

SPOTLIGHT:

Caring 4 Students in Michigan

Amber Bellazaire, Senior Policy Analyst | October 2025

Summary

School-based health centers (SBHCs) have long played a vital role in providing timely health care to Michigan students at or near school, and fortunately, Michigan has also taken an additional step to expand access to student health services. Enter: Caring 4 Students (C4S).

Caring 4 Students (C4S)



Launched in 2019, C4S allows Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) and eligible public schools to receive Medicaid reimbursement for the behavioral health and nursing services they provide to students enrolled in Medicaid. C4S is unique in allowing schools to bill Medicaid for services delivered by school-employed staff, including for students without an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Previously, schools could only receive Medicaid reimbursement for services provided to students with IEPs due to a federal policy known as the free care rule. That rule effectively excluded Medicaid reimbursement for services provided to general education students, even if they were covered by Medicaid.

In 2014, however, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) rescinded the rule, allowing states to seek reimbursement for services delivered to any Medicaid-covered student, regardless of whether those services were offered for free to students not enrolled in Medicaid.

In 2018, Michigan submitted a State Plan Amendment (SPA) to take advantage of this rule reversal. The SPA was approved in 2019, and Caring 4 Students was established.

Caring 4 Students Covers:

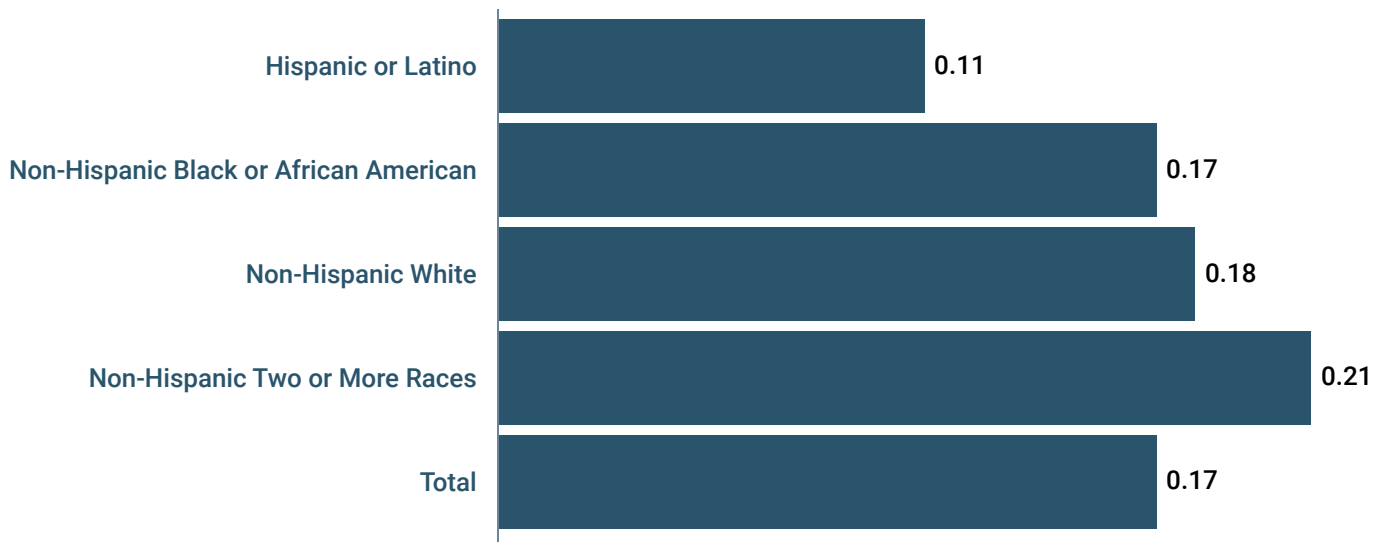
- Mental health counseling and crisis intervention services.
- Nursing services, such as acute health services, support for chronic disease management and health education.
- Medically necessary therapy, including occupational, physical, and speech, language and hearing therapies.
- Care planning and coordination.

