NAMI Student Mental Health Toolkit

How to Organize a Successful Advocacy Campaign to Improve Student Mental Health

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Introduction

Mental health conditions start early in life – and are very common. Today, almost 1 out of 3 parents say their child's mental or emotional health is worse now than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Students need help.

As schools bring students back to classrooms, local schools and school districts must ensure that students have needed supports to stay healthy and resilient.

By effectively working with student advocates and community partners, policymakers can be persuaded to prioritize the mental health of students. But first, it's essential to quickly mobilize and organize your supporters.

How to Organize a Successful Advocacy Campaign to Improve Student Mental Health is a resource for student leaders and their allies in communities who want mental health prioritized in their schools. While each community will have a unique situation, this guide can serve as a starting point for your organizing efforts.

Equipped with the NAMI Student Mental Health Toolkit, student leaders can play a vocal, leading role in getting mental health prioritized in schools.

Before you get started

As a student leader, there are several steps you can take to be prepared to organize a successful campaign to prioritize mental health in your school or school district.

Know Your Environment

The first step to any advocacy action is to understand the issue and the process.

Research the Issue: What is the current state of mental health in your school or school district? Do you learn about mental health in school? Are you taught about different mental health conditions, their signs and how to get help? Does your school allow mental health sick days? Do you have a mental health professional (counselor, social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist) on staff to help students who need it? If so, how many students does your school or school district have per mental health professional? How does it work in your school when a student has a mental health crisis? If a student has a behavior that may be a symptom of a mental health condition, how are they responded to? Is there a school resource officer who responds or are they referred to a mental health professional? Are students expelled for the behavior or are they referred to get help? This information will give a clear view of what's going on in your school or school district when it comes to how they treat mental health.

Find your Allies: Has anybody in your school been talking about these issues? This could be anyone: a teacher, school staff, coach, faith leader, other interested students (start a club!). See if they're interested in helping you advocate for mental health for students.

Research the Process: Research and see if any of your local representatives (school board member, city council, county, or state) have mentioned mental health or school mental health in a positive way. Reach out and ask for a meeting with that individual to explain the process on how to create change in your school or school district. You'd be surprised how willing policymakers are to talk to young people.

Act: Now that you have more information, a team to help you, and guidance on the process of creating change, it's time to get started to use your voice for good!

If you are interested in joining NAMI's grassroots advocacy efforts, learn more at www.nami.org/takeaction.

If you are interested in developing your grassroots advocacy skills, learn more about NAMI Smarts For Advocacy at https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-Programs/NAMI-Smarts-for-Advocacy.