

CHAP ADVOCACY BRIEF

Transforming the DC School-Based Behavioral Health Program

March 2026

PURPOSE

To inform the community about AJE's **Community Health Advisory Panel (CHAP)** recommendations on recent changes to DC's School-Based Behavioral Health Program and their implications for equitable access and student well-being.

OVERVIEW

The DC's School-Based Behavioral Health Program (SBBH), led by the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), intends to **provide prevention, early intervention, and clinical mental health services to students in DC public and public charter schools.**

KEY SYSTEM SHIFTS

- Shift Away from CBO-Based Model and movement toward a more centralized DBH-led system.
- This shift requires **laying off 90 CBO clinicians and hiring 59 DBH staff for FY/SY '27**, leaving 90 schools without behavioral health services for at least half of FY/SY '27.
- Transition to tiered staffing based on need, meaning **some schools may receive full-time clinicians, shared or part-time clinicians, or telehealth services.**
- Increased use of telehealth & hybrid support, which may impact access.

KEY STRENGHTS & CHALLENGES

- **Strengths:** Broad access to behavioral health supports across DC schools and a growing commitment to providing needed youth mental health interventions and prevention strategies.
- **Challenges:** Fewer clinicians may weaken relationships and trust, especially in high-need schools, which face disproportionate gaps in coverage.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Schools are often the primary access point for youth mental health care and gaps in services can lead to:

- Increased behavioral crises
- Lower academic performance
- Higher absenteeism and disciplinary actions

CHAP POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prioritize consistent presence in high-need schools.
- Maintain roles for CBOs and trusted providers.
- Evaluate telehealth for access gaps and ensure students with the highest needs receive in-person care.

Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.
The Parent Training and Information Center for the District of Columbia