

TO: Senator Ginny Lyons and Senator Brian Campion, Chairs
Senate Health & Welfare Committee and Senate Education Committee

FROM: Holly Morehouse, Vermont Afterschool

RE: Funding to support youth mental health & wellness in afterschool programs

DATE: February 11, 2022

Thank you for your concern for the wellbeing of Vermont youth as we collectively emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and for your understanding of the critical role that afterschool programs can play in making sure that our youth and their families are supported during this time of transition. We also appreciate your recognition that educators and staff in and out of school need support as well, to be fully present for our youth and to support them appropriately.

This memo is a response to your request for recommendations about how to access federal funding to support our youth, their families, and educators/staff over the next few years. Below are the findings of our research, as well as some recommendations for you to consider. We are available to you for further conversations, to testify, or to work with legislative counsel, as you determine.

Recommendations:

1. **Grant program.** Our primary recommendation is to create a two-year grant program for afterschool and summer programs to expand capacity in a concentrated and intentional way to support mental health and wellness for youth. Although one very important need has been identified—to make counselors available to youth, families, and staff—that is not the only way to support youth in strengthening their mental health and wellness. We recommend that other strategies be included in the grant program. *See proposed language on page 2.*
2. **Coordination between the Department of Mental Health and Agency of Education.** We recommend that the Department of Mental Health lead the grant program and coordinate closely with the Agency of Education, especially if ESSER funds are used. Our understanding is that the Agency can subcontract with the Department to run the program, so the funds can be combined with other federal and state funds, and thus provide many different approaches for supporting youth.
3. **Strengthen connection between the legislature and Governor’s Vermont Interagency Afterschool Youth Task Force.** As you know, Governor Scott created this task force through an executive order in October 2021. The task force is off to a strong start and is reporting directly to the governor. It has been encouraging to see so many different members of the administration participating in this conversation through the task force, and we do not think any changes to the task force are needed at this time. However, we recommend developing a relationship where the legislature is also getting information, so that as the task force comes out with goals and recommendations, legislators are informed. Our suggestion is simply for you to get information from the task force as they develop their benchmarks, collect data, gather feedback from the field, and do their other activities as planned.

Proposed language:

The Department of Mental Health in close coordination with the Agency of Education will oversee a grant program that offers grants to both school-based and community-based afterschool and summer programs, including those connected to a community schools model, to support the mental health and wellness needs of students, families and staff in a variety of settings that are easily accessible in the hours outside the school day and over the summer (e.g., before school, after school, in-service days, school vacation weeks, summer).

The criteria for the grants will include:

- Using evidence-based strategies to address student social, emotional, and mental health and wellness needs
- Working in close partnership with classroom teachers and school guidance counselors to coordinate supports, communication, and strategies
- Specially trained staff providing one-on-one and small group supports and resilience sessions for children and youth, including addressing specific needs such as suicide prevention, social isolation, anxiety, and substance use
- Families receiving assistance in navigating behavioral health resources in their communities
- Providing opportunities for children and youth to participate in activities that heal and prevent social isolation, such as outdoor activities, art therapy, recreation, and time in nature
- Collecting data to demonstrate the effectiveness of the supports and interventions
- Consulting with local pediatricians to provide referrals for support
- Connecting to and aligning with Vermont's statewide initiatives around Building Flourishing Communities, Youth Thrive, and the Vermont Youth Project
- Afterschool and summer staff receiving training in Youth Mental Health First Aid and other evidence-based techniques and approaches to crisis prevention and intervention, such as trauma-responsive practices, adolescent brain development, and how to build a culture of connection.

Some references and citations for your convenience:

1. Federal Dept. of Ed. FAQ on use of ESSER funds to support mental health. From:
https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/05/ESSER.GEER_FAQs_5.26.21_745AM_FINALb0cd6833f6f46e03ba2d97d30aff953260028045f9ef3b18ea602db4b32b1d99.pdf Page 15-16
May an SEA reserve any ARP ESSER funds for the SEA's use?
Yes. In fact, under section 2001(f) of the ARP Act, an SEA is required to reserve ARP ESSER funds for three State-level reservations for evidence-based activities and interventions (see FAQ A-10) that respond to students' social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, children with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, children and youth in foster care, and migratory students.
2. Can state level ESSER funds be granted to other entities like another state agency?
From:
https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/05/ESSER.GEER_FAQs_5.26.21_745AM_FINALb0cd6833f6f46e03ba2d97d30aff953260028045f9ef3b18ea602db4b32b1d99.pdf Page 48-49
For funds that an SEA reserves, the SEA must, within one year of receiving the funds, award the funds through grants or contracts or by retaining funds to provide direct services.

