



Statewide Support for Student Mental and Behavioral Health

2025–27 Operating Budget Decision Package

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Across the nation, students are facing unprecedented mental and behavioral health challenges that negatively impact their ability to learn, develop, and maintain their health and wellness. With roles and responsibilities assigned across different local and state agencies, the fragmented system built to support youth mental and behavioral health has undermined recent investments intended to provide support. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) requests funding to strengthen the K–12 mental and behavioral health system through investments in statewide coordination and leadership, regional student assistance, and more social workers in schools.

FISCAL DETAIL

Operating Expenditures	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Fund 001-1 (Program 021)	\$12,600,000	\$16,431,000	\$16,749,000	\$17,101,000
Fund 001-1 (Program 028)	\$9,989,000	\$10,189,000	\$10,189,000	\$10,189,000
Fund 001-1 (Program 010)	\$1,438,000	\$1,116,000	\$1,116,000	\$1,116,000
Fund 17F-1 (Program 068)	\$71,000	\$92,000	\$93,000	\$94,000
Total Expenditures	\$24,098,000	\$27,828,000	\$28,147,000	\$28,500,000
Biennial Totals	\$51,926,000		\$56,647,000	
Staffing	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
FTEs	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
Average Annual	4.0		4.0	
Object of Expenditure	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Obj. A	\$370,000	\$370,000	\$370,000	\$370,000
Obj. B	\$181,000	\$181,000	\$181,000	\$181,000
Obj. C	\$789,000	\$511,000	\$511,000	\$511,000
Obj. E	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$27,000
Obj. G	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$27,000
Obj. J	\$44,000	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Obj. N	\$22,660,000	\$26,712,000	\$27,031,000	\$27,384,000
Revenue	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Total Revenue	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Biennial Totals	\$0.00		\$0.00	

PACKAGE DESCRIPTION

Mental health affects every aspect of a student's life, including how and even if they show up to school. Recent data from Washington's 2023 Healthy Youth Survey¹ (HYS) show that mental health outcomes for youth are improving overall when compared to results from prior years. According to the new data, depressive feelings and contemplation of or planning suicide decreased significantly from 2021 to 2023. Even so, 30% of 10th graders reported persistent depressive feelings, and nearly 15% reported contemplating suicide. While this is an unacceptable level of youth struggling with suicidal thoughts, it is also the lowest rate we have seen in Washington in 20 years. However, the number of students who continue to struggle with mental and behavioral health issues and who lack access to consistent support remains high, especially for youth who already face more barriers to mental health interventions. Data from the 2023 HYS shows that nearly 50% of 10th graders report being unable to stop or control worrying in the past two weeks.

What is the problem, opportunity, or priority you are addressing with the request?

For too long, strategies and services supporting student mental and behavioral health have operated in silos, and investments at the state level are often short-term and insufficient to make comprehensive and lasting change across the system and the state.

Lack of Clear Roles

The lack of a lead state agency tasked with student mental and behavioral health continues to complicate efforts, despite a long-standing recommendation from the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Work Group (CYBHWG)² as well as a recommendation in the State Auditor's 2021 Performance Audit on K-12 Student Behavioral Health in Washington.³ Without strong statewide leadership and coordination and despite the best efforts from so many caring adults, school districts and the state struggle to operate effectively within a fragmented and unequitable system, leading to students and families lacking adequate access to mental and behavioral health supports and services.

Inadequate Regional and Local Resources

At the regional educational service district (ESD) level, the Student Assistance Program (SAP) has been successful in increasing regional deployment of mental and behavioral health supports in communities with limited access to these services. This work began nearly 30 years ago to support communities with limited resources and high need. This iteration of the program as administered through regional ESDs started during the COVID pandemic through a share of

¹ Washington State Department of Health. (2024, March 13). *2023 Healthy Youth Survey results offer signs of hope and resiliency among Washington students*. <https://doh.wa.gov/newsroom/2023-healthy-youth-survey-results-offer-signs-of-hope-and-resiliency-among-washington-students>

² Children and Youth Behavioral Health Work Group. (12 December, 2023). *Children & Youth Behavioral Health Work Group Annual Report*. <https://www.hca.wa.gov/assets/program/report-cybhgw-recommendations-part1-2024.pdf>.

