Berks County SAP data in 2022-2023 indicates that 3.7% of referrals made to SAP teams are related to suicide ideation, gestures, or attempts.

Mental health assessments through the SAP can lead to recommendations for school-based or community-based mental health services, psychiatric outpatient services, partial hospitalizations, in-patient treatment, or referrals for crisis intervention.

Berks County Student and School Support Networks

The BCIU supports school mental health professionals through the coordination of job-alike groups for social workers and homeschool visitors, school climate teams, and student assistance professionals. These job-alike groups offer opportunities for professional development and networking for school-based service providers.

Interagency Collaboration

BCIU and school leaders actively participate in community and interagency work groups to address the complex social and mental health needs of children and adults within the community. These efforts include committees such as:

- Child and Adolescent Services System Programs (CASSP)
- Berks Initiative for School Attendance (BISA)
- Pennsylvania Association of Student Assistance Professionals (PASAP)
- Suicide Prevention Task Force (ruOK? Berks)
- Berks Opioid Coalition

The BCIU supports educators, school mental health professionals, and leaders to enhance mental health awareness in schools as well as equip individuals to support early identification and intervention of mental health challenges through the following training programs:

Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR)

Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) is an interactive, best practices, and evidence-based training to help guide a person on how to ask the suicide question, persuade the person to get help, and then encourage them to seek appropriate professional support.

Youth Mental Health First Aid

Youth Mental Health First Aid is designed to teach individuals how to help an adolescent (age 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or addictions challenge or is in crisis. The course introduces common mental health challenges for youth and teaches a five-step action plan for how to help young people in both crisis and non-crisis situations.


Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)

The ASIST workshop teaches participants to recognize when someone may have thoughts of suicide and work with them to create a plan that will address and support their immediate safety. Participants learn to use a suicide intervention model to identify someone at risk with thoughts of suicide, seek a shared understanding of reasons for their wanting to take their own life, develop a safe plan based upon a review of risk, be prepared to do follow-up, and become a part of a suicide-safer community that they support.

THE ISSUE:

In today's education environment, there has been an increase in personnel shortages within our schools. All areas of education personnel have reported concerns regarding securing qualified staff; however, **the impact on special education and related services has been more pronounced in Berks County.**

We are not able to keep pace with the number of educators who are choosing to leave the profession, even with additional emphasis on retaining current staff members. The talent pipeline is limited and while we continue to strategize and implement unique recruitment efforts, certain positions continue to be difficult to staff.



PRIORITY:
To provide high-quality education programs and services to the 70,000+ students in Berks County

GOALS:

1. To retain and recruit quality staff in a competitive job market
2. To ensure qualified staff with the necessary skills are in the appropriate assignment to produce desired outcomes
3. To monitor and control organization financial stability / vitality

December 2023

PERSONNEL SHORTAGES



2023-2024 BERKS COUNTY IMPACT

Berks County K-12 Schools, CTCs, and BCIU Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services

November 1, 2023 – Snapshot

	TOTAL POSITIONS	TOTAL VACANCIES	VACANCY RATE 2022	VACANCY RATE 2023
Special Education Paraeducators	1,279	372	22.64%	29.90%
School Psychologists	82	22	17.14%	26.83%
Speech Language Pathologists	94	23	16.05%	24.47%
Special Education K-5	305	23	7.23%	7.54%
Special Education 6-8	204	29	13.36%	14.22%
Special Education 9-12	216	20	11.34%	9.26%
Special Education Administrators	45	4	7.89%	8.89%
Hearing Impaired PreK-12	10	1	0%	10%
Occupational Therapists	20	1	0%	5%
Physical Therapists	6	1	0%	16.67%

PERSONNEL SHORTAGES



2023-2024
**BERKS COUNTY
IMPACT**

ADVOCACY ASK:

- Support legislation that affords school entities various options to revitalize the educator pipeline (e.g., paid apprenticeship and scholarship programs, paid internship opportunities, stipends, and increases for professional and support staff).
- Consider legislation to incentivize college graduates and other practitioners to enter the teaching profession and other school professional positions.
- Review Pennsylvania's current certification pathways to determine if alternative routes are viable.
- Ensure timely processing of educator certification for new graduates and consider granting reciprocity in certification for educators holding credentials in states other than Pennsylvania.
- Ensure schools have adequate resources for salaries and benefits that are competitive with private industry.
- Continue to permit use of Classroom Monitors to support adequate staffing patterns in school programs.

Classroom Monitors

Classroom Monitor permits allow an individual meeting defined requirements to deliver assignments that are preplanned by a professional or temporary professional employee. Classroom Monitors supplement the limited available substitutes. Often the familiar classroom paraprofessional obtains the permit and can then lead the class when the permanent classroom teacher is out; thus, providing seamless student instruction.



STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATOR RECRUITMENT

Employee Referral Incentives

Recruitment Incentives

Partnerships with Local Universities

Education Job Fairs at Local Universities

Expansion of Internship Opportunities

Increased Marketing of Vacancies

Adjustment of Entry Rates and Education Incentives

Creating Pathways for Support Staff to Become Educators

MENTAL HEALTH FUNDING

TARGETED ADVOCACY AREA

THE ISSUE:

Cross-Systems Mental Health Funding

PRIORITY:

To support the social and emotional well-being of students through sustained and enhanced access to school and community-based mental health services and supports



BERKS COUNTY
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17.3%

OF STUDENTS REPORTED THEY ENGAGED IN SELF-HARM.

10.4%

OF STUDENTS REPORTED THEY ATTEMPTED SUICIDE.

WHEN ASKED,

40.5%

OF STUDENTS SAID THEY FELT DEPRESSED OR SAD.

17.9%

OF STUDENTS REPORTED THEY SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED SUICIDE.

PAYS SURVEY

2021 data from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey Berks County Report.

12,415 students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 participated.

The mental health and well-being of the more than 70,000 students we serve in Berks County are a shared responsibility of the greater community. At the forefront of that initiative are our schools which play a critical role in supporting children's mental health and whole-person development. Academics and healthy emotions, habits, and relationships are all intertwined. Many students' mental health diagnoses are first identified in schools, and schools are often where students are first connected to mental health services and support.

Because schools are integral to children's healthy development, funding local mental health resources to support our education system and student needs in Berks County is vital.

BARRIERS

to mental health services

- Wait lists / Community staffing shortages
- Complexities within family systems
- Lack of awareness or knowledge of how to access systems of care
- Availability of transportation
- Costs / Insurance issues*

*e.g., no insurance, limitations to private insurance, authorizations, out-of-pocket costs

2022-2023

11,562

BERKS COUNTY STUDENTS

were referred to the Student Assistance Program (SAP) for support.

6,012

STUDENTS WERE REFERRED DUE TO SOCIAL OR BEHAVIORAL CONCERNS.

5,605

STUDENTS RECEIVED AT LEAST ONE RECOMMENDED SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT OR SERVICE.*

2,017

STUDENTS ACCESSED A RECOMMENDED COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT OR SERVICE.**

*School-based services may include academic support, school team supports, group intervention, one-to-one counseling, social work services, crisis intervention, or alternative placements.

**Community-based supports may include mental health, drug and alcohol, or children and youth services.

ACT 55 OF 2022

- The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) administered **\$95 million for School Safety and Security Program grants specifically focused on school-based mental health initiatives.**
- The grants are designed to support projects such as risk and threat assessment, violence prevention curricula and programs, counseling services, professional learning and training, mental health screening, trauma-informed approaches, and coordinated cross-system partnerships.
- **The grant project period runs from August 1, 2022, through July 31, 2024, limiting sustainability.**

ACT 80 OF 2012

- Act 80 allowed for the creation of the Human Services Block Grant which provides for **greater flexibility for spending between mental health, developmental disability, drug and alcohol, and other social service allocations.**
- The funds provide community-based mental health, behavioral health, drug and alcohol, and additional social services.
- Since 2012, the mental health allocation under the **Human Services Block Grant has been reduced by 10% with no restoration to those funding levels.**

KEY TALKING POINTS

- The PCCD provides \$3,024,163 of funding to Berks County schools **for mental health projects over two years.**
- Berks County schools plan to use funds to:
 - Provide counseling services (67%).
 - Implement violence prevention programs (67%).
 - Support early identification and intervention for mental health (67%).
 - Invest in coordination of local and county mental health services (43%).
 - Provide training and resources for school personnel in areas such as trauma-informed approaches, early identification and intervention, and positive behavior support (33%).

- **The Block Grant** provides the following supports and services to youth and Berks County schools:
 - Student Assistance Program support
 - Prevention programs such as Kids Against Pressure, etc.
 - Coordination of service
 - Respite
 - Treatment services for all levels of care for uninsured
 - Crisis intervention and emergency services
 - Intake and referral services



**= 10% DECREASE IN
BLOCK GRANT FUNDING**
= 30% INFLATION
**= NO INCREASED FUNDING
FOR HUMAN SERVICES**

\$ Investments in both the PCCD Safety and Security and Human Services Block Grants are needed to improve cross-system coordination and integration of supports for students and families.

OUR ADVOCACY ASK

- **Continue state funding** of school safety and mental health projects beyond grant end on July 31, 2024, to sustain current initiatives across school districts, intermediate units, and career and technology centers.
- **Ensure timely review** of plans and distribution of state-allocated funds to school entities to allow for appropriate planning and provision of local school-based mental health services.
- **Afford school entities local discretion and flexibility** in use of mental health funds by eliminating the tiered structure currently outlined in Article XIII-B.
- **Increase funding** allocated for the Human Services Block Grant to:
 - **Improve strategies to connect families** to all levels of mental health care.
 - **Increase funding** of prosocial and prevention programming.
 - **Expand Student Assistance Programs** available in school buildings.
 - Expand and strengthen **suicide prevention and mental health crisis services.**



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October 2023

