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Our kids' mental health is suffering. And America's schools aren't ready to help.

ease and diversify school counselors, and ensure that providing mental health priority, then we will fail our youth.

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The U.S. surgeon general's public advisory about the devastating challenges to young people's mental health is a clarion call to increase and diversify the ranks of mental health professionals in our nation's schools.

"The challenges today's generation of young people face are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate," Surgeon General Vivek Murthy wrote in the advisory. "And the effect these challenges have had on their mental health is devastating."

Most school counselors are cisgender white women, which means students of color and students who identify as LGBTQIA+ may struggle to feel safe or understood in the space where such feelings are paramount.

While it is not required that a counselor have similar identities as the students they work with, representation can go a long way in developing therapeutic connection.

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Suicide rates among Black children below age 13 have been increasing rapidly, the advisory states. Black children are nearly twice as likely to die by suicide than white children. And socioeconomically disadvantaged children and adolescents are two to three times more likely to develop mental health conditions than peers with higher socioeconomic status, according to the advisory.

Black children are also more likely to experience grief and trauma due to disproportionality losing loved ones to COVID-19. Latino youth reported higher rates of loneliness, and Asian youth reported increases in stress due to COVID-related hate.

For many of our youth, school is a sanctuary where they are able to receive mental health support and be fully accepted. During the pandemic, many LGBTQIA+ youth lost access to school-based services and were stuck in homes where they were not accepted.

The surgeon general's advisory calls for more school-based mental health support, including increasing the number of counselors so that schools can be within the ratio of 1 counselor to 250 students recommended by the American School Counselor Association.

Counselors unable to help individual students

Even at a 1-to-250 ratio, school counselors do not have the bandwidth to provide ongoing individualized counseling to students. In fact, this is beyond the scope of the school counselors' role.

ASCA recommends that school counselors provide brief individual counseling, which often means providing between six to eight scheduled sessions in an academic year. Many students with more severe mental health concerns will need continued individual treatment.

When I was a school counseling master's intern working in a high school in 2016, four years before the pandemic, I realized that many students needed more individualized mental health care. When I referred students to the clinically licensed mental health therapists who were contracted from agencies to provide ongoing mental health care to students, I found that they often were booked and could not see more students on their caseload.

As an emerging professional in the school counseling field, it was discouraging and heartbreaking to see students fall through the cracks. But it inspired me to work toward getting my independent counseling license so that I could provide longer-term mental health support to youth.

While many counselors and counseling researchers have advocated for increasing the number of counselors in schools, doing so is only one aspect of tending to the youth mental health crisis.

Schools need more minority counselors

The profession needs more school counselors with intersecting identities, including men, racial minorities and LGBTQIA+ counselors. Youth are more likely to trust and seek support from counselors who look like them and have similar experiences.

In addition, school counselors need to have the opportunity to be mental health professionals in the school. Even before the pandemic, research often discussed how school counselors across the nation are tasked with administrative duties that do not align with providing social emotional learning interventions to students and supporting students' career development, academic achievement and mental health.

Many school counselors find themselves being tasked with inappropriate duties such as computing grade point averages, completing data entry, test coordination and building master schedules.

Eliminating such tasks from school counselors' workday will allow them to provide more small group counseling interventions and classroom instruction on various mental health topics like handling stress, recognizing the signs of depression and managing anxiety.

"It would be a tragedy if we beat back one public health crisis only to allow another to grow in its place," the surgeon general's advisory states. "Mental health challenges in children, adolescents, and young adults are real, and they are widespread. But most importantly, they are treatable, and often preventable."

Federal and state stakeholders need to take the surgeon general's advisory as a flashing warning light. If we do not increase and diversify the number of school counselors and school-based mental health therapists, and ensure that providing mental health services is a top priority in their roles, then we will fail to adequately support our youth's mental health.

Ignoring this call to action will have devastating, lasting consequences on a generation of young people.

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