

**To:** Senator Nicole Boyd  
**From:** Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows  
**Subject:** Recommendations for Mental Health & Wellness Legislation  
**Date:** December 21, 2021



Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows recognize the importance of addressing the mental health needs of students and teachers who have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. By requiring the adoption of mental health and wellness plans, setting minimum standards for mental health assessments and trainings, and ensuring that students have access to important resources, policy makers can help Mississippi public schools meet the needs of students and teachers.

## Mississippi Faces a Mental Health Emergency

In October, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) joined other child and adolescent health organizations in declaring a [national emergency in children's mental health](#). This declaration is consistent with the strong concerns shared by Mississippi teachers over the last two years. In a [survey conducted by Teach Plus Mississippi](#) in the Spring of 2020, over 2,500 teachers spoke of the impact COVID-19 has had on the social, emotional, and mental health of their students and colleagues. They recognize that students have been exposed to COVID-related illness and deaths, economic hardship, isolation, and harmful environments. Teachers also spoke of the ways that school leaders and policy makers could support the students and teachers, including:

**Training and Development** for teachers and staff,

**Mental Health Resources** for students and teachers, and

**Greater Access to Mental and Behavioral Health Providers**, including counselors, social workers, and therapists.

## Recommendations for Mental Health & Wellness Legislation

Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows are pleased that SB 2269 (2021), the “Trauma-Informed Act” will be re-introduced during the 2022 Legislative Session. The legislation would address many of the social, emotional, and mental health needs of our students and teachers. Our teacher leaders have also identified opportunities to amend the legislation to build legislative support and better meet the needs of Mississippi students and teachers.

### **ONE: Require the creation of a “Mental Health & Wellness Team” for each district.**

Shifting the focus of these teams from a “Trauma-Informed Team” (as they were titled under the original legislation) to a “Mental Health & Wellness Team” will enable school counselors, educators, and other staff members to not only focus on responding to the mental health impact of the pandemic, but also on taking proactive steps to promote mental health for students and teachers. Other recommendations include:

- + Require each public school district and public charter school or charter school district to establish a Mental Health & Wellness Team while giving districts the option of establishing school-level teams.

- + Ensure that Mental Health & Wellness teams have at least one member at the elementary (K-5), middle (6-8) and high school (9-12) levels.
- + Stipulate that the Mental Health & Wellness Team shall be responsible for
  - + Developing and implementing a mental health and wellness plan for their schools which should address the needs of both students and teachers;
  - + Conduct an inventory of mental health resources, services, and providers in the community; and
  - + Developing school and district-level recommendations for supporting the mental health needs of teachers

**TWO: Set minimum standards for assessing student mental health.**

Each district’s Mental Health & Wellness plan must include a strategy to assess the mental health of students through a combination of formal mental health screeners and the adoption of periodic mental health wellness checks. This plan should require:

- + The adoption of a mental health screener from an approved list from the Mississippi Department of Education;
- + A process for conducting informal mental health checks for all students at least once a semester as part of the Mental Health & Wellness plan; and
- + A mental health screener for any student recommended for corporal punishment, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, alternative settings, or expulsion.

**THREE: Set minimum requirements for mental health trainings for school and district staff.**

Mental Health & Wellness Plans should include training and/or development for staff members on social, emotional, and mental health issues. The training, guidance, and assistance provided to teachers and staff should consist of the following:

- + Recognizing and responding to the symptoms of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction;
- + Identifying mental health challenges and crisis situations, and providing mental health first aid; and
- + Implementation of restorative classroom management and discipline practices.

**FOUR: Ensure that the State Mental Health and Wellness Toolkit includes essential resources and services for students and teachers.**

To support the work of Mental Health & Wellness Teams in creating and implementing their plans to meet the needs of students and teachers, the State Mental Health & Wellness Toolkit provided by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) and the Mississippi Department of Mental Health (MDMH) should include the following resources:

- + Recommended list of formal mental health screeners;
- + Guidance for implementing informal mental health checks;
- + Guidance for conducting an inventory of community mental health resources and providers;
- + Guidance and resources to reduce the risk of suicide in students;
- + Resources to support teacher mental health, including access to counselors and other mental health experts; and
- + Online training and development opportunities related to mental health and wellness.

## Conclusion

Mississippi teachers have witnessed the impact of COVID-19 on student mental health, including marginalized students who live in communities that have faced the most significant loss of life, economic hardship, food, and housing insecurity, and isolation. Students have suffered in multiple ways that continue to widen the academic gap. Teachers and education staff have also been impacted by this insidious pandemic, with few mental health supports and resources. The impact on students and teachers will continue to disrupt teaching and learning until mental health resources and services become more accessible. Our students need and deserve an education system that focuses on both their academic success and social-emotional well-being.

## 2021-22 Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows

**Kimberly Archie**, Jackson Public School District

**Whitney Christenson**, Leflore Legacy Academy

**Shamia Hopper**, Republic Schools

**Valerie Steele**, Rankin County School District

**Earnestine Williams**, Western Line School District

**Alison Rausch**, Prentiss County School District\*

\*Senior Policy Fellow

**Sanford Johnson**, Teach Plus MS Executive Director

### About Teach Plus Mississippi

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing this mission, Teach Plus is guided by the Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.