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### Policy Council Proceedings

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مجلس السياسات  
POLICY COUNCIL



## PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING FOR UAE SCHOOL CHILDREN

**PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH  
AND WELLBEING FOR  
UAE SCHOOL CHILDREN**

## ABOUT THE POLICY COUNCIL

Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government took the initiative to launch the Policy Council, a round table dialogue program, to promote meaningful dialogues that will enrich shared knowledge within government entities. The Council also aims to highlight vital public topics and policies of high priority within the framework of the renown achievements realized by government entities in the UAE in various fields, positioning them locally, regionally, and globally as leaders within their specializations.

Additionally, the Council strives to encourage the dissemination of expertise, promote knowledge sharing, and ensure that all government entities benefit from the same. In this context, the School aims for participant diversity at every session, so as to include federal and local levels, central authorities, and specialized authorities, in addition to promoting the engagement of influential non-government stakeholders in relevant discussions. This will enable meaningful, comprehensive dialogues and the ability to tackle topics from a variety of perspectives, as the School seeks to restructure the Policy Council with a view to integrating it within comprehensive action agendas that will enable the Council to conduct in depth discussions of topics on the table. This, in turn, will enhance common understanding and knowledge-sharing efforts. The objectives of the Council can be summarized in providing a platform for cognitive dialogue among experts, specialists and stakeholders involved in the government sector with a view to highlighting issues of priority and importance on government and community levels. The Council also aims to document and disseminate dialogue in a balanced, comprehensive and practical manner to enrich cognitive content within government. Additionally, the Council strives to encourage individual and organizational communication and relationships, and to strengthen the cognitive network within government to enhance effective organizational cooperation. Finally, the Council strives to present insights and recommendations that will have an effective impact on joint action and the development of government performance.

## Executive Summary

This policy council proceeding reports on a policy dialogue that engaged a group of experts and practitioners in the field and aimed at identifying opportunities offered by the local context in terms of education and healthcare. The council discussed challenges that policymakers and practitioners encounter in promoting better mental health and wellbeing policies for UAE school children. The importance of such dialogue stems from the urgent need to address mental health policy and services, as mental health issues are predicted to increase with time.

The council identifies a number of challenges facing mental healthcare in the UAE, such as lack of clear policy directives, shortage of service providers, and social stigma. Policy recommendations were developed at the end to inform policymakers on possible options to overcome challenges and make the most of the present opportunities.

## Council Modularity and Purpose

The aim of this Policy Council was to gather stakeholders to start a dialogue on promoting mental health and wellbeing for school children in the UAE. A number of stakeholders were invited to participate, from both the public and private sector, including experts, policy makers, practitioners, and school counselors. Stakeholder selection was based on specific criteria that took into consideration expertise in the field of children and adolescents mental health and exposure to mental health policy and policy making, and it also stressed on diversifying participation to include different entities, locations, and sectors. This selection process provided a holistic view over the topic of discussion. The council benefited greatly from the participants sharing their knowledge, experience, and points of view.

The council also aimed at identifying opportunities offered by the local context in terms of education and healthcare, and discuss the challenges that policymakers and practitioners encounter in promoting better mental health and wellbeing policies for UAE school children. To conclude the council, participants were also asked to provide short-term and long-term policy recommendations that would inform policy decisions and advance mental health in schools. In more details, the council addressed these discussion questions:

1. How can you describe the current policy scene regarding mental health and wellbeing provided for school children?
2. What are some of the most prominent and/or urgent mental health areas that need to be addressed to help school children (especially from the perspective of any participants who have experience in children and adolescent mental health)?
3. In order to develop and implement better mental health policy for school children, who are the essential stakeholders that should be involved?
4. Whose responsibility is it to ensure that these mental health policies are developed, implemented and assessed (federal government, local government, regulatory entities, ministries, schools, local communities, etc.)?
5. What challenges do policymakers encounter when developing and/or implementing better mental health policies for school children?
6. What opportunities that exist locally or globally can be used to leverage better mental health policy development and implementation for school children?
7. Are there any examples of best practices you know of that can help schools implement better mental health policies?
8. What policy recommendation would you like to add to help guide policymakers in developing a stronger mental health care for school children?

