

## Editorial

### Mental Health in Schools: We Never Argue Against the Need for Additional Federal Support, *BUT ...*

News Release: **U.S. Department of Education Announces More Than \$188 Million from the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act to Support Mental Health and Student Wellness**

[https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-more-188-million-bipartisan-safer-communities-act-support-mental-health-and-student-wellness?utm\\_content=&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_name=&utm\\_source=govdelivery&utm\\_term=](https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-more-188-million-bipartisan-safer-communities-act-support-mental-health-and-student-wellness?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=)

U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona is quoted as stating: “Mental health and wellness have profound implications for our students, their academic success, and their overall outcomes, and we know that youth facing mental health challenges are more likely to receive services in a school-based setting.”

The news release states:

These grants will enable communities to hire approximately 5,400 school-based mental health professionals and train an estimated 5,500 more to build a diverse pipeline of mental health providers in schools. These investments will begin the important work of broadening access to critical mental health supports by increasing the number of health care providers in schools. These funds also will help with strengthening the pipeline of certified mental health providers who are ready to work in schools with the greatest needs. These competitive grants are the first in a series of awards the Department will make over several years and constitute the largest investment in school-based mental health this country has ever made.

We never argue against enabling *communities* to hire and train more mental health professionals. And COVID-19 certainly has underscored that *schools* must play a greater role in addressing mental health concerns.

Unfortunately, the long-standing inability of schools to play a potent role in addressing mental health concerns has led mainly to calls for hiring and/or contracting more and more staff (e.g., counselors, psychologists, social workers) to provide mental health *services*.

***As a solution, this represents a fundamental disconnect from reality.***

One reality is that only a relatively few of the over 98,000 public schools in the U.S.A. will benefit from federal funding limited to mental health *services*, and such funding will increase the opportunity gap across the country.

A related reality is that sparse district budgets make it unlikely that schools will ever be able to afford hiring all the student support professionals advocates say are needed.

***After the influx of relief funds, school budgets again are tight,  
and there is no indication that future sources of funding  
can meet the nature and scope of need.***

And with specific respect to need, the reality is that schools are confronted daily with multiple, interrelated student learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Student surveys consistently indicate that alienation, bullying, harassment, academic failure, and more are widespread problems at schools. While these raise mental health concerns, the solution isn't just increasing mental health *services*.

It is time to accept the realities associated with how best to enhance mental health in schools. It is time to move beyond old and simplistic ideas, such as schools hiring more professionals to provide mental health *services*.

In particular, the emphasis in federal, state, and local school policy needs to shift. Concerns about mental health at schools must be folded into the broader agenda of enhancing wellbeing and equity of opportunity for *all* students to succeed at school (and beyond). Achieving this agenda involves supporting the development by schools of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that embeds a full range of mental health concerns. Such a system can weave together existing (fragmented and marginalized) school and community resources for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. And, if and when opportunities arise to increase the number of student support professionals at schools (e.g., counselors, psychologists, social workers), whoever is added can help enhance the whole system's impact as well as providing mental health services to a few more students.

There are some who view *any* extra funding for schools as helpful. In this case, for example, they argue more students (albeit a small percent of those in need) will receive mental health services. This argument ignores the reality that some extramural funds have pernicious effects. In this case, the desire for more personnel to provide mental health *services* tends to pull resources and attention away from efforts to make essential improvements in how schools play a critical role in addressing a broad range of barriers to learning and teaching. It also tends to reify an approach that cannot help very many students and schools who need assistance and ongoing supports. We suggest that this is especially unfortunate at a time when public education is under considerable attack and needs to highlight its efficacy and value.

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