



**Kentucky Student Voice Team
Rose Revival Campaign 2025-2026
Summary Report from Mental Health Hearing in Louisville, KY**

Introduction

In 1989, the Kentucky Supreme Court’s *Rose v. Council for Better Education* decision affirmed that every child in the Commonwealth has a constitutional right to an adequate and equitable education—including the support necessary for “mental and physical wellness.” Yet, more than three decades later, Kentucky’s public schools are still falling short of that standard. Across the state, students report a worsening mental health crisis, inadequate access to school counselors, and growing inequities between wealthy and low-income districts. At the Kentucky Student Voice Team’s Rose Revival Mental Health Hearing—one of a series of student-led convenings complementing our pending lawsuit, *KSVT v. Commonwealth*—students, educators, and practitioners identified systemic barriers and community-based solutions to ensure all students can learn, thrive, and belong in Kentucky schools.

The September 2025 hearing was held in the Red Barn at the University of Louisville to discuss the state of Kentucky public schools’ mental health support systems and the welfare of students included. Four student examiners from the KSVT questioned three expert panelists. Approximately 40 guests attended, from the young, school-aged children to adults and senior citizens, proving the importance of the topic of mental health for all ages of the Commonwealth. Caroline Segebarth, a member of the KSVT litigation and research teams, and a Student Action Network for Equity Student Liaison, acted as a host for this convening, and provided opening remarks on the topic. Caroline then opened up the session by inviting the student panelists to begin their questioning.

Expert Panelists’ Remarks

Whitney Campbell is a Mental Health Practitioner and Counselor at Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS). Ms. Campbell’s testimony focused on fostering an accepting community and improving mental health support within schools. For example, Ms. Campbell stated that there are “Black girls groups; black boy groups; Latinx groups, self esteem groups, etc.” to make sure students feel welcome at school and in their community. She noted that she has witnessed firsthand the growing need for mental health support, which was especially heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. To address these challenges, JCPS implements a mandatory suicide prevention program that students complete twice each school year.

Ms. Campbell highlighted the idea that creating authentic connections with students requires both prioritizing mental health and providing intentional spaces for support. Visibility is key: counselors and mental health professionals must be present in everyday school spaces, such as the commons or cafeteria, to engage with students in natural, accessible ways. Representation is also critical, especially for LGBTQ+ students. For example, having administrators, teachers, and counselors who reflect diverse identities helps foster trust, break down stigma, and make students feel seen and supported.

Solyana Mesfin, a former KSVT Member and the first student on the Kentucky Board of Education, focused her testimony on decreasing the stigma around mental health in schools. She began by explaining that we need a “cultural reset” to broaden mental health resources for students. One way to do this, she said, was to improve the ratio of counselors to students in schools. Additionally, she noted that an increase in the number of counselors should lead to an increase in the diversity of all mental health counselors. She stated that students feel safer when they can see themselves in a counselor. Therefore, schools must be intentional about hiring diverse staff. Later in her testimony, Ms. Mesfin spoke about fostering school community. She felt strongly about creating a space where all students feel valued, suggesting the creation of certain clubs and community-building groups. By creating a welcoming environment, students feel safer talking to each other and with trusted adults. Finally, Ms. Mesfin shared her experiences as the first student on the Kentucky Board of Education, explaining how student voice has an invaluable impact on legislation policies, including mental health regulations, in school districts.

Lori Vogel’s testimony focused on how emotional distress is largely introduced to students at school, and these experiences severely disrupt student life. She introduces SB 8, which refers to the 1:250 counselor-to-student ratio, to lead into her unique opinion as a child guidance specialist and middle school social worker. Similar to the other panelists, she believes the reality that “counselors often have 500 students,” and clearly, the 1:250 ratio is not met in many schools across Kentucky. Additionally, she mentioned various programs that she believes schools should participate in: Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Sources of Strength. In comparison to the other panelists, Lori Vogel supplemented both Whitney Campbell and Solyana Mesfin by understanding the difficulties many counselors face daily, and explaining how the provision of more mental health support groups mentioned previously will provide countless students with opportunities to thrive in public education.

As a Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS) employee, Ms. Vogel focused on the opportunities that are offered to the students around her, leading to a unique and additional perspective that expands on what Whitney Campbell and Solyana Mesfin attested in their testimonies. For example, Ms. Vogel returned to the other panelists’ comments about socioemotional surveys,

reinforcing the idea that many students don't take the time to fill out these surveys. However, she suggested that training FCPS staff (and the greater public education workforce) on mental health literacy would help all students receive the help they need, even without filling out socioemotional surveys.

