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Maria Zate

Expanding mental health treatment for schoolchildren focus of national grant award to Gevirtz School and partner universities

Charged with launching a national center to expand school-based mental health, UC Santa Barbara Gevirtz Graduate School of Education and three other universities have been awarded a four-year, $10.4 million contract from the U.S. Department of Education. The collaboration will work to increase the number of school psychologists, social workers, school counselors and other practitioners.

“We are excited to collaborate with other leading institutions and scholars focused explicitly on school mental health,” said Professor Erin Dowdy, part of the team from Gevirtz School’s Department of Counseling, Clinical and School Psychology. “We recognize the tremendous need, both locally and nationally, to invest significant energy to improve the well-being of children and youth in the place they are most likely to receive mental health services.”

As part of a national school mental health collaborative, UCSB, along with University of Wisconsin Madison, University of South Florida and University of Iowa, will contribute expertise and resources to ensure the success of the new center called METRICS (Mental Health Evaluation, Training, Research, and Innovation Center for Schools).

The Gevirtz team also includes Distinguished Professor Emeritus Michael Furlong; Assistant Teaching Professor Jon Goodwin and Assistant Teaching Professor Arlene Ortiz.

“At UCSB, we hope to shift the conversation away from a focus on distress and towards an emphasis on wellness and student strengths,” Goodwin said. “We hope that our work on METRICS will be focused on prevention and early intervention, prior to students having significant symptoms of distress.”

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, K–12 public schools across the country have seen an increase in mental health concerns among their students, according to the Department of Education (DOE). The American Academy of Pediatrics and other national child and adolescent health care organizations in 2021 declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health and emphasized the need for expanded school-based mental health care.

In May 2022, the DOE reported that 70% of public schools saw an increase in the percentage of their students seeking mental health services at school since the start of the pandemic, with 76% of schools also reporting an increase in staff voicing concerns about their students showing symptoms of depression, anxiety and trauma. The Centers for Disease Control reported that between 2011–2021 chronic sadness lasting two or more weeks increased from 36% to 57% for female- and 21% to 29% for male-identifying adolescents.

The DOE is making large investments in programs designed to increase the number and diversity of mental health professionals in schools. In spring of 2023, the Gevirtz School received a $5.3 million DOE grant to train school psychologists and other professionals to promote justice, equity, diversity and inclusion, known as the JEDI Project.

“METRICS will provide needed support to other school-based mental health and mental health services professionals, which are focused on increasing the number of mental health providers in schools, like the JEDI project,” said Ortiz.

The National Association of School Psychologists estimates that 65,000 more school psychologists are needed to provide students with adequate and equitable mental health services, and there are similar shortages of school social workers and school

counselors. METRICS will contribute to the national initiative to strengthen school mental health services by supporting nearly 300 grants totaling more than $188 million awarded by DOE over the past two years to education agencies, school districts and universities.

“Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on child and adolescent mental health have heightened awareness of the need to increase the availability of prevention and intervention services, particularly in school settings,” Furlong said. “Clearly, a prerequisite to providing increased mental health services in schools is to increase the pool of qualified providers. This project aims to support educational agencies and training programs and the vital efforts of universities to recruit and train the next generation of school mental health professionals.”

Media Contact

Keith Hamm

Social Sciences, Humanities & Fine Arts Writer

keithhamm@ucsb.edu

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