Care That's There When It's Needed

Caring 4 Students is Michigan's response to the growing mental health needs of its youth, including rising rates of anxiety, depression and chronic absenteeism. These challenges do not affect all students equally.

The data shown below provide an important snapshot of the disproportionate health challenges some students continue to face and that can interfere with learning. By providing services directly within schools, C4S expands access to care, supports school health staff and offers a path toward greater equity by helping to address structural barriers that have long kept care out of reach for many children and teens.

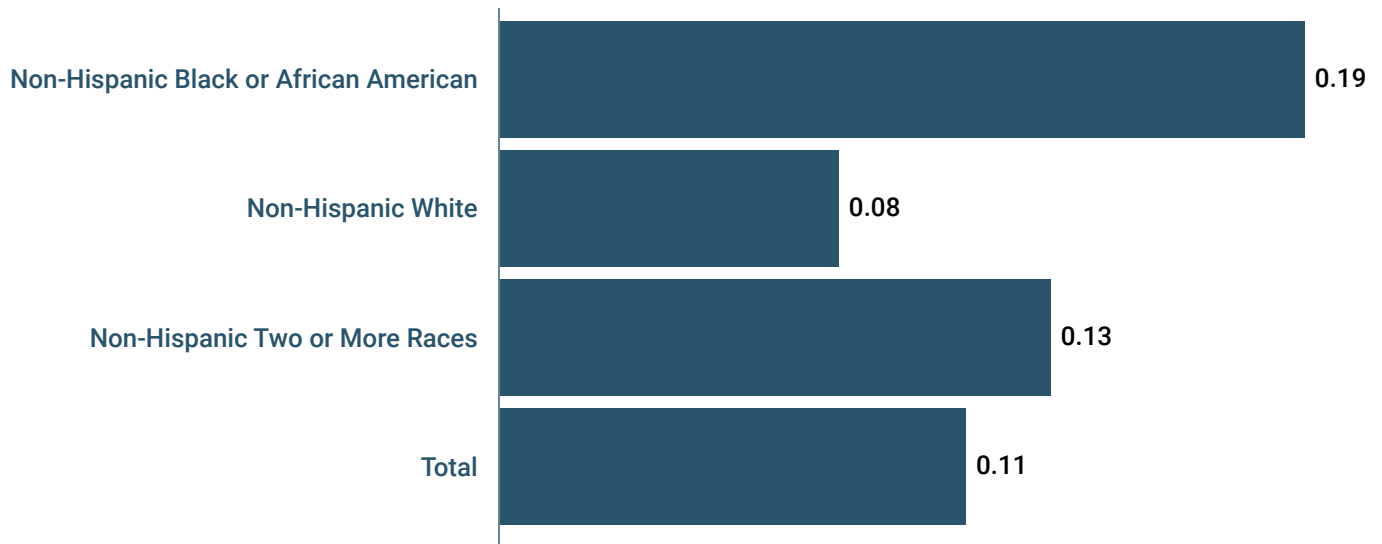
Rates of Michigan children and teens with anxiety or depression by race and ethnicity



Source: [Kids Count in Michigan, 2022](#)