While Ms. Campbell's and Ms. Vogel's testimonies focused on an adult perspective of mental health in schools, Ms. Mesfin shared her experience as a student who received mental health services in Kentucky high schools. Taken together, this information helped to broaden the audience's understanding of the quality and necessity of mental health services and community-building initiatives in public schools across Kentucky.

Audience Questions

Following the expert testimonies, audience members and student examiners engaged in an open Q&A that revealed both shared concerns and diverse viewpoints. Participants asked about new cell phone bans, including Senate Bill 181. Counselors noted a surprising drop in fights and a rise in face-to-face interaction, but others urged flexibility on the ban for emergencies. Questions about Senate Bill 181 surfaced frustration from parents and teachers who felt communication restrictions hindered collaboration; experts cautioned that preventing rare misconduct should not come at the cost of trust and access.

KSVT Recommendations for Next Steps

1. Enforce and Adequately Fund the Counselor-to-Student Ratio

- Mandate KDE audits and public reporting on each school's compliance with the 1:250 counselor-to-student ratio.
- Provide targeted state funding to districts unable to meet the mandate.
- Consider the value add of "counselors" as inclusive of certified school social workers and licensed mental health practitioners.

2. Recruit and Retain Diverse Counselors

- Establish a Diversity in School Counseling Fellowship to recruit counselors of color and LGBTQ+ practitioners.
- Offer tuition assistance or loan forgiveness for graduates who serve in high-need districts.
- Require annual training in trauma-informed practice that is culturally competent.

3. Train all School Personnel in Mental Health Literacy

- Integrate Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Sources of Strength programs across grade levels.

- Incentivize district partnerships with community mental health organizations.

4. Invest in Preventive, Student-Led Supports

- Dedicate existing homeroom or advisory time for structured peer connection and mental health literacy.
- Support peer mentorship programs pairing older and younger students.
- Fund small student-led initiatives—clubs, affinity groups, and mental health ambassadors—that promote belonging.

5. Create Visible, Inclusive Wellness Spaces

- Require each school to designate a supervised “wellness hub” or drop-in space for students.
- Encourage counselors to engage students in informal school settings (cafeterias, halls, clubs).
- Expand Family Resource and Youth Service Centers (FRYSCs) to include school-based mental health programming.

6. Elevate Student Voice in Policy Design

- Mandate Student Mental Health Advisory Councils at the district level to advise local boards.
- Include student representatives on KDE mental health and SEL task forces.
- Use student-administered climate surveys to evaluate program impact.

7. Balance Safety with Access Under SB 181

- Require district cell phone policies to allow flexible access during mental health emergencies.
- Engage students, parents, and educators in co-creating local implementation plans that prioritize trust and communication.

Reflections from the KSVT Student Researchers who Authored this Hearing Summary

Abby Ladwig: As someone who has personally used public school counseling, it is vital that we supply enough funding in our schools to provide for more children to receive these vital services. What our panelists said was outstanding, but also heartbreaking to hear about the state of our schools. It is up to us, as citizens and leaders, to support any legislative effort made to pass greater funding bills in the name of providing more access to mental health services for all students. Our efforts won't just impact the present health of Kentucky's students, but the future as well.

Daniel Ratley: As a student from rural Kentucky, I acknowledge how this hearing over mental health in Kentucky public schools is applicable to countless students and staff that deal with similar issues regarding counseling services within school systems. In the future, I hope that Kentucky schools can find a way to balance both providing mental health support for students and staff; this balance can have a structure that branches off important clubs (such as Sources of Strength) to make sure that everyone receives the help they need. By highlighting the importance of these clubs, Kentucky public schools will reduce feelings of isolation and foster a more collaborative environment for students and staff.

Bryan Xia: I understand that funding for education is limited, both in Kentucky and across the nation. Still, one low-cost and effective way to support students' mental health is through students themselves. Many schools already have homerooms or designated meeting periods, and dedicating that time to structured peer interaction could help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. Another approach is to introduce a peer mentor program, where upperclassmen build supportive relationships with younger students, fostering belonging and guidance within the school community.

Caitlyn Douglas: As a student in a public school with a counselor-to-student ratio of 1:650, I witness the daily implications of a weak mental health support system. With scarce professional resources, many students turn to their friends and teachers, placing an excessive burden on their peers. This failure to provide adequate mental health staff violates the promise of the Rose decision and the constitutional and statutory guarantees that every Kentucky student should be supported in their mental and physical wellness. Hearing the expert testimonies affirmed what many students already know: a lack of resources creates inequities for students with mental health needs. This hearing clearly showed that solutions, including diversifying mental health staff and maintaining a 1:250 counselor-to-student ratio, are necessary for moving towards the future and improving the overall wellbeing of all Kentucky students.