

MEMO:

TO: Boston Public Schools, General Court of Massachusetts, and Gov. Charlie Baker

FROM: Educators for Excellence Teacher Action Team

DATE: April 4th, 2018

SUBJECT: Policy Recommendations for Creating Trauma-Informed Schools

The Need

Educators across the state have voiced concern that students are entering classrooms with various forms of trauma, stemming from experiences such as homelessness, threats of deportation, bullying and/or familial incarceration. Yet, schools educating the most vulnerable populations tend to have counseling and psychological staff ratios that are well above recommended 1:250 counselor-to-student ratio by the American Counseling Association. For example, in Boston Public Schools, for 1,272 students there is only one licensed counselor.

Educators for Excellence-Boston (E4E-Boston), a teacher-led organization, surveyed more than 1,000 Massachusetts educators. Ninety-one percent stated that student trauma poses a major challenge in the classroom. When schools aren't equipped with adequate mental health professionals, it becomes more difficult for students to focus on their learning. **Educators from across the state would like to see an investment in more counseling and psychological staff in schools, especially in districts serving the most vulnerable populations of students.** This memo outlines how educators would like to see Massachusetts and Boston Public Schools make adequate student mental health supports a reality.

In order to adequately meet the staffing needs of schools, we need change at both the state and city-level.

The Solutions

E4E-Boston recommends taking the following actions at the state and city-level:

Advocacy at the state-level:

- **Modernize the state education funding formula to include a calculation for guidance and psychological staff:** Educators across the state agree that it is time to update the state funding formula, which was last updated in 1993. The current formula greatly underfunds schools serving the most vulnerable populations; this makes hiring mental health support staff for students difficult for schools. As such, educators would like to see Chapter 70 revised to include school guidance staff and psychological staff allotment.

- **Ensure that the FY19 Massachusetts State budget passes with a line item for guidance and psychological staff:** While conversations around how to best update Chapter 70 continue, it is essential that state legislators act in the best interest of students now and create funding in the annual state budget for guidance and psychological staff. School funding calculations at the state level should move toward accounting for student risk indexes such as homelessness, substance abuse, and incidents of community violence. Many districts implement this practice to disseminate school funding to schools, but educators would like to see this measure included at the state funding level.

Advocacy at the city-level:

- **Recommit to the Boston Teachers Union Contractual agreement to make every effort to ensure that the citywide ratio of guidance counselors shall be 1:300 (high schools); 1:400 (middle schools).** In addition to investing in counseling staff in the upper grades, educators recommend a commitment to lower grades as well. Research shows that the child's early years are critical for brain development and thus, the optimal time to buffer the impact of trauma. Therefore, Boston Public Schools must also make every effort to ensure elementary students are also able to access guidance and psychological services with a public commitment to hire additional counseling and psychological staff.
- **Prioritize social and emotional health by incorporating in the BPS weighted formula:** In order to best serve students experiencing trauma, schools must have the funding to hire more mental health professionals. Boston Public Schools should leverage student data or begin to collect specific student mental health data in order to ensure schools serving the most vulnerable students have adequate mental health staff.
- **Incentivize schools to use funding to hire for mental health support staff:** As educators, we know that there are currently too few full-time mental health staff, whether that be counselors, psychologists, or social workers, in schools that need them the most. While schools should maintain their autonomy to hire staff, the district must create provisions that encourage schools to hire full time mental health staff to serve the needs of their specific student population.