

## **BHC study of substance use supports and services in public schools**

### **What is the Behavioral Health Commission (BHC)?**

The BHC is a standing commission of the Virginia General Assembly, made up of 12 legislative members. The BHC was established to improve the state's behavioral health services and system through research-based recommendations and oversight. The BHC has a full-time staff that conducts objective and nonpartisan public policy research and uses research findings to make policy recommendations; these recommendations inform legislators' policy decisions.

### **Why is the BHC reaching out to me?**

Staff of the BHC are currently working on a study of the availability of substance use supports and services in Virginia's public schools, and we want to notify you that we will be reaching out to personnel within your division. This study was requested by the BHC's legislative members as part of its 2026 workplan, which can be accessed at <https://bhc.virginia.gov/planning.asp>. A one-page description of the study has been attached.

### **How will my school division be involved?**

There are two ways that your division may be involved:

#### **1. Upcoming site visits**

We will reach out to a cross section of school divisions over the next two weeks to (a) schedule onsite meetings with division and school personnel and (b) ask for assistance in facilitating site visits to schools in these divisions. The site visits will provide insight into the availability of substance use supports and services in Virginia's public schools, as well as the challenges faced by schools and how they vary across Virginia.

#### **2. Upcoming survey**

In July, we will send out a brief survey to some school counselors in each division. This survey is intended to provide an overview of the substance use supports and services that are currently available. Individual responses will be kept confidential.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact John Barfield, the lead analyst for this project, at [jbarfield@bhc.virginia.gov](mailto:jbarfield@bhc.virginia.gov) or (804) 967-3978.

# Availability and effectiveness of programs for substance use disorders (SUDs) in Virginia schools

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**Strategic goals addressed:** Complete continuum of care

**Estimated workload:** Medium/High

**Background:** Virginia's state and administrative codes require public schools to offer drug and substance-related education, as well as physical and health education that includes instruction on mental health and the connection between mental health and substance use disorders (SUDs). However, local school divisions retain significant authority over how to fulfill these requirements, which services to offer, and whether to develop their own programs. Because of the flexibility enjoyed by localities in Virginia, divisions are not required to report about their SUD offerings to the state, such that little is known about the types of SUD programs and services offered in each division and the extent to which they are accessible by the student population. It is also unknown whether school districts have collected data on the efficacy of their programs, and to what extent they are evidence based or follow the principles of effective SUD programs.

## Proposed scope

- Assess the availability of SUSS and measure to what extent they meet the needs of students
- Identify what strategies divisions and schools have used to better meet the needs of students
- Identify the barriers divisions and schools face to more fully meeting students' needs, and how they could be addressed
- Examine partnerships between schools and community providers and referral processes for connecting students to treatment
- Evaluate the risks and negative student outcomes associated with ineffective referral systems or failed community treatment linkages

## Recent work / work in progress

- The Virginia Department of Education conducted a survey in 2025 that details the availability of school-based mental health and substance use services across the Commonwealth. The report includes data that can help evaluate the availability of school-based services and better understand how school facilitate access to community providers. Although the report provides insights into some aspects of substance use services and supports (SUSS), the report lacks specificity on the availability of specific types of services and supports and on the types of community partnerships or referral mechanism for SUSS.
- The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services conducted an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program in 2017. The report found that the evidence for the effectiveness of the program was mixed at best, and included a review of other programs that have been found to be effective in reducing substance abuse based on scientific, evidence-based studies.