



For Immediate Release

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Family Connections

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Flagship Program for Youth Cut from Governor Murphy's Proposed FY 2021 Budget

School Based Youth Services Programs Eliminated across N.J. with only 30 days' notice

Orange, NJ: Governor Murphy's revised fiscal 2021 budget proposes nearly \$12 million in cuts for the Office of School Linked Services within the Department of Children and Families. Among the nearly 100 programs funded through the office are school-based youth services such as mental health counseling, employment counseling, substance abuse prevention, suicide prevention, pregnancy prevention and sexual assault prevention.

New Jersey is home to a program recognized across the nation as a model for how to reach at-risk youth who refuse to participate in other social services or otherwise slip through the cracks. Now with the proposed 2021 budget, that program is on the chopping block.

"Losing these 90 programs would be a devastating blow to thousands of students throughout the State who are struggling now more than ever with depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and difficulties at home," says Jacques Hryshko, Chief Executive Officer, Family Connections NJ. "The pandemic has only deepened the need for SBYSP services."

School Based Youth Services Programs (SBYSP's) are on-site in 90 of the most challenged high schools and middle schools across the State. Customized to coordinate with existing resources in each school and community, and open to all youth, SBYSP's operate before, during, and after school. Their main goals are to make a positive impact on students' social and emotional development, academic success and vocational and college prep.

Governor Murphy has previously made it clear that he wants to strengthen mental health and other safety net supports for New Jersey youth. Yet, his proposed FY2021 budget completely eliminates SBYSP's – a shining example of how to reach at-risk youth by being on-site where they congregate. Even during the pandemic, with all schools closed, SBYSP staff has kept in touch with these youth through creative use of Social Media and other technology. So, whether a school is all-virtual, hybrid, or in-person, SBYSP's are equipped to continue providing students with mental health counseling, skills-building groups, and positive social connection with their peers.

During summer months, SBYSP's have offered special programming to provide structure, life-skills training, and a fun place to hang out during a time when many, especially from low-income homes, have nothing to do and are at most risk of falling into unhealthy behaviors. "A first kids often come just to play video games after school," said Hryshko. "That is when they have nowhere else to hang out that's safe and welcoming. Then they learn to trust our staff and the real stuff starts coming out."

Each SBYSP has its own full-time staff and its own space that doesn't feel like school.

- At first, kids often come just to play video games or foosball after school, when they have nowhere else to hang out that's safe and welcoming.
- Many decide to join groups on homework help and S.A.T. prep. Others trust us enough to tackle challenges like safe sex, dating violence, LGBTQ peer support, bereavement, and more.
- Teens that have never hiked in a State Park or been to a Broadway show; SBYSP takes them there.
- When they have a crisis or loss at home, they come to SBYSP's licensed mental health clinicians. When a teacher or another student hears of a suicide threat, they bring the youth to SBYSP. So sometimes, these programs literally save lives.

"Even during the pandemic, with all schools closed all the SBYSP staffs have kept in touch with their local kids through social media and other technology," says Hryshko. "Whether a school is all-virtual, hybrid, or in-person, we're equipped to continue providing students with mental health counseling, skills-building groups, and positive social connection with their peers."

Call-To-Action:

- Save School Based Counseling & Youth Services Petition on Change.org has nearly 26,000 signatures with a goal of 35,000
- Social media, email and letter writing campaign to Governor Murphy and NJ State Legislators
- Student rally Friday, September 4th at the NJ State House, 3 to 4pm
- Virtual Rally proposed for Wednesday, September 9th (details TBD)
- Campaign support from The New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc.

The State Legislature can restore SBYSP funding – but only if they hear a resounding response from their constituents. Everyone who believes in supporting these life-saving model programs is urged to contact their local members of the State Assembly and Senate – and the Governor as well.

For more information on how to take action, go to: <https://www.familyconnectionsnj.org/join-the-effort-to-restore-school-based-program-funding/>

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