

USING A SYSTEM DYNAMICS APPROACH TO IMPROVE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

INTRODUCTION

From June 2023 to April 2024, CLASP and TYP Collaborative provided technical assistance to community advocates in three localities: Charleston, SC, Gulfport, MS, and Tulsa, OK. Our goal was to increase access to equitable school-based mental health services.

We used **Community-Based System Dynamics** to understand what upstream factors impacted student mental health outcomes and what was needed to make policy changes. System dynamics is a set of tools that elicit and represent mental models that members of a system hold about different dynamic problems, and allow us a way to test those models. In this case, the system was the school district. The goal of system dynamics is to understand how different parts of a system interact to see what the levers of change are and what's holding the system in place.

To better support the mental health of students and increase referrals to services, **an increasing number of states** have mandated that teachers receive mental health training. Many of the localities we worked with wanted to replicate this idea. When researching how to best implement this training, we found that many of the existing policies were not producing the desired results, to address inequities across race and other identities in student mental health. System dynamics with each locality helped us to better understand why.

System dynamics starts by identifying what members want to fix and framing that problem as a neutral question. Our workshop's guiding question was, "What factors contribute to student mental health outcomes in our communities?" Throughout the workshop, participants brainstormed all the variables that impacted student mental health outcomes in their communities and began to map out how those variables interacted with one another.

At the end of the workshop, we created a model for each system called a causal loop diagram. In each diagram, we identified the cycles that were holding the system in place and preventing change. Each model identified policy levers that could reroute negative outcomes.

While every district and community is unique and what one works in one may not work in another, our team identified three key insights across these systems that helped explain why existing policies were not producing the desired outcomes and what policies could move the needle on school-based mental health. They were:

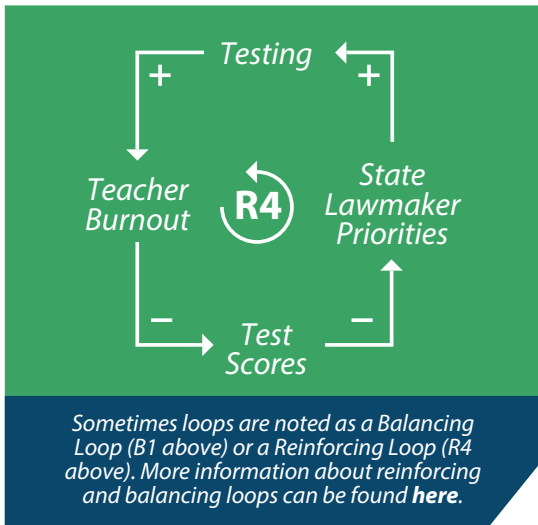
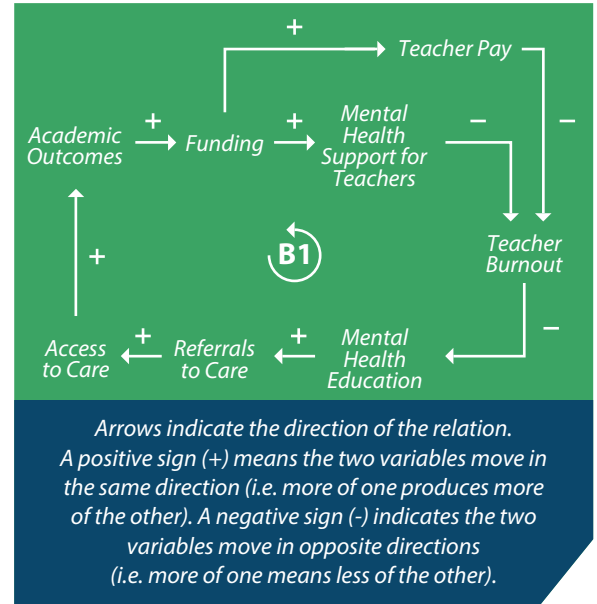
- 1. Teacher mental health and burnout are key factors impacting student mental health.**
- 2. Community input will improve policy outcomes.**
- 3. Lack of trust between students and teachers impacts student mental health outcomes and is rooted in structural racism.**

KEY INSIGHTS

Teacher Mental Health

First, we found that teacher burnout, fueled by low pay and competing priorities, is a key limitation to the effectiveness of training policies. **Training policies alone would have a limited impact because of the balancing effect of teacher burnout.**

Mental health education is just one of many required teacher trainings. While teachers often complete them, they are not always able to fully engage with, retain, or implement the material due to the many competing demands and priorities they balance. This training became just another box they had to check. In our model, the biggest policy lever for reducing teacher burnout was improving teacher pay.



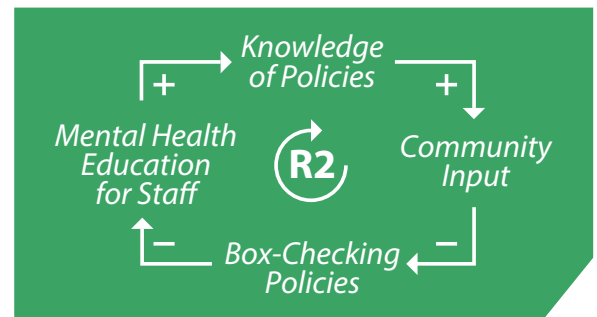
Moving away from an emphasis on testing will also lessen teacher burnout. Our models showed how a **focus on state-level testing did not align with better teacher mental health or better academic outcomes.** The focus on improving test scores, which fluctuates according to the priorities of state lawmakers, increases teacher burnout which, in turn, decreases test scores. Instead, the policymakers' priorities should be to improve the health and well-being of both students and teachers and recognize that increased access to mental health care improves students' academic outcomes.

This echoes CLASP's **previous recommendations** for improving teacher mental health.

Community Input

Next, we found that the structure and content of training were often not useful and that there was limited knowledge of what policies were already in place.

Our model shows that **if community members—namely, students and families—are engaged in the policymaking process, they have overall better knowledge of policies.** Community involvement can better inform policy language to go beyond cookie-cutter policies that exist to check a box.



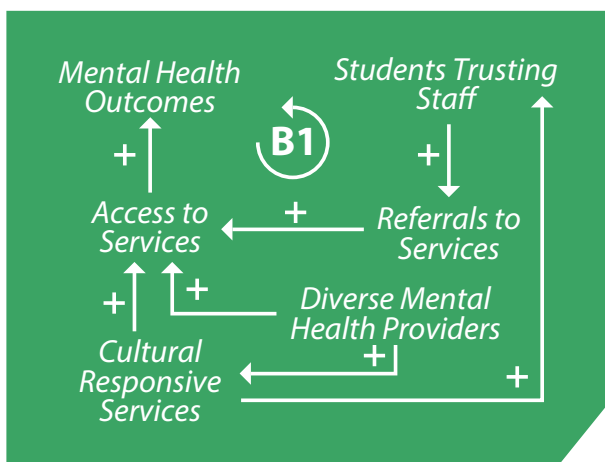
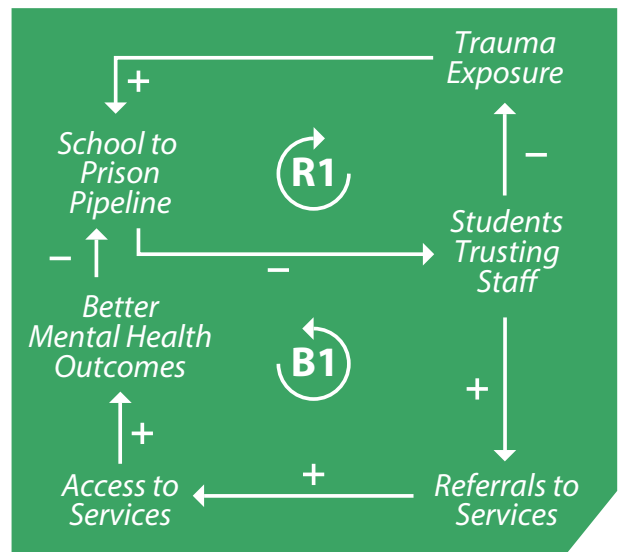
In the case of trainings, students and families should find out what information is covered to ensure that teachers and staff receive information that is useful and relevant for students and families. Students and fellow teachers can also be engaged in providing trainings so that they are engaging, meaningful, and memorable. Finally, districts should work to involve parents, families, and students before passing new policies to ensure they're aligned with community needs; and continue this work after new policies are implemented so families and educators know what resources are available to them.

Trust, Bias, and Systemic Racism

The localities we worked with shared that a key message from students and families was distrust in teachers and administrators. Students particularly noted a desire to have a trusted individual in the school with whom they could share concerns and challenges.

Our models found that **improving trust between students and staff requires addressing the school-to-prison pipeline**. Students who feel surveilled by their schools and teachers will not trust their teachers. Students who experience the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline have increased trauma exposure, which worsens their mental health outcomes.

In all of our models, the inherent biases and racism evident through high security, surveillance, and disciplinary actions for students of color impacted student mental health outcomes. Each community noted the bias and racism in their education systems. Training policies are unlikely to significantly increase trust between students and staff as they do not address the underlying root causes of distrust and resentment around the system, particularly in districts that have experienced school segregation. School mental health advocates should work with school climate advocates to reverse school hardening measures and increase school-based mental health services.



Additionally, schools can improve trust between students and staff by **increasing access to culturally responsive services and improving the diversity of school-based mental health providers**. Having diverse mental health providers and culturally responsive services on campus increases trust between students and staff. With greater trust comes more referrals to services, ultimately leading to increased access and better mental health outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Schools are complex systems with many competing priorities and policies. While the models we developed are specific to these three communities, student mental health across the country is impacted by nearly every factor in this system, from teacher pay to testing outcomes, family engagement, and historic and ongoing segregation. These factors determine the effectiveness of school-based mental health policies.

Policies that increase teacher pay, move federal and state entities away from a testing-focused evaluation and funding model, engage students in policy design and implementation, and eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline are critical to improving youth mental health. Until these factors are addressed, more straightforward interventions, like educator training or additional mental health resources, may have limited impact.

To create school-based policies that better meet students' mental health needs, advocates and policymakers must look beyond policies that focus only on mental health supports and instead implement policies that understand how mental health fits in a larger system. They must also work in coalition with other advocates in the education, health, labor, and civil rights spaces to recognize how their collective priorities and goals can positively impact student mental health outcomes. Trying to address youth mental health in schools without looking at systemic concerns is a disservice to teachers, administrators, families, and, ultimately, students.