³ Office of the Washington State Auditor. (22 June, 2021). *K-12 Student Behavioral Health in Washington*. https://sao.wa.gov/sites/default/files/audit_reports/PA_K-12_Student_Behavioral_Health_ar-1028626.pdf.

OSPI's federal pandemic relief dollars, more formally known as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. The Legislature provided additional state funds in fiscal year 2024. Beginning with fiscal year 2025, funding for the SAP was reduced significantly, shrinking the program down in both size and statewide effectiveness.

Inadequate Staffing

Under the current prototypical school funding model, an elementary school needs 1,818 students to generate a single full-time social worker. At the middle and high schools, it takes even more students, 7,200 and 6,742 respectively. The staffing allocations are simply inadequate to support comprehensive student mental health and well-being, especially when considering the statewide need. The Legislature has made significant progress in boosting school staffing levels to reflect the measures recommended by Washington voters through Initiative 1351 in 2014. However, these recommended staffing ratios were initially developed more than 10 years ago, and these numbers must be revisited and revised to reflect true and adequate support for an educational system that supports the current social, emotional, mental, and behavioral health needs of each and every student.

What is your proposal?

In order to continue making progress in addressing urgent youth mental and behavioral health needs, OSPI requests stable and ongoing funding dedicated to state, regional, and local strategies and services that support student well-being. This proposal has three parts that address current mental health needs at each level of our education system.

Statewide K–12 Leadership and Coordination

By increasing OSPI's role and capacity to support K–12 student mental and behavioral health in coordination with other relevant state agencies, this proposal aligns with recommendations from the CCYBHWG and reports from the Office of the Washington State Auditor. Funding additional staff at OSPI to oversee state-level coordination and evaluation of student mental and behavioral health strategies, initiatives, and programs will help schools better identify, assess, and connect students to behavioral health supports both in school and in interconnected community settings.

OSPI will collaborate with key state agencies and regional ESDs to:

- Utilize a shared framework, in alignment with the Washington Integrated Student Supports Protocol (WSIPP), for coordinated student behavioral health supports, encompassing prevention, awareness, engagement, access to services, and strategic goals;
- Provide access to and disseminate evidence-based practices that align with the WISSP;
- Coordinate with and support training and technical assistance from organizations with needed knowledge and expertise to help school districts design, fund, implement, and evaluate behavioral health supports;
- Reduce barriers for students by facilitating access to mental and behavioral health services;
- Deploy mental and behavioral health assessment and intervention activities and referrals based on best practices;

- Develop and maintain resources for substance abuse prevention and intervention, promoting positive student behavioral health; and
- Establish a review process for ongoing improvement and impact assessment of statewide behavioral health efforts.

Adding Physical, Social, and Emotional Support (PSES) Staff to Schools

To better support students statewide, this proposal seeks funding for additional social workers in schools through a staffing increase in the prototypical school funding model. This increase will support school districts' efforts in recognizing, screening, and responding to student emotional or behavioral distress, and support adoption and implementation of district screening and response plans required under RCW 28A.320.127.

Fully Fund the Student Assistance Program (SAP)

Building off success over the past few years, this proposal also funds additional student assistance professionals through the regional school-based mental and behavioral health SAP. This regional program was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic funded and by federal ESSER dollars, with funding taken over by the state in fiscal year 2024. The program's funding was reduced in fiscal year 2025.

This proposal also funds increased regional implementation of mental and behavioral health supports, including substance abuse prevention and intervention services in communities across Washington with limited access to these kinds of services.

SAP provides:

1. Direct school-based mental and behavioral health prevention and intervention services; and
2. Statewide and regional coordination of mental and behavioral health supports, data collection, evaluation, and an accountability infrastructure through the Washington Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD).

