

STUDENT WELL-BEING

New Grants Could Fund 14K School Mental Health Workers. Will It Be Enough?



By [Libby Stanford](#) — May 15, 2023 ⌚ 7 min read



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The Biden administration estimates nearly \$300 million in federal grants will eventually prepare 14,000 new mental health workers to work in schools. But that will only be “a drop in the bucket” to meet students’ growing mental health needs, experts say.

Since Congress passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act—a law that provided \$1 billion to support training for recruitment of mental health workers in schools—last June, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded \$286 million to 264 school districts, state education

agencies, universities, colleges, and nonprofit organizations, the department said in a May 15 news release.

The money comes from two programs, the Mental Health Service Professional and School-Based Mental Health grants. Both focus on recruiting, retaining, and diversifying the school mental health workforce as schools continue to grapple with [a crisis of worsening student mental health](#).

But schools are going to need more resources if they hope to meet students' mental health needs, said Kelly Vaillancourt Strobach, director of policy and advocacy at the National Association of School Psychologists.

"Fourteen thousand professionals across the country, that is laudable, [but] it is a drop in the bucket when you think about the number of the professionals that are needed," Vaillancourt Strobach said.

Schools struggle without enough mental health workers

There were 1,127 students to every school psychologist nationwide as of the 2021-22 school year, a number that is more than double the school psychologist association's recommended ratio of 500 students to every psychologist, [according to NASP](#). It would take around 63,000 new school psychologists to meet the ratio nationally, Vaillancourt Strobach said.

Utah is the only state that meets the association's recommended ratio. Eight states—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas—have ratios of over 2,000 students to every school psychologist, according to NASP.

Most of the time when there is a high ratio of students to school psychologists, the school psychologist's role is limited to special education services so schools can meet Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requirements, Vaillancourt Strobach said.

"They're one of the few professionals in schools who can do the types of evaluations required for IDEA eligibility, and so that means you have school psychologists basically just serving in primarily a testing role," she said.

Evaluating students with disabilities is only one skill school psychologists are trained to have.

Without overwhelming caseloads, school psychologists also have the ability to collect data and provide analysis on student mental health needs, provide behavioral and mental health interventions for struggling students, collaborate with families and the community, provide professional development in mental health best practices for teachers, and develop effective school-wide practices to address mental health and promote learning.

But that capacity is only available when schools have enough people working in mental health positions, which also include social workers and school counselors, Vaillancourt Strobach said. Right now, there aren't enough people to fill needed positions.

“For a long time, what states were doing is they were saying, ‘Well, we’ll just give districts more money. That’s the problem. They just need more money to hire these people,’” she said. “The problem is, we don’t have an adequate pipeline.”

Grants address pipeline issues

The Mental Health Service Professional and School-Based Mental Health grants are both aimed at expanding the mental health worker pipeline.

Another grant in the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the \$1 billion Stronger Connections program, also provides funding that districts can use to expand school-based mental health services, but those funds have been slow to trickle out.

The Mental Health Service Professional grant funds school district-, state education agency-, and university-led efforts to train and recruit people to enter the mental health field. It also gives colleges and universities resources to place school psychology and mental health graduate students in schools to provide services as schools work to hire more mental health workers.

For example, the University of Minnesota plans to use the \$1 million it received through the grant to fund a program that places mental health service professional graduate assistants in schools for 20 hours a week, according to the university’s description of how it will spend the grant money.

The grant is also focused on diversifying the mental health workforce. Forty-five percent of grant recipients have proposed a partnership with an institution that serves mostly minority students, a historically Black college or university, or a tribal college or university, according to the Education Department.

“We’re a largely white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual field,” Vaillancourt Strobach said. “That is not the population of our students, so it’s been really great to see a lot of districts very intentionally either partner with a minority-serving institution or make one of their goals very clearly, ‘We want to make sure we are not only attracting a more diverse pool of candidates but we’re also embedding more intentionally culturally responsive practices specific to the population that [we’re] going to serve.’”

San Francisco State University is one such institution. The university plans to use \$1.1 million to establish an Equity and Justice-Focused School-Based Mental Health Training Project, a partnership between the university and the Oakland and San Francisco school districts with a focus on training mental health professionals “who reflect the communities, identities, and cultures of the students in (or served by) our high-need schools,” according to the university’s description of how it will use the funds.

The School-Based Mental Health grant focuses on supporting grow-your-own programs, which identify people already in the school community who may want to be trained in mental health support. The program will be especially helpful for rural communities, where it might be harder to recruit young professionals to live and work. It’s an approach some districts have embraced in an attempt to fill teaching positions.

“People that grew up in a rural county and they don’t want to leave, they don’t have the desire to leave, they might be a great candidate to be trained as a school counselor, school psychologist, or school social worker and stay in that community,” Vaillancourt Strobach said.

For example, the Tempe Union High School District in Arizona is planning to use nearly \$276,000 to hire bilingual “youth specialists” who match the district’s demographics. The specialists will dedicate their time to assessing and surveying students who display signs of mental health concerns or risky behavior and create support groups for them to help them work on life skills and support their mental health, according to the district’s description of how it will use the money .

The Education Department also announced \$2.6 million for a new Mental Health Personnel Technical Assistance Center to support the grant recipients. That’s an exciting development, Vaillancourt Strobach said, as it will provide the field with informational resources on which strategies are most effective at improving mental health services.

The technical assistance center will also give districts that don’t receive grant funding the ability to learn from those that do, Vaillancourt Strobach said.

Continued support means commitments from Congress

But while the grants are a step in the right direction, time will only tell how effective they will be. The estimate of 14,000 new mental health workers comes from the grant applications themselves, and grantees may struggle to meet that goal.

Recruiting and training 14,000 new workers will also require sustained funding for the grants from Congress, Vaillancourt Strobach said.

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act came as a response to the May 2022 mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, in which a gunman killed 19 students and two teachers. Congress will have to continue to provide the funding allocated in the law if the grant programs will continue, but that might be a challenge as Congress and the White House remain in a standoff over raising the debt ceiling.

“This should become regular order investment that Congress makes moving forward if we’re serious about addressing the shortages,” Vaillancourt Strobach said. “What’s underpinning a lot of the challenges in schools right now is their inability to meet the mental health needs of kids because they just don’t have enough people.”



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