## Issue Overview

A significant proportion of the world's population has experienced mental and psychological disabilities. Depression ranks third in the global burden of diseases, and it is projected to rank first in 2030<sup>1</sup>. Mental disorders can have detrimental impacts on individuals if left undiagnosed or untreated, leading in some cases to death. For example, suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people, as one alarming estimate revealed<sup>2</sup>. In the Arab world, it is estimated that 17.7 per cent of the population is living with depression and this figure is only the tip of the iceberg because mental illness is associated with social stigma, and as a consequence not many people would step forward to talk about their conditions<sup>3</sup>. In the UAE, there are many stressors that can lead to the development of mental health issues and children are among those who are impacted.

But in order to address mental health policy in the UAE, first we need to define it. According to World Health Organization (WHO), mental health can be defined as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”<sup>4</sup> Children and adolescents encounter mental health and wellbeing challenges that may hinder their potential. There are different factors which can lead to that, including exam stress, bullying, cyberbullying, anxiety, depression, and others concerns that might affect the quality of their lives.

Because mental illness is associated with social stigma, it becomes difficult for people with mental health conditions to seek professional help or cope with it. As a consequence, they can experience feelings of isolation and despair, adding to their symptoms. When it comes to children, this issue is magnified because they might not know how to seek help and they cannot access healthcare on their own. Nonetheless, people are becoming more aware of the importance of mental health and younger generations in particular are more open about it. However, school children in the UAE do not receive enough support to help them deal with their mental health issues and empower them to face new psychological and emotional challenges in the future.

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## Discussion Points

### 1. Mental Health Services:

Mental illness prevention, detection and treatment is key in promoting healthy and sustainable communities. The demand for mental health services is predicted to grow, as individuals are becoming increasingly more aware of and open to seeking professional help for their psychological and emotional problems. It is often reported by school counselors that children are increasingly showing signs of openness towards seeking mental help. The main problem with this shift is the shortage of service providers in children and adolescence psychology. The numbers of child psychologists and therapists in the UAE is small. While some schools have a counselor (or more), it is not always the case that they are specialized in child psychology. This becomes particularly problematic when counselors have to address serious cases that need referrals. Even in schools with counselors, the number of counselors per school is not adequate to support the psychological and emotional needs of all students. Oftentimes school counselors work overtime trying to accommodate as many students as they can which can lead to exhaustion and burnout.

The shortage of service providers in the UAE can be attributed to different causes. One of the main causes is the fragmented regulatory process. Obtaining license for mental health professionals is a daunting task, due to an overly complicated process, and the same thing is often reported by mental health centers when hiring new professionals. Because there is already lack of local supply of psychology graduates qualified to work with children, hiring professionals from outside the UAE can cover for such gap, however, the hiring process can be an overcomplicated process.

Other than availability, the mental healthcare system in the UAE is hindered by accessibility issues. Mental health services are not accessible to all due to limited insurance coverage. Therefore, when a child requires professional support, it is not uncommon to see parents unable to afford the service charges which might push them to seek help from unreliable sources. A reform in mental healthcare cannot be truly complete without reconsidering insurance plans.

## **2. Policy Fragmentation**

When it comes to regulations, there are multiple regulatory bodies responsible for mental health services in the UAE. In general, the regulatory scene is downed by bureaucracies and lacks an overarching and unified regulatory process reporting to a single entity. The implications of having scattered and fragmented regulatory system are slowing the growth of an already small field and intensifying the issue of service shortage. To witness substantial growth in the mental health sector, agility and flexibility are required. Moreover, implementation plans of mental health policies do not have clear roadmaps or accountability measures set in place. The general orientation of jurisdiction and mental health laws is to stigmatize patients, especially in relation to drug abuse and suicide. Although the UAE has a mental health policy established in 2016, its implementation is still not fully activated across all entities, and a standalone policy for children's mental health is absent from the scene.

