

Opinion: NY needs a student mental health system that works for students

Gov. Kathy Hochul has made a strong start, but improvements are needed.



Gov. Kathy Hochul (MIKE GROLL/OFFICE OF GOVERNOR KATHY HOCHUL)

BY #DEGREESNYC YOUTH COUNCIL

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Mental health is one of the biggest crises affecting youth in the United States. One in five young adults [experience mental illness](#); in New York City, 60% of adolescents report that they've had major depressive episodes. Structural barriers, heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to even higher rates among non-white students.

While in the past these problems were swept under the rug, recent public awareness campaigns by national groups like [Young Invincibles](#) and the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) have advocated for societal acceptance and understanding. Through personal narrative projects that highlight people like [Melissa](#) – a college student who dealt with stigma at home and cumbersome administration which prevented her from getting help at school – these campaigns have substantially improved [public perception](#).

Robust mental health services with collective care teams are among the recommendations included in the #DegreesNYC Student-Ready Schools and Campuses report, which will be released on June 14. The report argues that for a school to be student ready, mental health services have to be available, accessible and culturally relevant for students.

Our political leaders are stepping up. Gov. Kathy Hochul announced an ambitious proposal to combat the youth mental health crisis during her 2023 state of the state speech. She allocated funding to schools to create in-place



clinics, youth-centered community-based organizations, and expand CUNY and SUNY student services. Through these funds, it is possible to help tens of thousands of students. However, to achieve real impact, this proposal must be carried out in an equitable, comprehensive, and transparent way.

#DegreesNYC is a movement co-led by young people and education professionals to break down barriers to higher education in New York City. When our Youth Council reviewed the governor's plan, we had questions about several aspects, including how high schools are chosen to receive funding. Selected high schools are given \$25,000 to create a mental health clinic. Gov. Hochul's goal is to help 137 schools throughout the state. Having a clinic on campus will improve student access to resources, but the clinics should be sited for maximum impact. When looking at which New York City schools and districts were given this award, we found an underrepresentation of public schools. In fact, District 75 (a citywide district serving youth with educational and physical disabilities) is omitted entirely. How can Gov. Hochul's proposal improve mental health in schools when it overlooks some of our most vulnerable students?

Additionally, in the governor's listening tour that led to the announcement, there were only five locations outside New York City for youth participation. Engaging two hundred young New Yorkers is a good start, but youth input needs to be consistent, inclusive and empowering. We encourage the governor to expand the listening tour to involve young people beyond the brainstorming phase. Specifically, there should be a way for students to provide feedback on how mental health services are delivered at schools. Combined with data collected through surveys and interviews with youth leaders, it would allow the state to take into account how young New Yorkers feel.

Intake and referral services should also be expanded for students. A major factor of the mental health crisis is poor access to counseling and psychiatry services. Ideally, school clinics would hire an intake counselor to guide, support, and advocate for students as they explore their mental health plan.

Lastly, in recent months New York City has taken in thousands of newly arrived migrants. The needs of these students must be accounted for. Every clinic must come with cultural-sensitivity trainings and multilingual resources.

In response to this crisis, we urge the governor to revisit the selection criteria for school awards and make the commitment to include at least one school in District 75 and increase borough diversity. We also demand a greater focus on assuring that every student has the necessary support for this very personal problem. Young people should never have to fight for mental health care on their own, as Melissa did. By ensuring they have support to get care, Gov. Hochul can make it clear she understands that students who are in a good place emotionally are more likely to succeed in school.