

BEYOND THE MASK

Promoting Transformation and Healing in School Reopening

AUTHENTIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

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THE CHALLENGE

Schools should prioritize authentic student engagement when designing school-based mental health services. Student leaders should design and lead programming around mental health literacy, helping to destigmatize accessing mental health services.

The U.S. Department of Education required each state to submit a reopening plan outlining how they were using and planned on using [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief \(ESSER\) funds](#). The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) conducted an analysis of 37 state plans to better understand if and how schools were authentically engaging students in the design and implementation of their reopening plans.

While states were required to solicit stakeholder feedback in developing their reopening plans, including feedback from students, in general, states are not authentically engaging young people around school-based mental health. States and districts should be intentional about consulting with students in developing mental health services and programs, especially given that stakeholders listed mental health as their primary concern.



HOW DID STATES ENGAGE STUDENTS IN THEIR REOPENING PLANS?

The U.S. Department of Education did not specify how states should solicit student feedback when developing their reopening plan. Different states used different approaches, which are described in the chart below.

METHOD	STATES	SPOTLIGHT
Consulted with a specific pre-existing student advisory council in their state	Connecticut Kentucky Massachusetts Minnesota New York Oklahoma Oregon Rhode Island	By law, Oregon is required to engage students, particularly students who have historically experienced disparities. Michigan has an anti-racism student advisory council. Other states, like Kentucky, have statewide student advisory councils.
Invited students to join listening sessions or stakeholder feedback groups	District of Columbia (D.C.) Delaware Idaho Illinois Louisiana Maine New Hampshire New Mexico New York	New York had a dedicated virtual forum for students, which was attended by over 100 students. New Hampshire and Idaho both created a new student workgroup to advise on reopening. D.C. noted students from all eight wards were represented in their focus groups.
Sent a survey to multiple stakeholder groups, including students	Delaware Georgia New Mexico South Carolina Texas	Most states did not specify how many students completed the survey. In New Mexico, only 2 percent of respondents were students. New Mexico and Delaware sent a survey in addition to other engagement methods.
Consulted with advisory groups, but did not specify if students were included in those groups	South Dakota Utah Washington	
Mentioned student feedback as part of the process, but did not specify how they engaged students	Hawaii Idaho	
Did not specify how they engaged students	Alaska Arkansas Indiana Kansas Missouri Montana Nevada New Jersey North Carolina North Dakota Tennessee West Virginia Wyoming	

KEY RECOMMENDATION: PRIORITIZE AUTHENTIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Soliciting feedback from young people is a key strategy for ensuring youth-friendly services. Youth-friendly services are accessible, equitable, appropriate, confidential, and safe. Authentically engaging young people requires youth partnering with adults as active decision-makers. It is based on mutual trust, respect, and values. Importantly, young people must be equal partners in determining both their own care and the design and direction of programs and activities. Their ideas should be respected and listened to by adult partners.ⁱ

Schools should view youth leadership opportunities through the lens of positive youth development (PYD). PYD assumes young people are active agents working in partnership with adults and that all youth have the capacity for positive growth and development. PYD argues for instilling leadership qualities in youth and supporting civic engagement.ⁱⁱ

Schools, particularly middle and high schools, should invest in peer support services, working to train and compensate students who serve as peer support specialists. Student leaders can also design and lead programming around mental health literacy, helping to destigmatize accessing mental health services. Schools should be encouraged to form student advisory boards to drive decision-making around school-based mental health service design and implementation. Many school districts with strong school-based health systems rely on student leadership, including the Los Angeles Unified School District,ⁱⁱⁱ districts across New Mexico,^{iv} and more.

Authentically and equitably engaging student voice requires intentional resources. Student leaders, peer support specialists, and advisory board members should be compensated as experts for their expertise and lived experience. These leadership opportunities should be available and accessible to all students, including by scheduling meetings at youth friendly times, such as after school and during weekends; providing transportation to and from meetings for interested students; considering student childcare needs; compensating students for attending meetings; and providing for other needs, such as offering meals during meetings.

By authentically engaging young people, schools can better understand the unique mental health challenges of their students and their preferred and needed mental health supports. Young people should drive what investments are made.

ENDNOTES

[i] <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2020/06/CLASP%20REPORT%20-FINAL.pdf>

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] TheIatrust.org

[iv] <https://www.nmasbhc.org/>