



BOARD OF TRUSTEES

February 11, 2025

COMMITTEE: Senate Finance Committee

BILL: SB 486 – School Health and Wellness Personnel Assessment and Maryland Council on Advancement of School-Based Health Centers

POSITION: Support with amendments

The Horizon Foundation is the largest independent health philanthropy in Maryland. We are committed to a Howard County free from systemic inequities, where all people can live abundant and healthy lives.

The Foundation is pleased to support SB 486 – School Health and Wellness Personnel Assessment and Maryland Council on Advancement of School-Based Health Centers. This bill would require the Maryland State Department of Education and the Maryland Department of Health to conduct an annual assessment of school health and wellness personnel – which includes positions such as nurses, social workers, psychologists and more – to get data on staff-student ratios, identify vacancies and gain feedback on strategies to recruit and retain workers.

The Horizon Foundation has worked with the Howard County Public School System over the last several years to expand school-based, enhanced mental health supports, including 1:1 student counseling services, to all schools. Though tremendous progress has been made, work remains to ensure this program is fully and effectively implemented throughout all Howard County public schools. Utilizing both school social workers and community-based mental health providers, thousands of students have been served through this program since it began, including over 800 students just in the first quarter of this current school year. However, more students remain on waiting lists and nationwide staffing shortages have resulted in very high staff-student ratios – currently, over 2000 students per one school social worker.

These issues in our schools reflect the larger shortage of behavioral health workers that Maryland has been experiencing for many years. There are simply not enough providers in Maryland to meet our residents' mental and behavioral health needs. In fact, a recent report commissioned by the Maryland Health Care Commission found that Maryland needs to attract 30,000 new behavioral health workers in order to meet unmet needs and to account for current workers expected to retire, leave the state or leave the field in the next several years.ⁱ Recruiting and retaining personnel who can provide these services for students is critical.

Christopher Fortune
CHAIR

Lisa Pearson
VICE CHAIR

Gopi Suri
SECRETARY

Mark Cissell
TREASURER

Nikki Highsmith Vernick
PRESIDENT & CEO

Jonathan Ilson Ahn, Esq.

Yvonne Commodore-
Mensah, Ph.D

Juliet Gilliam

Catherine Hamel

Brian Hepburn, M.D.

Louis Hutt III

Sekou Murphy

Yvette Rooks, M.D.

Scott Rose

Celián Valero-Colón, M.D.

David Wolf

Lanlan Xu, Ph.D

Like many communities across the country, mental and behavioral health needs in Howard County have been on the rise and barriers remain to ensuring robust and equitable access to care. In our county’s most recent health assessment, the number of residents who reported experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety jumped significantly compared to the last survey in 2018, and only 16% reported receiving some type of treatment.ⁱⁱ We also continue to see stark racial disparities in mental health. In the same survey, Black and Hispanic residents were much more likely than their White counterparts to report feeling a lack of interest or pleasure in doing things – as were residents with low income – in addition to feelings of being down, depressed or hopeless. There is also growing research that shows chronic stress and trauma due to racism exacerbates mental and behavioral health challenges for people of color.

SB 486 would help us get needed data around the health and wellness workforce in our schools with the goal of recruiting and retaining personnel to meet the growing needs of our students. To help achieve this goal, we suggest two amendments to the bill language as written:

1. **In the assessment conducted by MSDE and MDH, require that the data gathered about current school health and wellness personnel be disaggregated by race and ethnicity.** This will help discern whether school providers represent the diversity of the student population and help ensure that schools provide more culturally competent care as they seek to recruit and retain personnel.
2. **Include “community providers who deliver school-based mental health services to students during the school day” in the definition of school health and wellness personnel.** This will help ensure that community mental health providers, in addition to social workers and psychologists that are school system employees, are included in the data gathered for the assessment.

We strongly believe everyone, including our students, should have access to compassionate and culturally competent mental health care. For this reason, the Horizon Foundation **SUPPORTS SB 486** and urges a **FAVORABLE** report **WITH AMENDMENTS**.

Thank you for your consideration.

ⁱ <https://marylandmatters.org/2024/12/02/maryland-needs-another-30000-behavioral-health-workers-to-meet-growing-demand/>

ⁱⁱ Howard County Health Assessment Survey, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.hclhic.org/community/data>