

2019 SXSW Edu Session

## Human Touch Meets Human Tech

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**Eve Myers, Consultant, HillCo Partners, Austin, TX**

- I. **The Urgency:** While instances of school violence make the headlines, less media attention is focused on an even more widespread problem: the day-to-day mental health needs of our students are not being met in most schools.
  - a. Federal Commission on School Safety Report noted that “approximately 1 in 10 children and youth in the US experience a serious emotional disturbance (SED), yet only 20 percent of them get the help they need.”
  - b. Data from the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and prevention) show that between 2007 and 2015, suicide rates increased among both young men and women aged 15-19 — an increase of 31% for men and 40% for women.
  - c. According to the Commission report, “school principals report that student mental health needs are one of their biggest challenges.” Educators report increases in bullying, anxiety, depression, and social isolation, leading to increases in discipline referrals and absences.
  - d. Schools are not required to have counselors, and many do not due to lack of funding, while those that do, often share them between multiple campuses. Counselors have many other routine duties that may take time away from providing mental health support to students.
  - e. Students who are not mentally healthy are not achieving at their highest potential.
- II. **Potential Solutions:** School safety is a priority issue in Texas for our governor, legislature, and Commissioner of Education. There’s a consensus that providing mental health services for students is an essential component of school safety.
  - a. **Providing additional funding:**
    - i. Commissioner Morath’s funding request included an exceptional item for \$54.5M for Safe & Healthy Schools. Two of the four pillars of Safe &

Healthy Schools, according to the request, are Mental Health Supports and Positive School Culture. (The other two are Facility Safety & Emergency Response Coordination.)

- ii. State Rep. Dr. Greg Bonnen, whose district includes Santa Fe, TX, has filed a bill calling for a School Safety Allotment of \$50/student. The bill calls for the funds to be spent in 3 broad categories: improving facilities, providing more personnel, and providing training. The training component includes training programs related to prevention and treatment of childhood trauma.
- b. **Expanding Access to Mental Health Services:** Gov. Abbott’s School Safety plan announced this summer called for additional counselors, recognizing the need for more support. But when a counselor identifies an at-risk student in need of intensive intervention, it may take weeks or even months for the student or family to see a mental healthcare professional—and in rural areas and even some urban areas, transportation may make help inaccessible.
- i. Last week, the House Committee on Education heard several bills related to school safety, including SB 1981, calling for school-based health clinics, with the goal of reducing absenteeism and helping students reach their full academic potential.
  - ii. Sen. Jane Nelson has proposed SB 10, which would increase access to improved mental healthcare. Medical hubs would provide support systems for public schools by bringing together doctors & pediatricians, mental healthcare professionals, social services, and universities in a collaborative network. This bill has already been voted out of committee.
- c. **Integrating telemedicine and technology solutions:** New technology solutions, such as texting or video conferencing, can significantly expand access to mental health resources. Again, Gov. Abbott recognized this, calling for an expansion of telemedicine in his School Safety plan.
- i. SB 10 also calls for using telemedicine to create TCHAT, Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine. This would potentially provide every region of the state access to assessments and intervention for at-risk students using telemedicine.

III. **Other states are currently either implementing or considering some of these same solutions.** For example, both Connecticut and Pennsylvania implemented school safety

and mental health initiatives that dramatically reduced suspensions, expulsions, and risks associated with depression, according to the Federal Commission Report. Let's explore two solutions that are currently being used in Texas schools.

<https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf>