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Mental health services hot topic at Federal Commission on School Safety meeting

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AP Photo

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Leaders from across the South gathered at the Alabama Capitol on Tuesday afternoon to talk about the things they are doing, and the things that they need help with in regards to school safety as part of two roundtable discussions hosted by the Federal Commission on School Safety.

A major theme that was focused on was the mental health of students and how schools need to be more proactive in dealing with mental health issues before unsafe situations occur. In the public comment section following, the same message was reiterated by several speakers.

While many leaders pointed to needed logistical improvements focused on the security of a campus, as Gov. Kay Ivey put it, Alabama could build walls around schools as strong as "Fort Knox," but the real threat is often coming from inside the building from students struggling with mental or societal issues.

Commission on School Safety meets with Alabama leaders

Lynn Beshear, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said the biggest barrier to mental health care is stigma, and funding.

"Whenever we have a mass shooting and it becomes clear that this individual had a mental health challenge, then we tend to think everyone with a mental health issue is a violent person," Beshear said, echoing the opinion of the other presenters that that stigma has prevented people from seeking care, and legislators from providing adequate funding.

More: [Stepping away from suspensions: How schools are dealing with behavior \(/story/news/education/2018/08/24/stepping-away-suspensions-how-schools-dealing-behavior/881579002/\)](/story/news/education/2018/08/24/stepping-away-suspensions-how-schools-dealing-behavior/881579002/)

So far in Alabama, Beshear said the Department of Education and the Mental Health Department came together "without any money" in the wake of the Sandy Hook school shooting to address school safety.

From that, 12 of the state's mental health centers have created programs in 47 Alabama schools that bring mental health counselors into the school, with schools providing a space for the student to receive services. Parents, administrators and teachers help to identify students that are in need of help.

Statewide, there are 26 mental health centers.

After the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, the Legislature gave \$500,000 to expand those services to six more schools, Beshear said.

Although "just a fraction of what the need is," Beshear said it is the beginning, and the approach has been helpful — preventing the need for parents to miss work and students to miss school.

More: [Poverty and proficiency: MPS' biggest obstacle may lie outside the school system \(/story/news/education/2018/07/13/poverty-and-proficiency-how-mps-biggest-obstacle-may-lie-outside-school-system/772421002/\)](/story/news/education/2018/07/13/poverty-and-proficiency-how-mps-biggest-obstacle-may-lie-outside-school-system/772421002/)

Donna Bahorich, chair of the Texas State Board of Education, reiterated the importance of providing training to teachers and administrators on how to identify students struggling with mental health issues, and getting information to parents on what resources exist for services.

"Let's start talking about it (mental health) as it is, because it is folks all living amongst us," Bahorich said.

Looking ahead, Elinore McCance-Katz, assistant secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use, said the administration is working on an advisory to share with schools nationally that will help with bringing mental health services into schools.

"The issue of integrating mental health services into schools is extremely important and many school systems don't know how to do that in a way that is feasible," McCance-Katz said.

The advisory, she said, will address how schools can receive payment for services.

During the public comment section, 10 of 16 speakers used a portion of their time to say they opposed the consideration of using federal dollars to arm teachers with guns.

Several national media outlets this past week reported on the ability of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos to use her interpretation of the Every Student Succeeds Act to decide whether states can use Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants to purchase firearms.

"Educators have tremendous responsibilities — having to add marksmanship ought to not be one of the responsibilities," said Pam Doyle, the past president of the Alabama Association of School Boards.

An active shooter situation is, she said, something even law enforcement officers do not encounter often. Additionally, she added, those funds could be directed to other options. Her recommendations included increased funding for mental health services and to hire additional School Resource Officers.

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