Additionally for the afterschool (and summer and learning recovery state set asides, and additional state funds) the American rescue Plan Act states:
(f) STATE FUNDING.—With funds not otherwise allocated under subsection (d), a State—
(1) shall reserve not less than 5 percent of the total amount of grant funds awarded to the State under this section to carry out, directly or through grants or contracts, activities to address learning loss by

supporting the implementation of evidence-based interventions, such as summer learning or summer enrichment, extended day, comprehensive afterschool programs, or extended school year programs, and ensure that such interventions respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on the student subgroups described in section 1111(b)(2)(B)(xi) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 6311(b)(2)(B)(xi)), students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care, including by providing additional support to local educational agencies to fully address such impacts;

(2) shall reserve not less than 1 percent of the total amount of grant funds awarded to the State under this section to carry out, directly or through grants or contracts, the implementation of evidence-based summer enrichment programs, and ensure such programs respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on the student populations described in section 1111(b)(2)(B)(xi) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 6311(b)(2)(B)(xi)), students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care;

(3) shall reserve not less than 1 percent of the total amount of grant funds awarded to the State under this section to carry out, directly or through grants or contracts, the implementation of evidence-based comprehensive afterschool programs, and ensure such programs respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on the student populations described in section 1111(b)(2)(B)(xi) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 6311(b)(2)(B)(xi)), students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care; and

(4) may reserve not more than one-half of 1 percent of the total amount of grant funds awarded to the State under this section for administrative costs and the remainder for emergency needs as determined by the State educational agency to address issues responding to coronavirus, which may be addressed through the use of grants or contracts

3. Federal funds that can be used to support student mental health in addition to ESSER:
 - a. SAMHSA block grants: <https://www.samhsa.gov/grants/block-grants>
 - b. ESSA Title IV Part A <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/ssae/index.html>. Note: These funds go from SEA to LEAs so may be hard to use for a competitive grant.

Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy testifying on youth mental health at Senate Finance Committee

PBS News Hour, streamed live on YouTube, Feb 8, 2022: https://youtu.be/yh_oLL7HTXo?t=849

...Over the next few years, my children and millions of their peers will start down the path to adulthood. Each of their paths will be different. All will be filled with challenges along the way. ...the obstacles that this generation of young people face are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate, and the impact that's having on their mental health is devastating.... All of these factors affecting youth mental health were true before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the last two years have dramatically changed young people's experiences at home, at school and in their communities. It's not just the unfathomable number of deaths or the instability, it's also the pervasive sense of uncertainty and the nagging sense of fear. It's the isolation – from loved ones, from friends and from communities at a moment where human support systems are irreplaceable and more needed than ever before. ... We are on the verge of beating back one public health crisis in COVID-19, only to see another one grow in its place. In 2019, the year before the pandemic, 1 in 3 high school students reported feeling persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, up 40% - 40% from a decade prior. ... As devastating as these numbers are is that we as a country are failing to respond to them. Even before the pandemic, we were not doing enough to provide adequate care and treatment options in every community. And COVID-19 has only made that disparity worse. ... We are not doing enough as a country to prevent – not just treat – this crisis. Many mental health challenges first emerge early in life, and studies suggest that the average delay between the onset of mental health challenges and treatment is 11 years. Eleven long, confusing, isolating and painful years. Now, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to make a change now. ...

Pyramid Model for Mental Health and Trauma Services

Stratified or multi-tiered systems of supports are commonly used for structuring strategies to improve mental health and trauma services for children and youth. While intensive interventions and treatment are required for children and youth experiencing a mental health crisis (top tier of the pyramid), the approach for the grant program outlined above promotes the integration of strategies at all other levels of the pyramid and across children, youth, families, and staff. See diagram below (adapted from the Wisconsin Afterschool Network).

