

State Education panel meets in Sterling Heights to address mental-health in schools

Some audience members complain about not being able to speak



Diana Wheatley, left, who works in New Haven Schools social worker and was representing the Michigan Association of School Social Workers, accompanied by Terri Tchorzynski of the Michigan School Counselor Association and Lauren Mangus of the Michigan Association of Psychologists, speaks Monday at a hearing of the state House Education Committee at Sterling Heights High School on 15 Mile Road. Observing is state Rep. Gina Johnson, right, a west Michigan Republican. JAMESON COOK — THE MACOMB DAILY

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PUBLISHED: March 18, 2024 at 7:23 a.m. | UPDATED: March 18, 2024 at 10:14 a.m.

The state needs to reverse a shortage of mental-health professionals in schools to help improve students' feeling of well-being and thereby improve performance.

That was a consensus of a rare hearing of the state House of Representatives Education Committee held last Monday evening outside of Lansing and in a room at Sterling Heights High School, attended by about 75 people.

The purpose of the hearing was to gain input so “lawmakers, experts and community members could come together in a location that would be impacted by the topic at hand: the importance of school mental health care professionals and their essential role in school safety,” and so

lawmakers “can craft smart legislation that will keep kids safe and support our mental health care workers,” said committee Chair Matt Koleszar, a Plymouth Democrat.

A school-safety bill package was introduced shortly after the February 2023 mass shooting at Michigan State University in East Lansing but has not been acted upon. The House School Safety Task Force has been working on the issue since after the Oxford High School mass shooting in November 2021. House Republicans accuse Democrats of delaying action.

Following the hearing, a small group of spectators loudly complained that people who attended the hearing were not able to speak, contrary to what they believed.

Immediately after Koleszar pounded the gavel to close the hearing, a woman who later would only identify herself as “Leanne,” confronted the panel and said, “You said you want to hear from the community but you didn’t give us an opportunity to speak at all. I thought this was a community meeting. You don’t want to hear from the students? You’re walking away. There’s students here that are wishing to speak and you’re ignoring them.”

Barrier to Service Delivery Professional to student ratios	Recommended	Michigan
School Counselors	1:250	1: 693 (40% of US)
School Psychologists	1:500	1:1445
School Social Workers	1:250	1:1051

A chart provided Monday by Lauren Mangus of the Michigan Association of Psychologists on Monday at a state House Education Committee hearing held at Sterling Heights High School. MACOMB DAILY PHOTO

Two Republican state representatives, the panel’s vice chair, Jaime Greene of Richmond, and Donni Steele of Orion Township, agreed the session should’ve lasted longer than 90 minutes and the public should have been allowed to speak.

They said preventing that input undermined the point of holding the meeting in Sterling Heights.

“Everything we did could’ve been done in Lansing. Why have it outside of Lansing? Was it a political stunt?” she said in reference to Democrats, who hold run House committees after grabbing a majority in the last election, though the chamber is at least temporarily deadlocked pending the outcome of two special elections this spring.

Koleszar responded afterward that the hearing could go only 90 minutes because of limited of access to the building.

“While I appreciate and respect the willingness to speak, ... ultimately we did not have more than 1-½ hours,” Koleszar said. “I’m sorry if they (the public) misunderstood.”

He noted the people who testified were from Macomb County and they were allowed to submit a card or document. Minutes from the meeting show that 19 documents or cards were submitted. Of those, 14 were comments and five were requests to speak.

It was the first an Education Committee hearing was held outside of Lansing in at least a decade, Koleszar said.



State Rep. Matthew Koleszar, a Plymouth Democrat, speaks Monday at a hearing of the state House Education Committee, which he chairs, at Sterling Heights High School. JAMESON COOK — THE MACOMB DAILY

“I can’t say enough good things about Sterling Heights High School, the staff and school district at-large,” he said.

Among several people who testified were a trio of professionals representing school counselors, psychologists and social workers.

Lauren Mangus of the Michigan Association of Psychologists provided a chart that showed Michigan’s ratios of professionals in those fields woefully below the recommended ratios. Also, a separate graphic from the American School Counselor Association shows Michigan has the second-worst ratio in the nation, with 598 students for each counselor, second only to Arizona at 667. Vermont has the best ratio, with 177 students per counselor.

“It’s startling,” Koleszar said of the numbers.

Referring to a chart on screen displaying the ratios, Diana Wheatley added, “I think a picture is worth 1,000 words.” She works in New Haven Community Schools as a social worker and was representing the Michigan Association of School Social Workers.

David Meengs, chief academic officer at Warren Consolidated Schools, under which Sterling Heights High School operates, said in his district, the ratio of counselors is one for every 350 to 400 students in the high and middle schools and one for each 350 to 550 students in elementary schools.

Does that feel like enough to you?” said state Rep. Jennifer Conlin, an Ann Arbor Democrat.

“No,” Meengs replied. “My wife is a high school counselor as well and would tell you, ‘No, that is not enough.’”

“I hope there’s something we can do to get those ratios in line,” said state Rep. Nate Shannon, a Sterling Heights Democrat.

More mental-health professionals are needed to help an increased number of students cope with mental-health issues related to things such as bullying and fears over school safety, more so since the COVID-19 pandemic began, officials said.

Mangus, of the Michigan Association of Psychologists, said the number of students reporting mental-health problems has increased from one in six students before the pandemic to one in three since the pandemic.

“The profound impact of the pandemic (on student mental health) we have had to endure can not be overstated,” Meengs said.



Some of the audience watches a state House Education Committee hearing Monday at Sterling Heights High School. JAMESON COOK — THE MACOMB DAILY

Greene said one parent asked her “to fix bullying.”

“Scared brains don’t learn,” Wheatley said.

School officials said providing more mental-health professionals to interact with students is key.

“(Mental health) Professionals are on ‘team-student’ every day,” Wheatley said, referring to the positive impact they can have on creating a “appropriate school culture and climate, and create situations that are best for children in environments where they are safe.”

“All of us work together to create an environment that is emotionally and psychologically safe for our students to give them the capacity to learn as much as they can every day,” she said.

Mangus said students’ relationship with school staff create critical “connectiveness,” which “helps mitigate mental-health needs.”

“The more connections we can make in the building the better,” said Todd Distelrath, principal of Chippewa Valley High School in Clinton Township.

But school officials said they are hampered by being short-staffed due to lack of state funding of schools that began years ago as well as a shortage of mental-health professionals available to be hired.

“We need people, and we need money,” Meengs said.



Chippewa Valley High School Principal Todd Distelrath speaks Monday at the state House Education Committee hearing at Sterling Heights High School. JAMESON COOK — THE MACOMB DAILY

The National Association of Secondary School Principals reports the top two priorities in Michigan are “state funding to recruit and retain mental-health staff” and “expand access to on-site behavioral health services to students,” according to Distelrath.

The under-funding “has really decimated schools’ ability to hire and retain both teaching staff and support staff, mental-health staff at schools,” said state Rep. Regina Weiss, an Oak Park Democrat. “Now that that has kind of changed, and we redirected and reinvesting back to school and getting staff back up, it’s gong to take time.”

Sheryl Kennedy, legislative liaison for the Michigan Department of Education, said there is a upward trend in state mental-health funding. It has increased substantially from zero in fiscal year 2018 to \$31.8 million in fiscal year 2019 to \$112 million in recurring funding and \$343 million in one-time funding this year. Koleszar said school funding began dropping significantly in about 2005 to about 2015 but has been increasing of late.

But even with more funds, there are not enough mental-health professionals available to fill all of the positions that may be created due to an overall national shortage, officials noted.

According to Health Worker Shortage Areas, a government agency, more than 8,000 mental health professionals were needed as of March 2023.

“A lot of people are leaving the profession,” Mangus said.

“The struggle to fill positions is real,” Distelrath said.

He speculated as to why more people aren’t seeking to work in schools.

“Pay ... that is part of it, right, and just the profession itself and the respect or lack of respect the profession receives,” Distelrath said. “There’s a lot of scrutiny. There’s a lot of pressure from everybody. Everybody went to school, so everybody is an expert about school, even though it’s a little bit different than when we went to school. That’s not even accurate. It’s a lie. It’s different than it was when we went to school. We do need support to recognize the difficulty of the job and to celebrate, as much as we can, the accomplishments of the job.”



State Rep. Jaime Greene, a Richmond Republican, speaks Monday at the state Education Committee hearing at Sterling Heights High School. JAMESON COOK — THE MACOMB DAILY

Weiss, a former teacher, said the shortage of mental-health professionals also impacts the retention of teachers. The burden of helping students cope has fallen on the teachers because mental-health professionals do not have enough time.

When she taught, mental-health professionals “were just so overwhelmed with just meeting the needs of their IEP (Individualized Education Program) students that the general ed students did not have access to a lot of the critical care,” Weiss said. “So a lot of it falls on classroom teachers, who don’t have the training, the experience, and who are expected and feel obligated and try to do everything they can to meet the needs of their students.”

Many of her former colleagues left the profession due to burn-out, thereby contributing to a shortage of teachers, she added.

Distelrath agreed teachers increasingly have to worry about students’ well-being while “also trying to teach math, science and social studies.”