When appropriate, the SAP programs coordinate with regional School Safety Centers by sharing information and student assistance resources to align behavioral health strategies and supports across the region.

How is your proposal impacting equity in the state?

1. At the forefront of every program, policy, and decision, OSPI actively focuses on ensuring all students have access to the instruction and support they need to succeed in our schools. This proposal is focused on the needs of our most vulnerable students, particularly students of color, American Indian/Alaska Native students, and highly mobile students including students from migrant families, students who are gender diverse, students who identify as LGBTQ+, students in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness. These student groups face unique systemic barriers to completing their K-12 education, barriers which perpetuate larger systemic inequities that persist along racial and socioeconomic lines.
2. While not directly gathered by OSPI, school-based mental and behavioral health was the

subject of a discovery sprint sponsored by CYBHWG’s strategic plan advisory group. The workgroup contracted with a firm that spent a few months learning about student mental health supports by speaking with individuals at all levels of the student mental and behavioral health ecosystem, including families. Their final recommendations support the elements in this proposal, as do past-year recommendations from the School-Based Behavioral Health and Suicide Prevention subgroup of the CYBHWG, which has youth and family representatives as subgroup members.

3. See above.
4. See above.

What are you purchasing and how does it solve the problem?

Statewide Leadership and Coordination

OSPI requests funding for staffing at OSPI to perform the tasks outlined above. Funds will pay salaries and benefits for 4.0 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff and additional contracted support for the development and collection of resources, curricula, educational campaigns, professional development, training, and coaching services.

Increased Student Support Staffing

To support student mental and behavioral health across the state, this proposal seeks funding to increase the staffing allocation for social workers in the prototypical school funding model.

Fully Fund the Student Assistance Program (SAP)

The proposal places student assistant professionals in 67 additional school sites across Washington in the 2025–26 school year. The proposal also supports these deployed student assistance professionals by funding a 1.0 FTE regional behavioral health coordinator at each of the nine regional ESDs. OSPI also requests funding for hiring, training, and supporting school-based student assistance professionals and 0.6 FTE clerical and/or administrative support at each of the nine ESDs. Lastly, the proposal includes statewide coordination of the SAP, contracts for program evaluation, and a statewide data collection system.

What alternatives did you explore and why was this option chosen?

Addressing the mental and behavioral health needs of Washington’s students is critically important to student success within the K–12 system and beyond. Failure to fund centralized, state-level support for this work, and failure to capitalize on the progress made through the SAP by allowing the program to falter from lack of investment, will continue to hamper the system’s efforts to improve student mental and behavioral health outcomes.

What resources does the agency already have that are dedicated to this purpose?

SAP was partially funded by the state during the 2024 Legislative Session at \$4,000,000 for fiscal year 2025. No other current state resources exist to continue this work.

ASSUMPTIONS AND CALCULATIONS

Expansion, reduction, elimination or alteration of a current program or service:

This request expands the Student Assistance Program. In the 2021–23 biennium, OSPI directed approximately \$16,100,000 in federal emergency relief funds toward student mental and behavioral health, and in the 2023–25 biennial Operating Budget, OSPI received separate appropriations of \$5,000,000 in fiscal year 2024 and \$1,200,000 in fiscal year 2025 to continue behavioral health regional services grants to support school districts. Additionally, OSPI received \$2,800,000 in fiscal year 2024 and \$2,800,000 in fiscal year 2025 for ESDs to expand and maintain student mental and behavioral health services.

This request builds on current funding, which is assumed to be ongoing at the fiscal year 2025 amounts. The detailed assumptions and calculations section captures the additional funding request by activity.

Detailed assumptions and calculations:

OSPI Administrative Costs

OSPI requests \$190,000 in fiscal year 2026 and \$179,000 in fiscal year 2027 ongoing to support a 1.0 FTE Assistant Director at the WMS 2 level. This position would oversee and provide state level coordination to help schools better identify and connect students to behavioral health supports in school and in interconnected community settings.

