

# **New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children Releases Issue Brief on New Jersey's Student Mental Health Crisis Through the Eyes of Immigrant Youth**

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*Crucial Report Focuses on Current Resources and Proposals for Change*

March 14, 2022, New Jersey – Today, the New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children released [\*Confronting New Jersey's Student Mental Health Crisis: Current Resources and Proposals for Change Through the Eyes of Immigrant Youth\*](#), a youth-led issue brief focused on immigrant students' needs and priorities around mental health services in schools. During the pandemic, immigrant students have faced unprecedented loss and isolation, leading to increased anxiety and depression. The situation has been particularly grave for recently arrived immigrant students, who often lack access to linguistically and culturally appropriate mental health services. Yet even as students' mental health needs have increased, schools already facing disparities in funding for mental health services have been stretched thin coping with the pandemic and subsequent shutdowns. Students' increased need for support and schools' lack of resources have the potential to fuel a crisis of youth mental health in New Jersey for years to come.

During the summer of 2021, the New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children (NJCIC) conducted in-depth interviews with first- and second-generation immigrant students, counselors, social workers, and caregivers to better understand the current landscape for youth mental health resources in

New Jersey. Additionally, with the partnership of Make the Road NJ, NJCIC conducted three listening sessions to learn more about families' experiences with mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. NJCIC also conducted a listening session with Make the Road's Youth Power Project about their experiences in New Jersey public schools.

The final issue brief, *Confronting New Jersey's Student Mental Health Crisis*, incorporates insights from these interviews and listening sessions to make recommendations for school boards and the Legislature that would improve school-based services. Among the issue brief's key insights:

- Community-based and school-based mental health support services can be more accessible to students and their families than outside referrals, for financial and geographic reasons, among others.
- Using language inclusive methods of communication between schools, students, and caregivers is important. Schools often provide key information in a language or using a form of communication that parents do not understand or access.
- Schools and the state should increase funding and accountability to ensure that school districts provide school-based youth services and student assistance counselors, and that staff reflect the demographics of the school community. Schools need funding to recruit, hire, and retain mental health professionals. The Issue Brief found a particular need for mental health professionals who can relate to immigrant communities and can provide services in students' home languages.

In light of the findings of the Issue Brief, NJCIC calls on the Murphy Administration, state agencies, the NJ Legislature, and individual schools and school boards:

- To direct additional funds to youth mental health services and to the recruitment of culturally competent and bilingual student assistance counselors;
- To create a School Mental Health Commission made up of diverse stakeholders, including student and caregiver representatives, to provide

oversight of and recommendations for publicly funded mental health services in school settings; and

- To provide support for new immigrant families in schools, through programming that connects newly arrived families to needed social services and assists new students in adjusting to the school community.

Looking back on her experience working on this project, former NJCIC Mental Health Advocate Angelica Barreto stated, “Mental health issues in immigrant children are very often overlooked. I had the opportunity to listen to immigrant parents about the mental health needs of their children and how the pandemic exacerbated those needs. The brief highlights the importance of increasing mental health resources in schools and of destigmatizing mental health issues, and the urgency for new policies and programs that will benefit immigrant communities, especially youth immigrants.”

Expanding these resources will mean committing more funding to mental health in schools. Giovana Castañeda, youth organizer with Make the Road NJ, said, “For students of color who have experienced disproportionate loss and trauma during the pandemic, school must be a haven, not a place where they are criminalized. NJCIC’s report clearly outlines what is at stake for youth of color and immigrant youth when we choose to invest in police and not mental health. Policing in schools does not make students of color more safe. We support the NJCIC’s recommendations to urge our schools to invest in mental health, restorative justice, and additional supportive services for students, not increased law enforcement.”

“It gives you a different perspective to hear directly from immigrant youth how a lack of mental health support affects their daily lives,” said Lady Jimenez Torres, Policy Director of the NJ Consortium for Immigrant Children. “The pandemic has shined a bright light on the need for mental health services for all students. However, it also widened disparities in the resources, or lack thereof, available to immigrant youth versus other students. The administration, the legislature, and state agencies need to work together on long term solutions for our immigrant children.”

With the pandemic sharpening government's focus on mental health as part of general health and wellbeing, now is the time to enact policies that would help our children reach their full potential. Addressing these challenges now will make for a healthier and more equitable New Jersey for all.

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### **About the NJ Consortium for Immigrant Children**

We work with New Jersey's young immigrants and their allies to advance their full, fearless participation in our society. We seek lawful status for immigrant children and youth and advocate for systemic change in how they access legal and social services.

For more information or to join our efforts visit our website at <https://njcic.org/>