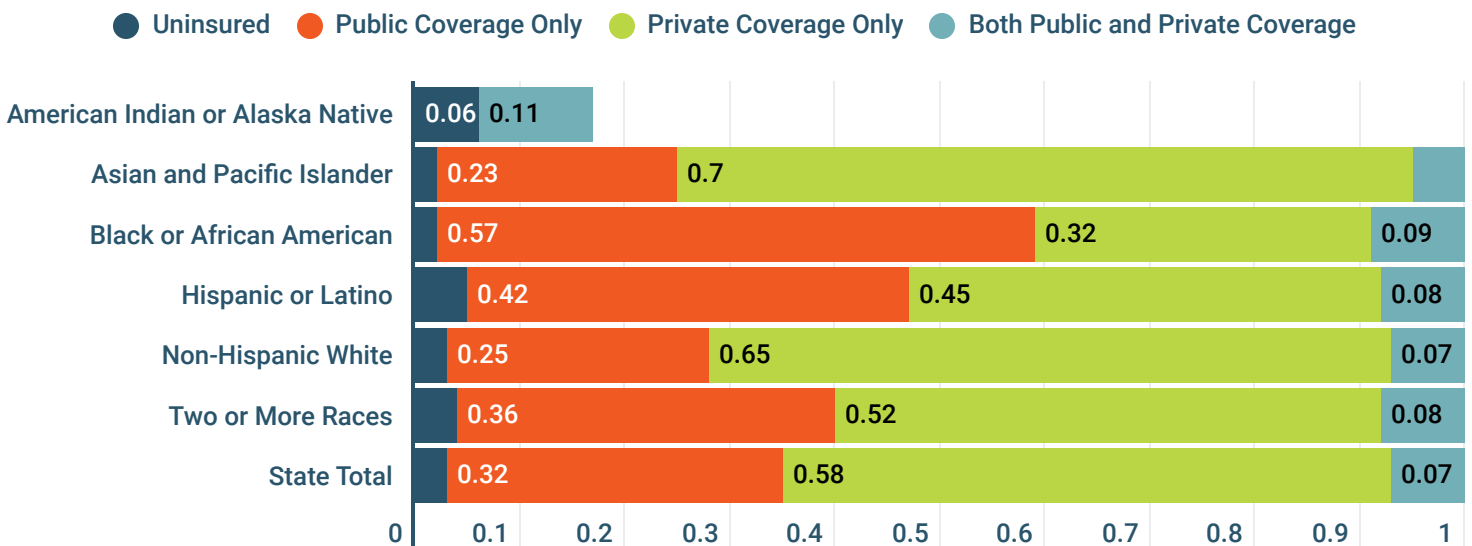


Rates of Michigan children who are not in excellent or very good health by race and ethnicity



Source: [Kids Count in Michigan, 2022](#)

Rates of Michigan children by health insurance type and race and ethnicity



Source: [Kids Count in Michigan, 2023](#)

Note: While these charts offer valuable insight, data for some racial and ethnic groups (e.g., American Indian or Alaska Native students) are not currently available or are suppressed due to small population sizes – a limitation that points to the need for more inclusive, disaggregated data collection. At present, data on students served through Caring 4 Students, including data disaggregated by race or ethnicity, is not publicly available.

Because C4S services are delivered in-house by staff already embedded in students' daily environment, they're easier for students to access, especially for those who face barriers such as transportation challenges or long wait times for outside appointments. This is particularly important in under-resourced rural and urban districts, where access to clinical providers can be more limited and other barriers more common. By reimbursing services provided by existing staff, such as social workers, school psychologists, and nurses, C4S helps schools maximize their resources, reduce disruptions to learning and eliminate common barriers to care.

In some districts, Caring 4 Students is the primary means for schools to employ dedicated and certified behavioral health professionals and be reimbursed for the care they provide to students. This is particularly true for schools without a school-based health center. In districts with an SBHC, C4S and SBHCs form a two-pronged approach to school health, ultimately facilitating greater access to the services students need to reach their full potential.



How State and Federal Investments Support Student Mental Health

Caring 4 Students works in tandem with other state initiatives, including Michigan's 31n funding, to create a more robust and sustainable school health infrastructure.

In fiscal year 2018-2019, Michigan approved a School Aid supplemental budget bill, [Michigan Senate Bill 149 \(H-1\)](#), that included a \$30 million allocation to expand school-based mental health services. Commonly referred to as "31n" (a reference to the bill's section number) this dedicated funding included: \$16.5 million to Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) to hire mental health professionals such as social workers, counselors and psychologists; and \$5 million to SBHCs to support a Master's-level behavioral health provider in schools without such care already available.

Together, 31n funding and C4S form a powerful partnership: 31n provides the financial support necessary to grow the number of mental health providers working in schools, and C4S enables schools to be compensated for the health services delivered to Medicaid-enrolled students. By combining dedicated state funding through 31n with federal Medicaid reimbursement through C4S, Michigan schools are better equipped to meet the comprehensive mental health needs of their students.