



COVID-19 School Wellness Initiative

Report Highlights



Illinois Children's
Healthcare Foundation

PIE  ORG
PLAN | IMPLEMENT | EVALUATE

Overview

In late 2021, in response to profound mental health needs exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Board of Directors of the Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation (ILCHF) approved approximately **\$8.5 million** over two and a half years to support the COVID-19 School Wellness Initiative (CSWI).

CSWI funded **29 grants of up to \$300,000 each to 22 communities across the state of Illinois disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic**. The Chicago cohort received 14 grants, with the remaining 15 grants distributed throughout Illinois. Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation (PIE) Org evaluated the initiative.

Focus & Methodology

These grants focused on solidifying relationships between schools and behavioral health organizations, providing direct support in schools to meet the mental health needs of students, school staff, and parents and caregivers across Illinois. CSWI is among the largest single-initiative investments in children's mental health by the Board of Directors of ILCHF. The described takeaways and strategies are gleaned from grant reports submitted to ILCHF and the [PIE evaluation report](#).

A **mixed-methods approach** combined quantitative (student attendance, referral rates, behavioral health outcomes, workforce numbers) and qualitative data (interviews, focus groups, case studies, and stakeholder feedback) to provide a fuller understanding of the initiative's impact. The evaluation not only measured progress against defined outcomes, **but captured the reality of the impact of the pandemic on students, families, school staff, and behavioral health providers across Illinois**.

Outcomes

The data indicates improvements in both attendance and classroom engagement, with decreases in disciplinary incidents for youth receiving services. Other highlights include:



19,026 students
gained access to school-based
behavioral health services



75% of clinicians
reported improved
outcomes in youth



4,827 parents/caregivers
engaged in Tier 1-3
programming



89,334 hours
of direct service
provided in schools



73% of partnerships
expected to continue
after the grant periods



Key Elements

The evaluation revealed three core themes vital to sustaining improvements in children's mental and behavioral health across communities in Illinois:

- **Parent/Caregiver Engagement:** Parents and caregivers are a child's first teachers and strongest advocates. When families are engaged as active partners in care, children are more likely to access services consistently, demonstrate stronger resilience, and experience improved social-emotional outcomes.
- **Workforce Strategies:** A skilled, sustainable workforce is essential for addressing the increasing behavioral health needs of children. CSWI grantees developed innovative strategies to recruit, train, and retain behavioral health professionals, helping schools and community organizations meet demand.
- **School-Behavioral Health Provider Relationships:** Strong and collaborative relationships between schools and behavioral health providers create seamless systems of support. When school personnel and providers work in partnership, schools can become hubs where children can access care without stigma or delay.

Although CSWI focused on meeting immediate needs, many grantees planned for sustainability beyond the grant period. The desire for continued services surfaced often in learning community discussions, not as a separate effort, but as part of day-to-day decision making: how to determine funding sources, strengthen organizational capacity, and embed services into school culture. By the end of the initiative, **16 organizations reported plans to continue their partnerships** in some form, whether through additional grants, Medicaid billing, or school district support. Together, these efforts provide a foundation for lasting impact across the Illinois children's mental health landscape.

We hope these outcomes and strategies resonate with you and provide valuable insights as you continue to improve children's behavioral health in your communities. This important work would not be possible without the dedication of behavioral health advocates, school partners, parents, and caregivers across Illinois. Thank you for your contributions to advancing **ILCHF's vision: that every child in Illinois grows up healthy.**

For questions, please email Christine Brambila, ILCHF Senior Program Officer, at ChristineBrambila@ilchf.org.

Read the full CSWI report:



ILCHF Vision

Every child in Illinois
grows up healthy.

Acknowledgements

ILCHF is grateful to and celebrates the CSWI grantees and all those who participated in CSWI for the work they do every day to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and families.

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