## **3. Stakeholders' engagement**

The UAE has made efforts to address the importance of mental health by executing initiatives and developing policies around well-being, happiness and positive education. These initiatives resulted in outcomes which had positive impact on communities, education and workplaces. However, this might have dwarfed the urgency to reform mental health policies. Currently, a standalone policy for mental health for school children and staff still does not exist. Direct instructions from regulatory bodies such as the Ministry of Education emphasizing children's mental healthcare provision in schools are not fully developed. The field of Psychology in the UAE is slowly growing, and it requires serious attention and involvement from stakeholders and the public in order to witness further progress and achieve positive results.

## **4. Awareness**

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing mental health policy is social stigma. The language used to talk about mental illness is still heavily degrading, often referring to mental illness as "craziness" or "insanity". There is a lack of awareness on the topic of mental illness and it is still highly stigmatized by the public. There aren't enough laws and policies in place serving individuals who are living with conditions impacting their mental health. The general attitude to mental illness in society and jurisdiction is stigmatizing and penalizing. This could cause people to shy away from seeking professional help or opening up about their experiences which often leads to feelings of isolation, discrimination and despair. The implications of



social stigma can lead children to fear the social consequences of opening up or seeking help. In return, many children with mental illness go unnoticed by the system, leaving them with undiagnosed and untreated conditions that can have negative consequences on their wellbeing.

Due to the lack of awareness amongst the public, families might not be able to identify emerging signs of mental illness observed in their child's behavior. Also, due to lack of awareness and training, teachers are not able to identify children who need help and communicate unusual or concerning behaviors to parents or health professionals. This could unintentionally lead to more damage; as early intervention becomes difficult.

# Policy Recommendations

## 1. Incentivizing Private Sector

The private sector, the biggest mental health service provider in the UAE, can be incentivized to contribute to community service. This policy option capitalizes on the limited resources available in the country and consequently can deal with the problem of service shortage. If the private sector providers are given incentives relevant and crucial to their business, they will engage in community training and raise the awareness of school staff and parents, and mentor psychology graduate students and starting practitioners. The incentives have to be designed in a way that would be beneficial and relevant to providers. These benefits and incentives can be identified through engaging private sector providers in the process of policymaking. Some of these incentives can take the form of facilitated government services, reduced fees, and tax exemption.

## 2. Insurance

Getting professional help in mental health is not accessible to a significant proportion of the UAE population, and part of the reason is due to service costs. Mental health services are expensive and most medical insurance plans do not cover them. Currently, insurance coverage in the UAE includes mainly clinical psychology services. Even when schools provide counseling services, some mental health cases cannot be addressed within the school, and these cases are normally referred to hospitals or clinics. Many families cannot afford such services and might in desperation seek help from unprofessional sources or “bogus” healers. Therefore, a sustainable model for medical insurance needs to be established to allow children to receive mental healthcare when needed and get full or at least partial coverage to ease the financial burden on families.

## 3. Reforming the Regulatory Process

The current mental health regulatory scene in the UAE is limited by bureaucracies and fragmentation. Licensing procedures and regulations in the UAE are currently controlled by multiple regulatory bodies where each has separate requirements and guidelines. It is crucial to consider centralizing these regulations within a unified process managed by one

regulatory body. Having guidelines and regulation in one platform would make it more efficient to communicate information to both practitioners and regulators.

#### **4. Public and Private School Regulatory Bodies**

The role of school regulatory bodies is crucial in determining how schools build healthier environments boosting physical and mental health. There have been many initiatives to promote positivity and wellbeing in UAE schools, however, mental health is still lagging behind. Schools that want to create better mental health policies and practices struggle to do so due to lack of clear guidelines or support from regulatory bodies. It would be beneficial to have a shared platform between schools or activate the existing ones to include best practices in mental health. Encouraging knowledge sharing would contribute to creating a community of practice where stakeholders can discuss challenges and solutions.

#### **5. Leadership Commitment**

Developing and successfully implementing mental health policy requires active engagement from stakeholders, especially leadership. Through leadership commitment, mental health can advance forward, especially that it is associated with social stigma. Federal and local governments should unify efforts to prioritize and normalize mental health, aiming to raise the public's awareness and change their attitudes. Mental health policy needs an agile and radical change to lift it up from a prolonged state of stagnation.