OSPI requests \$168,000 in fiscal year 2026 and \$157,000 in fiscal year 2027 ongoing to support a 1.0 FTE Program Supervisor at the WMS 2 level. This position would provide oversight and state level coordination to help schools better identify and connect students to behavioral health support in school and in interconnected community settings.

OSPI requests \$91,000 in fiscal year 2026 and \$85,000 in fiscal year 2027 ongoing to support a 0.5 FTE Senior Data Analyst, Exempt. This position would provide state level data analysis to help schools better identify and connect students to behavioral health supports in school and in interconnected community settings.

OSPI requests \$144,000 in fiscal year 2026 and \$133,000 in fiscal year 2027 ongoing to support a 1.0 FTE Administrative Program Specialist 1, step M. This position would provide state level coordination to help schools better identify and connect students to behavioral health supports in school and in interconnected community settings.

OSPI requests \$56,000 in fiscal year 2026 and \$51,000 in fiscal year 2027 ongoing to support a 0.5 FTE Administrative Assistant 3, step M. This position would provide administrative support to the other FTEs requested to help schools better identify and connect students to behavioral health supports in school and interconnected community settings.

Apportionment

OSPI requests to increase the allocation for social workers through the state funded prototypical school funding model by 0.06 FTE per prototypical school. This would increase the social worker allocation for prototypical elementary schools from 0.311 FTE per school to 0.371 per school, from 0.088 to 0.148 per prototypical middle school, and from 0.127 to 0.187 per prototypical high school. Using maintenance level funding as a baseline for calculations and student enrollment as approved by the Caseload Forecast Council, OSPI estimates this increased allocation will drive an approximately 130 FTE certificated instructional staff allocation through the prototypical funding model statewide. The estimated cost per school year is approximately \$19 million.

By state fiscal year, the amounts are estimated at the following:

- Fiscal year 2026 = \$12,671,000
- Fiscal year 2027 = \$16,523,000
- Fiscal year 2028 = \$16,842,000
- Fiscal year 2029 = \$17,195,000

(see attached table 1 for more school year and fiscal year details for increased funding to Social Worker Allocation)

Maintenance Level Funding

Social workers are currently funded through the prototypical school funding model at 0.311 per prototypical elementary school, 0.088 per prototypical middle school, and 0.127 per prototypical high school. The estimated maintenance level funding for social workers in the prototypical funding model based on caseload forecasted student enrollment is approximately \$150 million in the 2025–2027 biennium (\$149 million General Fund; \$1 million Opportunity Pathways).

Contracts

OSPI requests \$789,000 in fiscal year 2026 and \$511,000 in fiscal year 2027 ongoing for contract support for the development or collection of resources, curriculum creation of educational campaigns, professional development, trainings and/or coaching services, statewide coordination, program evaluation, and a statewide data collection system.

Grants to ESDs

OSPI requests \$9,989,000 in fiscal year 2026 and \$10,189,000 in fiscal year 2027 ongoing to fully fund the AESD Network Student Assistance Program. This funding will restore 67 additional sites in the 2025–26 school year at \$149K per site and ongoing at \$153K per site. Full funding of this request will restore capacity across the ESD regions for supporting student mental and behavioral health prevention and intervention activities.

The cost per site is inclusive of the following:

- Direct school-based mental and behavioral health prevention and intervention services:

- Student assistance professional salary/benefits at 67 sites. (In the coming few months, as sites are secured for the 2024–25 school year, ESDs will also establish a list of anticipated additional sites for re-expansion in the 2025–26 school year.)
- Statewide (AESD) and regional behavioral health data collection, evaluation, and accountability infrastructure:
 - Regional behavioral health coordination, supervision, and administrative support (minimal);
 - Data collection system (statewide);
 - External evaluation expert services; and
 - Statewide (AESD) coordination and accountability.

