



Education | Healthcare | Public Services



The Center for
Health and Health Care
in Schools

Mandated Supporters in Education

Wrap Around the Family



Child maltreatment refers to harmful behavior perpetuated against minors, including **physical abuse**, **sexual abuse** and **neglect**. Concerns about children's emotional well-being prompt many educators, who are mandatory reporters, to contact child protective services agencies, despite the absence of consensus on a **clear definition** of some forms of **maltreatment**. As a result, mandatory reporting may cause **more harm than good**. This brief explores an escalating preventive approach to protect children and address student well-being.

Reporting is not an effective intervention.

In a 2024 national survey, about 8 percent of educators mentioned students' emotional state as what prompted their most recent report to child protective services (CPS). Respondents used words like "scared," "fearful" and "reluctant" to describe students, such as during drop-off and pickup at school, as well as when talking about specific adults. Select participant submissions further clarify educators' observations and concerns:¹

"Witnessed a caregiver using derogatory language toward a child."

—Teacher, San Diego

"Noticing signs of emotional abuse, such as belittling remarks or constant criticism from a caregiver."

—Teacher, Pittsburgh

"Young girl who became suddenly withdrawn and emotional. Obvious change in the student's demeanor."

—Teacher, Neosho, Mo.

Weak parent-child bonds are the foundation for multiple types of maltreatment, as well as for preventable health challenges, including childhood mental illness.² These weak bonds have been called emotional maltreatment, psychological abuse and emotional abuse—but the phenomenon lacks a clear definition and is hard to study. What is clear is that emotional disconnection from a parent or caregiver is an important sign that a child and their family likely need more support.

Educators, kids and families benefit from **mandated support**. This term, coined by JMACforFamilies and used in local, state and federal initiatives, is an umbrella term for programming changes and policy commitments that prioritize effective prevention and harm reduction.³ Mandated supporters value family preservation and share power with families through communication and education. They leverage all available resources to bring material support to struggling families without government intervention, monitoring or punishment. Here, we review promising practices for schools and educators to effectively intervene about concerns for a student's emotional well-being. We offer escalating strategies that align with multitiered systems of support.



The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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Be the right person at the right time.

Let's start with a universal, whole-school, tier 1 approach—an intervention that promotes well-being for all students and adults, all the time. One of the best ways to facilitate the switch to “a terrible thing happened to me and I persist” instead of “I struggle with the terrible effects of an adverse childhood” is a strong connection to a caring adult.⁴ Consistent with many school climate strategies and social and emotional learning curricula, educators can use five evidence-based healing gestures to start, strengthen and sustain healthy relationships with all students.⁵ Another example, the Strong Start program, also integrates five components into everyday engagement with students—greetings, goal-setting, community building, purposeful partnering, and breathe and focus—to meet the needs of the whole child with evidence-based interventions to boost calm, confidence and readiness to learn.⁶

Visit kids at home.

Some student challenges require more tailored or targeted intervention. In a multitiered system of support, these are also called tier 2 strategies. Home visiting programs are among the most effective ways to prevent the occurrence of child maltreatment and to prevent recurrence in families where it has occurred.⁷ Effective programs focus on family strengths, assume that adults in the lives of the child are equal partners and connect families to aid for specific challenges.⁸



MANDATED SUPPORT in EDUCATION

Mandated supporters practice **care**.
Embed **healing gestures** into every interaction.

HEALING GESTURES



Celebrate



Comfort



Collaborate



Inspire



Listen

The national **Parent Teacher Home** Visit project has honed a model in the education sector. The project's evaluations show that visits to 10 percent of students are linked to **schoolwide improvements in attendance and academic proficiency**, as well as **stronger family engagement**, with educators and parents alike thinking differently about each other.¹⁶ The Saint Paul Federation of Educators negotiated to adopt the national Parent Teacher Home Visit project model in 2010.¹⁷ According to the collective bargaining agreement, educators who volunteer to participate receive **four hours of training** and **meet at least eight families per year** through visits that are “relation-based [and] focused on the **hopes and dreams** of the family.”¹⁸ Then, they document their visits and attend debriefs to **inform collaboration** with colleagues and **increase family engagement**. One school nurse describes the power of his program participation: “**Collaboration and communication is critical when we're trying to figure out ways to support our families.**”



Parents who struggle to emotionally connect with their children also show high rates of challenges with anger, effective coping, emotional regulation, depression, hostility and self-esteem.⁹ Importantly, home visiting programs strengthen relationships between caregivers and educators, increase parents' confidence in their parenting skills, and improve families' willingness to engage in school-based programming.¹⁰

Extend school-based healthcare to the whole family.

