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Gevirtz Graduate School of Education awarded record grant for K-12 mental health services

Over the past decade, the impacts on the mental health of school-age children have been piling on — from social media and mass shootings to coronavirus and climate change.

In short supply, however, are the school psychologists who can support the healthy development of children. To help fill gaps in mental health services, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has granted $5.3 million to professor and principal investigator Shane Jimerson and school psychology faculty collaborators Erin Dowdy, Arlene Ortiz and Jon Goodwin of UC Santa Barbara's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education (GGSE) to prepare the next generation of school psychologists and related professionals. The grant is the largest award in GGSE history.

Jimerson has titled the program the JEDI Project, emphasizing its focus on promoting justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. The project will prepare professionals from diverse backgrounds to contribute to mental health services for K-12 students, including students from culturally, linguistically and racially minoritized groups, he said. These marginalized groups are often the most impacted by systemic and racial trauma and the least likely to receive needed mental health services.

"The JEDI Project is both timely and important, as school psychologists working to promote social, emotional, behavioral and mental health present a tremendous

opportunity to support all children," Jimerson said.

It's gotten so bad in the U.S. that in 2021 a national state of emergency in children's mental health was jointly declared by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association. In 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that more than four in 10 teens expressed feeling persistently sad or hopeless and that one in five contemplated suicide. And according to a federal study released in February of this year, the numbers among teen girls are even more troubling, with about six out of 10 feeling constant sadness. Nearly one in three teen girls expressed having suicidal ideations, up 60% over the past decade.

"We appreciate the increased capacity this grant provides so that we may prepare more school psychologists than ever before at a time of such pressing need," said Jeffrey Milem, the Jules Zimmer Dean's Chair of Gevirtz Graduate School of Education. "This JEDI Project embodies the core values of the Gevirtz School, namely our insistence upon collaborating with interdisciplinary and community partners to conduct impactful, respectful and equitable service and research."

The DOE funding for JEDI will support upward of 50 school psychologists over the next five years, a threefold increase in the GGSE's typical output.

By design, the project's graduate students will combine classroom studies with hands-on training at several Santa Barbara County public schools that have high numbers of students experiencing chronic absenteeism, homelessness and other socio-economic disadvantages.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District, for example, serves more than 16,000 K-12 students, 91% of whom are socio-economically disadvantaged, with a homeless rate of 14% (more than 2,300 students). Districtwide, 20 school psychologists serve students at a ratio of one for every 833, respectively, which is higher than the one-per-500 ratio recommended by the National Association of School Psychologists.

Other educational agencies within Santa Barbara County to be served by the project include Lompoc Unified, Carpinteria Unified and the Santa Barbara County Special Education Local Plan Area.

Jimerson highlighted the GGSE’s strong collaborations with many schools and its contributions to students and families over the years.

“We’re not just now deciding to do this; this is what we have been doing for the past two decades,” he added. “The resources we’ve been able to secure are really a reflection of the expertise and knowledge we’ve established that’s now highly salient, highly sought after and highly invested in.”

The $5.3-million JEDI Project award comes on the heels of a $2.7 million DOE grant awarded to Jimerson, Dowdy and Mian Wang in 2021 to prepare scholars in advancing equity in mental health services and train school psychology and special education experts to contribute to the next generation of professionals. Known as Project TEAMS, that initiative is funding doctoral students at UCSB and Boston University.

“Building upon collaborative efforts throughout the past two decades, these recent awards recognize and further advance the high-quality scholarship and graduate preparation that the school psychology faculty at UCSB contributes within the local community, and at the state, national and international levels,” Jimerson added. “These efforts are essential to further support and promote the well-being of children in our schools and communities."

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