

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Work in progress: Audit description

Evaluating Washington's Prevention and Early Intervention Efforts in Students' Behavioral Health

Behavioral health encompasses both mental health and substance use disorders. In Washington, crisis intervention and inpatient care have been the focus of attention in recent years. However, fewer than 2 percent of people with behavioral health disorders need inpatient care. Research shows that prevention and early intervention efforts can reduce the need for crisis and inpatient care and associated long-term care costs, while improving patients' quality of life. Stakeholders emphasize the need to close gaps in services, particularly in prevention and early intervention.

Prevention: Activities to enhance a person's psychological well-being and resilience to cope with adversity, while reducing stigma and increasing awareness of behavioral health disorders

Early intervention: Activities focused on early detection and treatment to reduce the progression of behavioral health disorders

The federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states that almost 21 percent of children and adolescents have a diagnosable mental health or substance use disorder, which can interfere with the way they think, feel and act. Half of those with mental health disorders will show symptoms by age 14. If not addressed, these problems may interfere with learning and their ability to form and sustain friendships, increase risky behaviors, and contribute to disciplinary problems. Recent performance audits and a 2016 survey of schools revealed an increased need for access to mental health services for school-age children.

Schools are well positioned and can play a critical role in both identifying and connecting students with the services they need. Research shows early identification and treatment improves outcomes. Although state law designates the Health Care Authority (HCA) as the state authority for behavioral health, others also provide these services, including the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Educational Service Districts (ESDs), and counties.

Preliminary scope and objectives

This audit will evaluate current prevention and early intervention efforts in behavioral health for students by asking these questions:

- Are there opportunities for HCA, OSPI, ESDs and school districts to better identify and connect Washington students to needed services?
- Can state agencies, counties, ESDs and school districts reduce barriers to accessing these services and improve coordination of them?

Timing: Work on this audit has been delayed by issues surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. We plan to publish the audit results in early summer 2021.



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