

Mental Health Care Access for Santa Clara County Students

Research Brief • March 2024

New Findings from Survey of School-Based Healthcare Providers

In December 2023 and January 2024, the Santa Clara County Office of Education conducted a survey of school-based health professionals to better understand provider, student, and family experiences in accessing care.

Who completed the survey?

Across Santa Clara County, 190 school nurses, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and wellness center staff responded to the survey.

What were the key findings?

School-based mental health professionals **routinely refer students to external services**

such as therapy, counseling, emergency services, and developmental assessments. Nearly half (48.6%) of school counselors, social workers, and wellness center staff surveyed perform external referrals twice a month or more. Most often, these providers referred students to therapy, counseling, or emergency services.

However, referrals do not necessarily result in successful treatment for students. For students covered by managed care plans, only 15% of school-based health providers reported referral completion in all or most cases, and many school-based providers are only informed of the referral outcome if the student or family provides that information. Further, **only 10% of providers indicated that the referrals were typically completed within two weeks**. Long wait times, insurance, costs, and transportation were among the top challenges reported. Respondents specifically mentioned insurers' practice of authorizing only monthly or short-term counseling when more regular care is indicated.

“Therapy can be expensive, even with a sliding fee. Insurance companies will often deny coverage or only allow a set amount of sessions.”

- School Counselor



The survey's final qualitative section asked providers to report barriers to providing mental health services at schools. By far the most common response (n=47) was the limited capacity of school-based providers to meet student demand. Providers report caseloads that fill up quickly and long waitlists for school-based services, especially for providers that can offer services in multiple languages. Quicker approval and delivery of all provider-indicated services, whether provided externally or at schools, is needed.

For more information about our efforts to promote healthcare access in schools across Santa Clara County, visit sccoe.org/yhw