**RSAI 2021 Legislative Priority:
Assessing and Addressing Staff/Student Social, Emotional and Behavioral Health**

**Background:** Mental health challenges for students have increased in all school districts in Iowa, including rural schools. The following statistics from: *A Strategic Plan for a Children’s Mental Health Redesign in Iowa* [*DRAFT*](https://www.namigdm.org/documents/resources/Final_Document_A2BABAF6FDF28.pdf) , are compelling:

* Over 20% of children have a seriously debilitating mental illness during their lifetime.
* Over 45% of children have had any mental illness.
* Half of all lifelong cases of mental illness begin by age 14 (75% by age 24).
* 80% of children who need mental health treatment never receive treatment.
* 50% of youth in the child welfare system have a mental illness.
* Treatment works. Treatment of mental illness reduces disability, leads to recovery and is most effective during the brain’s development from birth to age 26.

**Provider Shortage:** [Iowa Capitol Dispatch](https://iowacapitaldispatch.com/2020/11/23/iowans-must-fight-again-for-state-support-of-mental-health/) reported on Nov. 23, 2020, “One in five Iowans is likely to be affected by a mental health challenge in a normal year. In 2020, that estimate has increased to one in four, according to [*NAMI Iowa’s strategic plan*](https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn%3aaaid%3ascds%3aUS%3a59cd9208-a039-49d4-9777-0f84734117bc&emci=002e7ea1-a02b-eb11-9fb4-00155d43b2cd&emdi=170092eb-a02b-eb11-9fb4-00155d43b2cd&ceid=2261064#pageNum=1). But Iowa continues to fall far short of the number of mental health providers needed to address the need. The state ranks 48th overall in the provision of mental health services, according to NAMI Iowa, with fewer than 100 psychiatrists accepting clients in the state.”

# Impact on School: Chronic Absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or 18 days a school year. Children with mental illness are more likely to miss school due to depression or anxiety, and are then more likely to miss school to get needed mental health care. According to the American Academy of Pediatricians[, School Attendance, Truancy & Chronic Absenteeism: What Parents Need to Know](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/school/Pages/School-Attendance-Truancy-Chronic-Absenteeism.aspx), “**Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are less likely to read on grade level by the third grade.**For older students, being chronically absent is strongly associated with failing at school―even more than low grades or test scores. When absences add up, these students are more likely to be suspended and drop out of high school. Chronic absenteeism is also linked with teen substance use, as well as poor health as adults.”

**Recent Strides:** Unless a student is receiving special education services, and the IEP so authorizes, mental health treatment at school is not funded. Such services are often not readily available in rural communities, requiring time away from school or no service at all. Thankfully, the 2020 Iowa Legislature approved schools as originating sites for virtual mental health counseling. The hope is to minimize absenteeism and get students the help they need while at school, when virtual telehealth counseling is appropriate for their challenges. Although welcome, this will not be sufficient for Iowa’s neediest students.

The 2019 Legislature created a structure for children’s mental health services. In 2020, the Legislature and Governor approved [SF 2360](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=88&ba=sf2360) Classroom Management/ Therapeutic Classrooms. This legislation sets up a grant process for additional therapeutic classrooms. Both of these efforts require funding to be successful. An appropriation of $2.1 million to the Iowa AEAs to provide mental health awareness training for educators must also continue.

**COVID Impact:** School closures and hybrid instructional models, family job loss, quarantine requirements and illness are all potential stressors increasing the mental health challenges of students, parents and staff members. The need to continue this important work is more urgent than ever.

**Assessing and Addressing Staff/Student Social, Emotional and Behavioral Health:** RSAI supports access to and funding for mental health services for children and supports for staff. July 1, 2020 Return-to-Learn Plans required school leaders to determine how to meet an increased demand for social-emotional supports anticipated due to school closure. RSAI thanks the Legislature and Governor for addressing telehealth services at school without creating an undue administrative burden for schools and the addition of a social worker position to operational sharing. Despite these advances, our educators are neither prepared nor qualified to become providers of mental health services for children. Iowa needs to address a shortage of qualified mental health professionals and provide resources over the next two years for local districts to determine how best to train school staff based on a local assessment of need and consideration of local community tools and capacity to collaborate for a collective solution.