

NEWS

Mental health cuts to hit rural schools

Experts condemn cancellation of grants by Trump officials.

By Annie Ma
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In parts of rural upstate New York, schools have more than 1,100 students for every mental health provider. In a far-flung region with little public transportation, those few school counselors often are the only mental health professionals available to students.

Hennessey Lustica has been overseeing grant-funded efforts to train and hire more school psychologists, counselors and social workers in the Finger Lakes region, but those efforts may soon come to end — a casualty of the Trump administration's decision to cancel school mental health grants around the country.

"Cutting this funding is just going to devastate kids," said Lustica, project director of the Wellness Workforce Collaborative in the Seneca Falls Central School District. "The workforce that we're developing, just in my 21 school districts it's over 20,000 kids that are going to be impacted by this and not have the mental health support that they need."

The \$1 billion in grants for school-based mental health programs were part of a sweeping gun violence bill signed by President Joe Biden in 2022 in response to the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. The grants were meant to help schools hire more psychologists, counselors and other mental health workers, especially in rural areas.

Under the Biden administration, the department prioritized applicants who showed how they would increase the number of providers from diverse backgrounds, or from communities directly served by the school district. But Pres-



Hennessey Lustica has been overseeing U.S. grant-funded efforts to train and hire school counselors and social workers in the Finger Lakes region, but those efforts may soon end. LAUREN PETRACCA/AP

ident Donald Trump's administration took issue with aspects of the grant programs that touched on race, saying they were harmful to students.

"We owe it to American families to ensure that taxpayer dollars are supporting evidence-based practices that are truly focused on improving students' mental health," Education Department spokesperson Madi Bledermann said.

Districts end training, retention programs

Lustica learned of her grant's cancellation in April in a two-page letter from the Education

Department, which said the government found that her work violated civil rights law. It did not specify how.

Lustica is planning to appeal the decision. She rejected the letter's characterization of her work, saying she and her colleagues abide by a code of ethics that honors each person's individuality, regardless of race, gender or identity.

"The rhetoric is just false," Lustica said. "I don't know how else to say it. I think if you looked at these programs and looked at the impact that these programs have in our rural school districts, and the stories that kids will tell you

about the mental health professionals that are in their schools, it has helped them because of this program."

The grants supported programs in districts across the country. In California, West Contra Costa Unified School District will lose nearly \$4 million in funding. In Alabama, Birmingham City Schools system was notified it would not receive the rest of a \$15 million grant it was using to train, hire and retain mental health staff.

In Wisconsin, the state's Department of Public Instruction will lose \$8 million allocated for the next four years. The state had used the money to boost retention and expand programs to encourage high schoolers to pursue careers in school-based mental health.

"At a time when communities are urgently asking for help serving mental health needs, this decision is indefensible," state superintendent Jill Underly said in a statement.

In recent House and Senate hearings, Democrats pressed Education Secretary Linda McMahon on the end of the grants and the impact on students. McMahon told them mental health is a priority and the grants would be rebid and reissued.

"Anyone who works or spends time with kids knows these grants were funding desperately needed access to mental health care services," American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten said in a statement. "Canceling the funding now is a cruel, reckless act that puts millions of children at risk."

Losing grants 'feels, to me, really catastrophic'

The strains on youth mental health are acute in many rural school districts.

In one upstate New York district, half the students have had to move due to economic hardship in the last five years,

creating instability that can affect their mental health, Lustica said. In a survey of students from sixth through 12th grade in one county, nearly half reported feeling sad or depressed most of the time; 1 in 3 said their lives lacked clear purpose or meaning.

"We've got huge amounts of depression, huge amounts of anxiety, lots of trauma and not enough providers," Lustica said. "School is the place where kids are getting a lot of the services they need."

Some families in the region are unable to afford private counseling or are unable to get their children to appointments given transportation challenges, said Danielle Legg, a graduate student who did an internship as a school social worker with funding from the grant program.

"Their access to mental health care truly is limited to when they're in school and there's a provider there that can see them, and it's vital," Legg said.

In the past three years, 176 students completed their mental health training through the program Lustica oversees, and 85% of them were hired into shortage areas, she said.

The program that offered training to graduate students at schools helped address staffing needs and inspired many to pursue careers in educational settings, said Susan McGowan, a school social worker who supervised graduate students in Geneva City School District.

"It just feels, to me, really catastrophic," McGowan said of the grant cancellation. "These positions are difficult to fill, so when you get grad students who are willing to work hand in hand with other professionals in their building, you're actually building your capacity as far as staffing goes and you're supporting teachers."