School-based health centers provide access to critical health services for the nation’s most vulnerable youth. In Spring 2021, the School-Based Health Alliance, a nonprofit corporation dedicated to supporting and advocating for high-quality healthcare in schools, launched a National Survey of School-Based Health Centers to gather information on their operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Representatives from approximately one-third of school-based health centers nationally responded to the survey (n=1,122), representing school-based health centers in 33 states and the District of Columbia; most were located in the South and West regions of the U.S. While survey findings may not be generalizable to school-based health centers nationally, particularly since non-responders were likely health centers that were temporarily or permanently closed, they provide insights into how school-based health centers nationwide were impacted by and responded to the pandemic.

KEY FINDINGS

School-based health centers continued serving students and their school communities despite challenges, innovating and adapting as necessary.

- Nearly all survey respondents (92%) were fully or partially open by Spring 2021, despite facing many challenges to service delivery. These challenges included reaching or engaging students (59%), having to close when the school facility closed (39%), and having to furlough, lay off or redeploy staff (38%).

- School-based health centers continued to serve populations that traditionally experience health care disparities. Most schools with access to the school-based health centers in the survey sample (79%) were designated as Title I, meaning they receive federal financial assistance because of the high percentage of students from low-income families. Moreover, half (51%) of survey respondents reported that they served populations other than the students attending their schools, such as students’ family members, school staff, and other community members.

- Telehealth, delivered by phone or virtually, was a critical strategy for delivering continued care. Over 80% of survey respondents delivered some services via telehealth—a significant increase compared to the 2016-17 school year when 20% of school-based health centers nationwide reported offering services via telehealth.

- School-based health centers provided direct services to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly half (45%) of the survey respondents offered COVID-19 testing or follow-up on testing results and one quarter (25%) administered COVID-19 vaccines. These numbers have likely increased as vaccine approval was expanded to children five years and older in Fall 2021.

- One-quarter (27%) of the respondents reported that their staff delivered professional development or consulting to school staff to support student mental health and 22% expanded their mental health referral networks.

- As in prior years, half of survey respondents (50%) reported that their lead sponsor agencies, which generally oversee clinical, staffing, and fiscal operations, were Health Centers. Other common sponsor types included school systems (16%), hospitals/medical centers (15%), and mental health agencies (11%). Common sources of
funding reported by survey respondents were third-party billing (55%); state (47%), federal (33%) and local (22%) government funding; and in-kind (29%) and school system (22%) support. Future examination into how these sponsor and funding models impacted school-based health centers' ability to stay open and adapt services is critical.

WHAT'S NEXT

As we advocate for national policy and legislative action, we will use the findings from the 2021 National Survey to tell the story of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school-based health centers across the country and how they responded to meet the needs of their communities. The details on implementing telehealth, vaccination and testing of students and their families, and the challenges related to clinical operations and service delivery during the pandemic illustrate the true strength of our field.

The National Survey was designed to obtain timely information from the field and does not capture all school-based health centers nationally. We hope that every school-based health center will participate in the 2021-22 National Census to be launched this upcoming spring.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported in part by funding from the JPB Foundation. We also appreciate the contributions of our current and former School-Based Health Alliance staff, School-Based Health Alliance Affiliates, State Program Offices, and California and New Mexico affiliates for contributing data from their states' data collection efforts. Thank you to the school-based health care professionals who generously participated in this survey in addition to facing the demands of an ongoing pandemic.

GET INVOLVED

The School-Based Health Alliance is committed to strengthening and expanding school-based health centers nationwide. Learn about how you can contribute at www.sbh4all.org. Be sure to also follow us on Twitter (@sbh4all) and Facebook (SchoolBasedHealthAlliance) for our latest updates.


1 Health Resources & Services Administration: https://telehealth.hhs.gov/patients/understanding-telehealth/
4 Bureau of Primary Health Care: https://bphc.hrsa.gov/about/what-is-a-health-center/index.html.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

1 Share this report with your colleagues to launch dialogue and inform decision-making.
2 Connect with research@sbh4all.org to confirm your School-Based Health Centers contact information.
3 Complete the 2021-22 National Census of school-based health centers in Spring 2022.