

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 24, 2022

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-1510

Dear Secretary Cardona:

I write regarding the urgent need to improve support for teachers and school personnel as they face increasing student mental health challenges.

The youth of America are facing an unprecedented mental health crisis. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019 the National Survey of Children's Health found that nearly 30 percent of adolescents were struggling with mental, emotional, developmental or behavioral health problems. Survey data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found that the national rate of depression in teenagers ages 12-17 nearly doubled from 2008 to 2018. Over approximately the same time period, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported that the suicide rate among people aged 10 to 24 increased by 56 percent, with the most rapid increase occurring between 2013 and 2017. The suicide rate for teens aged 15 to 19 increased 76 percent from 2007 and 2017, with suicide now the leading cause of teenage death.

According to a new report from the CDC, emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts among adolescents increased by an astounding 31 percent in 2020 compared with 2019. In the early months of 2021 – among girls – that number rose to a 51 percent increase over 2019. Inability to socialize in person, online school and being isolated at home were significant sources of anxiety and depression for respondents. Furthermore, last year, a CDC survey sought to measure the mental health impact of COVID-19. Although the survey did not include people under 18 years old, the CDC found that among young adults (aged 18 to 24), 63 percent suffered from an anxiety or depressive disorder, 25 percent started or increased substance use to cope with pandemic-related stress and 25 percent seriously considered suicide in the prior 30 days. Tragically, young people struggling with mental health challenges do not have access to the mental health treatment they need. We are seeing a national shortage of access to mental health treatment across the board, and schools in particular are struggling to meet the need for increased mental health services for students. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 500 students per school psychologist; however, the real ratio as of the 2019-2020 school year was unfortunately just one school psychologist per 1,211 students. This ratio is far below the number of professionals needed to provide adequate mental health support for students.

Congress must continue to work to improve access to mental health treatment and services in schools. I support increased funding for schools to hire mental health professionals, as well as

measures to expand the available workforce of school-based mental health providers. This is a long-term problem that will require comprehensive solutions, and I am continuing to work in Congress to address this issue.

However, the Administration must act now to address this emergency. I urge the Department of Education to provide better support for teachers grappling with the extreme mental health challenges that their students are experiencing. The pandemic has taken an enormous toll on teachers who have had to handle the hardships of remote and hybrid teaching, as well as the physical safety risks of COVID-19 in the classroom. Now, without adequate professional support, they face alarming and worsening mental health conditions among students.

The Department of Education must look to existing federal programs that fund teacher training and continuing education to help ensure teachers are equipped to face these challenges. For example, Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants provide flexible funds to states and school districts that can be used to meet a variety of needs including the training of school personnel in the identification of, and provision of services for, students affected by trauma and students with, or at risk of, mental illness. Separately, the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program provides competitive grants to support professional development practices and trainings for teachers, and Congress provided clear direction in Fiscal Year 2021 appropriations legislation that these grants should be used to support the incorporation of social and emotional learning strategies and practices. Moreover, the Teacher Quality Partnership Program provides federal funding for the improved preparation and training of new teachers to help them meet the needs of current students. I urge the Department to work through these and other existing programs to encourage the use of funding to help teachers support student mental health.

I would appreciate your answers to the following questions:

1. How is the Department utilizing existing programs to support professional development in mental health for teachers and school personnel?
2. How does the Department plan to expand existing programming to increase mental health knowledge and awareness among both current and future teachers?
3. What additional tools or funding does the Department need to better support teachers coping with the current student mental health emergency?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to continuing to work together to address this crisis facing our students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeanne Shaheen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jeanne" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Shaheen".

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senate