

THE URGENT NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AMONG FILIPINO SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

by:

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The concerning state of mental health among Filipino school-aged children is a critical issue that demands immediate attention. According to the Philippine WHO Special Initiative for Mental Health, around 3.6 million Filipinos, including 10-15% of children aged 5 to 15, grapple with various mental health challenges. Alarming, a staggering 16.8% of students aged 13 to 17 attempt suicide annually (Zurielle et al., 2021). These statistics emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support within the education system to ensure that young people receive the help they need.

The alarming data from the 2020 Department of Education reveals a significant gap in mental health resources available to students. With only 1,096 active guidance counselors available for at least 20 million public school learners, the ratio of counselors to students is severely lacking. This results in one counselor serving approximately 18,248 students each school year (Quilaton-Tambiga, 2022), exacerbating the challenge of providing adequate support to those in need. The overwhelming number of students per counselor makes it nearly impossible for these professionals to address individual concerns effectively, leading to many students suffering in silence.

Poor mental health profoundly affects academic performance, creating a ripple effect that impacts not only students but also their families and communities. Conditions such as anxiety and depression hinder students' engagement in class, leading to concentration lapses, decreased participation, and negatively impacting their grades. For many students, coping with exam pressures becomes a formidable challenge, making long-term goals—like completing university and pursuing a fulfilling career—seem

overwhelming and out of reach (EU Business School, 2023). This cycle of stress and underachievement can have lasting consequences on their future.

Recognizing the severity of the mental health crisis among students, the House Committee on Basic Education and Culture has introduced House Resolution 422. This resolution advocates for the integration of mental health awareness courses into the K to 12 basic education curricula for all secondary high schools, both public and private (Philippine News Agency, 2021). By embedding mental health education into the curriculum, students can learn essential coping strategies and develop a better understanding of mental health issues, helping to reduce stigma and encourage open conversations.

In a virtual seminar organized by the Department of Education (DepEd), Prof. Erickson A. Amion highlighted several strategies for effectively incorporating mental health education in schools. These strategies include fostering open conversations to reduce stigma, training educators to recognize and address mental health concerns, integrating mental health topics into academic curricula, and providing essential tools for students to manage their mental health effectively. Supporting the mental health needs of educators themselves is also crucial, as they play a vital role in nurturing students' well-being (Department of Education, 2022).

Furthermore, psychosocial support programs initiated at the beginning of the school year, along with national initiatives like the National Mental Health Month and Suicide Prevention Month, are gaining momentum. These programs aim to create a supportive atmosphere where students feel safe to express their feelings and seek help without fear of judgment.

Addressing mental health in schools is vital for fostering a supportive environment that enables students to thrive. Recognizing the significance of mental well-being in our education system not only promotes academic success but also contributes

to the overall development of young individuals. The future of our society relies on the mental health of our youth, and as such, we must prioritize creating an environment that supports their emotional needs.

However, the successful implementation of these initiatives requires dedication and increased resources. Educational institutions must allocate funds and support to train counselors and teachers adequately, ensuring they are equipped to handle mental health issues effectively. Collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, and mental health organizations is essential to establish a nurturing and mentally healthy educational environment for everyone. By prioritizing mental health support, we can pave the way for a brighter future for the youth of the Philippines, where they can excel not only academically but also personally, fostering a generation that is resilient, informed, and capable of overcoming challenges.

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