#### **6. Stakeholder Engagement**

Another issue in mental health policymaking is viewing first-line stakeholders only as the recipients of policies. Participatory planning and decision making with and among the public, key government agencies, private and third sector partners should be key to developing and enabling mental health policies. When it comes to school mental health, the voice of children and youth should be heard. There should be direct and easily accessible channels of communication between policymakers and youth. Also parents with children diagnosed with mental health disorders, or those who are struggling with mental health themselves should be able to participate in setting policy priorities.

## **7. Raising Awareness**

In order to tackle the social stigma surrounding mental illness, awareness should be embedded within the public's attitudes and beliefs. This requires policymakers to measure and assess the public's general perceptions of mental illness in order to understand the current barriers existing in society. There needs to be a change in the language used to address mental illness within institutions, jurisdiction and communities in order to overcome stigmatization and penalization. Creating safe spaces for children to seek help without fear is paramount in promoting healthier mental life. Normalization of mental issues is also crucial as it can curb social stigma and protect human rights and dignity.

## **8. Mental Health First Aid**

Mental Health First Aid is a training program designed to educate people on how to help someone with a mental health problem. Training programs can be a useful tool to raise awareness and increase the chances of identifying early signs of mental illness. Training teachers and school staff, or even children themselves, to identify issues and seek help might empower them to help themselves and others whenever needed. This policy option will guard against harmful practices like seeking information from unreliable sources and acting on misinformation. Ideally, teachers and school staff should be trained in mental health first aid, however the costs can be high to train everyone and most schools cannot afford it. Training a percentage of teachers and school staff should be prioritized and public funding should capitalize on such initiatives because it will pay off on the long term.

# Participating Entities

## **Government Entities**

Community Development Authority

Department of Health – Abu Dhabi

Dubai Health Authority

Knowledge and Human Development Authority

## **Private Sector**

Kids First Medical Center

Lighthouse Arabia

World Enabled

## **Schools**

Dubai College

Jebel Ali School

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the trustees, officers and other staff of the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (MBRSG) and its associated entities and initiatives.

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# Research at The Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government

The Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (formerly Dubai School of Government) is a research and teaching institution focusing on public policy in the Arab world. Established in 2005 under the patronage of HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, in cooperation with the Harvard Kennedy School, MBRSG aims to promote good governance through enhancing the region's capacity for effective public policy.

Toward this goal, the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government also collaborates with regional and global institutions in delivering its research and training programs. In addition, the School organizes policy forums and international conferences to facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote critical debate on public policy in the Arab world. The School is committed to the creation of knowledge, the dissemination of best practice and the training of policy makers in the Arab world. To achieve this mission, the School is developing strong capabilities to support research and teaching programs, including:

- Applied research in public policy and management;
- Master's degrees in public policy and public administration;
- Executive education for senior officials and executives; and,
- Knowledge forums for scholars and policy makers.

The MBRSG Research Department focuses on the following seven priority policy areas:

1. Future Government and Innovation
2. Education Policy
3. Health Policy
4. Public Leadership
5. Social Policy, Wellbeing and Happiness
6. Sustainable Development Policy
7. Economic Policy



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## **Health Policy**

The health policy research area aims to explore healthcare policy and policy for health in the UAE. It also addresses the health policy the policy implications, needs and challenges related to the provision of health services in accordance to the UAE National Agenda.

## **Social Policy**

This research area is interdisciplinary in nature and focuses on some of the most pressing social policy issues in the UAE and region at large. Broadly, research in this area is concerned with social equality and cohesion, public service accessibility, inclusive policy making and the well being of individuals and families. Work in this area pays special attention to women, the elderly, the disabled and those living in remote and rural areas. Current and planned research in this area includes: Women and leadership in the UAE, Social cohesion in Dubai Emirati family, Inclusive policy making and citizen engagement, Utilizing assistive technologies to aid accessibility for individuals with disabilities.







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