Workforce assumptions:

Fiscal Year 2026 (Total = \$649,000)

Assistant Director, WMS 2: 1.0 FTE

- Salary: \$113,919
- Benefits: \$51,595
- Goods/Services: \$6,678
- Travel: \$6,678
- Equipment: \$11,130 (one time)

Program Supervisor, WMS 2: 1.0 FTE

- Salary: \$96,990
- Benefits: \$46,524
- Goods/Services: \$6,678
- Travel: \$6,678
- Equipment: \$11,130 (one time)

Administrative Assistant 3, Step M: 0.5 FTE

- Salary: \$27,102
- Benefits: \$16,655
- Goods/Services: \$3,339
- Travel: \$3,339
- Equipment: \$5,565 (one time)

Data Analyst Senior, Exempt: 0.5 FTE

- Salary: \$53,255
- Benefits: \$25,502
- Goods/Services: \$3,339
- Travel: \$3,339
- Equipment: \$5,565 (one time)

Administrative Program Specialist 1, Step M: 1.0 FTE

- Salary: \$78,468
- Benefits: \$41,046

- Goods/Services: \$6,678
- Travel: \$6,678
- Equipment: \$11,130 (one time)

Fiscal Year 2027 and ongoing (Total = \$605,000 Annually)

Assistant Director, WMS 2: 1.0 FTE

- Salary: \$113,919
- Benefits: \$51,725
- Goods/Services: \$6,678
- Travel: \$6,678

Program Supervisor, WMS 2: 1.0 FTE

- Salary: \$96,990
- Benefits: \$46,654
- Goods/Services: \$6,678
- Travel: \$6,678

Administrative Assistant 3, Step M: 0.5 FTE

- Salary: \$27,102
- Benefits: \$17,220
- Goods/Services: \$3,339
- Travel: \$3,339

Data Analyst Senior, Exempt: 0.5 FTE

- Salary: \$53,255
- Benefits: \$25,067
- Goods/Services: \$3,339
- Travel: \$3,339

Administrative Program Specialist 1, Step M: 1.0 FTE

- Salary: \$78,468
- Benefits: \$41,176
- Goods/Services: \$6,678
- Travel: \$6,678

Historical funding:

Fiscal Year 2026

- FTE = 0.00
- Total Funds = \$4,000,000
- Near General Fund = \$4,000,000
- Other Funds = \$0.00

Fiscal Year 2027

- FTE = 0.00
- Total Funds = \$4,000,000
- Near General Fund = \$4,000,000
- Other Funds = \$0.00

STRATEGIC AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Strategic framework:

This proposal supports the heart of OSPI's mission and vision to prepare all students for postsecondary success and civic engagement, with an emphasis on **all** students. It helps drive Superintendent Reykdal's Strategic Goal #1, to ensure all students have equitable access to strong foundations; and Strategic Goal #2, providing every student with rigorous, learner-centered academic options in their community. Supporting the mental and behavioral health of all students is part of a world-class education, a goal of the Governor's Results Washington.

Performance outcomes:

Improved Statewide Coordination of Student Mental and Behavioral Health Services

Increasing statewide leadership and support around K–12 student mental and behavioral health will lead to more cohesive and coordinated mental and behavioral health services across all school districts in Washington state. This leadership and support will reduce fragmentation and siloing of efforts across the system and create the path for the effective sharing of resources and implementation of best practices across regions.

Increased Access to Mental and Behavioral Health Services for Students

With the expansion of the SAP and additional staffing allocations, more students, particularly those living in underserved regions of the state, will have timely access to mental and behavioral health services. This investment will provide more consistent and widespread support for school districts, students, and families who desperately need these services.

OTHER COLLATERAL CONNECTIONS

Intergovernmental:

None.

Stakeholder impacts:

This proposal supports past recommendations of the CYBHWG and the School-Based Behavioral Health and Suicide Prevention subgroup, alongside recommendations by the State Auditor's 2021 Performance Audit on K-12 Student Behavioral Health in Washington.

Legal or administrative mandates:

None.

Changes from current law:

None.

State workforce impacts:

None.

State facilities impacts:

None

Puget Sound recovery:

N/A

Governor's salmon strategy:

N/A

OTHER SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Table 1

Information technology (IT):

N/A