

THE CURRENT STATE OF LEARNERS' MENTAL HEALTH IN PHILIPPINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Mental health has become a growing concern in Philippine public schools, especially after the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students are grappling with various challenges, including the stress of adjusting back to face-to-face classes, academic pressures, and the lingering effects of prolonged isolation. Many learners, particularly those from low-income families, face additional burdens, such as economic instability and family-related issues, which significantly impact their emotional well-being.

Despite the efforts of the Department of Education (DepEd), addressing learners' mental health remains an uphill battle. Programs like the DepEd Mental Health Program and the implementation of Republic Act No. 11036, or the Mental Health Act, are steps in the right direction. Schools have also strengthened their guidance and counseling services and promoted initiatives such as Learning Action Cells (LAC) for teachers to raise awareness. However, the shortage of guidance counselors and mental health professionals in many public schools has left teachers bearing the responsibility of identifying and addressing mental health concerns without sufficient training or resources.

In addition to institutional efforts, public schools have collaborated with external stakeholders, including local government units (LGUs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to provide supplementary support. Programs like Barkada Kontra Droga and Supreme Student Government (SSG) help foster a sense of belonging among students, which is crucial for emotional resilience. However, the full impact of these

initiatives is limited by systemic gaps, such as the lack of funding and inadequate parent involvement, which hinder sustainable mental health interventions.

To address these gaps, several recommendations are proposed. First, the government should prioritize the hiring of more licensed mental health professionals to support public schools. Teachers must also receive regular training on mental health to better assist students. Additionally, fostering stronger collaboration between parents and schools can ensure students receive consistent emotional support both at home and in the classroom. Schools should also encourage student-led mental health initiatives to destigmatize seeking help and promote a supportive peer culture. Integrating mental health education into the curriculum can further develop emotional literacy among students.

The mental health crisis among learners in public schools is a pressing issue that requires immediate and sustained action. While existing policies and programs are commendable, there is much room for improvement in their implementation and scope. By addressing systemic gaps, equipping educators, and fostering a whole-community approach, the education system can better support students' mental well-being. Ultimately, a robust focus on mental health is essential not only for academic success but also for nurturing resilient and emotionally healthy individuals.

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