Therapeutic models that address the needs of the whole family represent an important opportunity for schools to prevent child maltreatment at all tiers and especially to improve capacity for intensive needs.¹¹ Programs that combine support with parent training over several months are among the most effective.¹² One way to achieve such comprehensive school health systems is through robust staffing of specialized instructional support personnel, such as school nurses, school social workers and school psychologists, as well as careful attention to the design of their workload to ensure that specialty skills can be extended to the

school community at every tier of a multitiered system of support.¹³

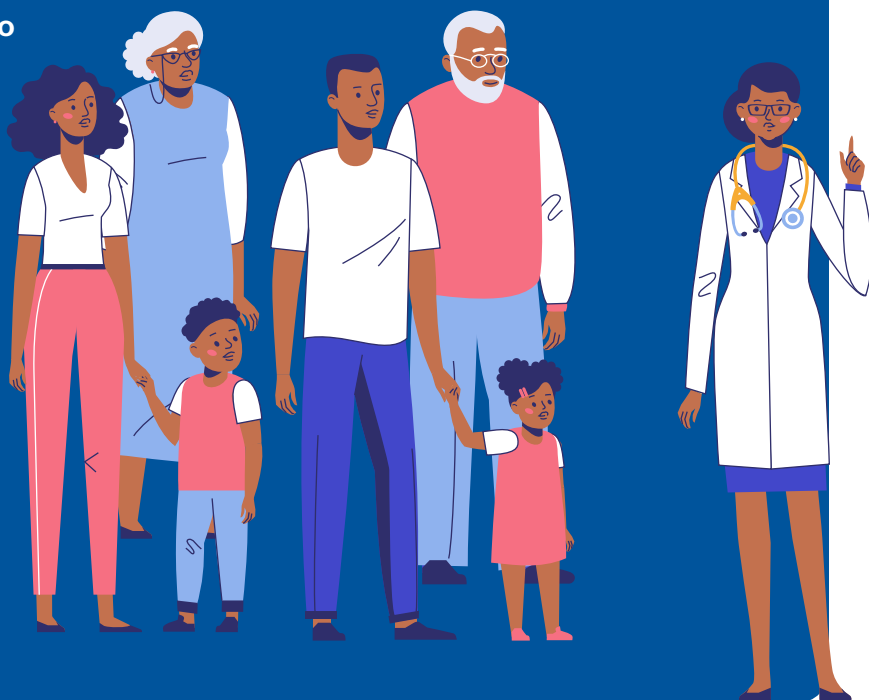
School-based health centers represent another pathway to meet the complex health needs of marginalized children and families. In SBHCs, schools and local healthcare organizations partner to provide an array of services to improve health and education outcomes.¹⁴

Mandated support is not only the work of the education sector. We are fighting to upend poverty, transform structural oppression, and eliminate the scourge of child abuse. It won't be easy. But if we continue to require reporting over engagement, to conflate poverty with neglect, to funnel marginalized families into government surveillance, and to remove children from their families, we are pursuing more problems than solutions.¹⁵ We must rely on thoughtful, rigorous public health and social science research, and proven intervention, to guide how we build the world that children and families deserve. And we must make it simple to get—and give—support.

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For decades, the Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools and Department of Health and Human Services have worked together to make schools hubs for **learning supports** and **health** through their **Linkages to Learning** program. Three staff members—a **community schools coordinator**, a child and family **therapist**, and a family **case manager**—at each of more than 30 participating schools jointly address the **social, economic, health** and **emotional issues** of the whole child, and importantly, whole family. In addition to support for their children, parents can take advantage of **English language classes** for adults, **assistance in navigating social services** for new immigrants, and **family therapy**. Overall, Linkages to Learning has **increased student happiness** and **improved student attendance**. Additionally, by directly addressing employment, health, child care, housing, transportation, nutrition and other concerns, the program has **increased participating families' stability** and reduced their risk of CPS engagement.¹⁹



Endnotes

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