

An Act to create a thriving public health response for adolescents H.2084 (Representative Decker)



What problem does this bill address?

Schools often serve as a place where these needs are identified and treated. However, many schools do not have enough resources to address the behavioral health needs of *all* students and are often under-equipped to support the needs of Black and brown students whose behaviors are subject to punitive measures like suspension and expulsion at greater rates than their white peers. These issues have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the strains it has put on the children's behavioral health system. **The Commonwealth must be prepared to support the behavioral health needs of children living through an unprecedented period in history.**

What difference will this bill make?

This bill addresses several root causes of inequitable access to school based behavioral health (SBBH) by establishing systems and protocols for creating and maintaining SBBH resources and ensuring the behavioral health needs of all students are supported:

- **A School-Based Behavioral Health Advisory Council.** The council will provide formal guidance for the implementation of multi-tiered systems of behavioral health promotion, prevention, and intervention in Massachusetts school districts with a focus on eliminating systemic inequities and disparities in access to SBBH.
- A statewide, regionalized **Technical Assistance Center** providing consultation, coaching, and training to assist school districts in implementing behavioral health systems.
- **Behavioral health crisis plans** in schools that rely on accessing mobile crisis teams as the primary intervention for a student in acute crisis.
- **Protocols for prohibiting or limiting suspension & expulsion of young children from Early Education and Care programs.**

With a focus on equity:

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing behavioral health problems for children and youth with an even more acute impact on Black and brown children from historically disenfranchised communities. This bill creates standards for supporting schools and communities as they address both the emergent and exacerbated behavioral health challenges of Black and brown children.

Why is this bill needed now?

COVID-19 has led to a massive increase in behavioral health need among school-age children and youth. Schools We must prioritize legislation to support the integration and strengthening of behavioral health systems in school now, so schools can be prepared to receive the whole child as they walk through their doors this fall.