

April 6, 2021

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

Dear Secretary Cardona,

[The Center for Law and Social Policy \(CLASP\)](#), [The Kennedy Forum](#), and the undersigned 97 organizations are writing to urge the Department of Education (ED) to issue guidance that supports schools to prioritize supplemental funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (American Rescue Plan) for mental health services and supports as students return to in-person learning. As education, mental health, civil rights, and youth advocacy organizations dedicated to the healing and well-being of youth, especially youth in low-income communities and BIPOC youth, our goal is to ensure that every student has access to quality, culturally responsive, trauma-informed mental health and social emotional learning supports in their school. We appreciate the Secretary's expressed commitment to supporting student mental health and offer our collective expertise in support of the development of guidance that positions schools to respond to the scale of need.

Before the pandemic, many young people were already experiencing a rise in mental health challenges without the ability to access mental health support. Between 2016 and 2018, the number of young people living in poverty experiencing psychological distress increased from [1 in 5 to 1 in 4](#). Since the pandemic, those numbers have risen drastically, [with 2 out of every 3 youth](#) reporting symptoms of feeling down, depressed or hopeless. In many places across the nation, there has also been an [increase in suicide attempts](#) for children and adolescents. Before the pandemic, 90 percent of students were in [public schools where the number of counselors, social workers, nurses, and psychologists do not meet recommended professional standards](#). Professional standards recommend at least 1 counselor and 1 social worker for every 250 students and at least 1 nurse and 1 psychologist for every 750 students and every 700 students, respectively.

We have experienced a once-in-a-century cultural trauma over the past year. Many people have lost family members; [1 in 3](#) people in the US know someone personally who has died from COVID-19; Black people, Indigenous people, Latinos, and Pacific Islanders are all [more than twice as likely to have died](#) of COVID-19 than white people; people with disabilities have also [experienced high death rates](#). Hate crimes and violence targeting Asian Americans have [risen dramatically](#) during the pandemic due to the racialization of COVID-19. Unemployment and accompanying stress as well as lost access to wraparound supports and supportive connections provided through schools have disproportionately impacted communities of color. The nation has seen a rise in anxiety and depression for everyone; however, young people have specifically been struggling with isolation associated with not being in school.

The American Rescue Plan provided schools with nearly \$130 billion for reopening. The legislation made mental health services and supports and social emotional learning (SEL) allowable uses of these funds but did not require their use for this purpose. We are concerned that without additional guidance, schools could spend all their funds on other services and resources and not substantially invest in student mental health. We are particularly concerned that this will be the case in Title I schools and schools with high proportions of students of color, the exact schools where this type of investment is most needed.

We urge the Department of Education to develop reopening guidance focused on mental health supports and social emotional learning. This guidance should emphasize:

- School-wide (Tier 1) social emotional learning supports, including:
 - establishing K-12 social emotional learning standards;
 - universal screenings;
 - well-being check-ups from a caring adult staff member; and
 - mental health literacy for all programs.
- Staff-wide professional development in trauma-responsive practices and other strategies to help ensure that all school personnel are properly trained and able to respond appropriately when students present with mental health challenges or evidence of trauma, including:
 - Mental Health First Aid; and
 - de-escalation techniques.
- Trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and healing centered mental health supports including those provided by:
 - peer support specialists;
 - recovery coaches and other substance use prevention and treatment services;
 - community health workers;
 - trauma-informed personnel;
 - dedicated staff specifically trained in de-escalation and violence interruption practices;
 - staff trained in anti-bias practices;
 - specialists in behavior planning and intervention;
 - Mental health clinicians, including adolescent and child psychiatrists, school psychologists, social workers, and counselors; and
 - other community-based organizations, specialists or individuals with expertise in school climate and behavior.
- Data collection strategies to identify student needs and track progress; and
- Recommendations for authentically engaging student voice in identifying needed/preferred mental health supports and challenges.

School reopening will not be safe, supportive, or complete for students without the right supports in place to navigate an unprecedented time in their life. We urge the Department to issue the requested guidance to ensure that school-reopening is a healing experience for the students who need it most.

Sincerely,

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
The Kennedy Forum

Alexander and Alexander & Assoc., Inc.

Alliance for Quality Education

American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work

American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

American Association of People with Disabilities

American Association of Suicidology

American Federation of Teachers

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

American Psychological Association

American School Counselor Association

American Youth Policy Forum

Arab-American Family Support Center

Aspen Institute: Forum For Community Solutions

Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO)

Association of Children's Residential Centers (ACRC)

Augustus F. Hawkins Foundation

Autistic Self Advocacy Network

Big Cities Health Coalition

Boys Town

C4 Innovations

Campaign for Trauma Informed Policy and Practice

Center for Independence of the Disabled, NY

Center for the Integration and Advancement of New Americans, Inc. (CIANA).

CenterLink: The Community of LGBT Centers

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)

Children Now

Children's Integrated Center for Success

Children's Law Center

Coalition for Asian American Children and Families

College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists (CPNP)

Committee for Children

Community Catalyst

Community Inclusion & Development Alliance(CIDA)

Council for Exceptional Children

Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

East Hartford CONNects

EDGE Consulting Partners

Education Law Center - PA

Education Policy Program at New America

Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC)

Equality California

First Focus on Children

Futures Without Violence

Girls Inc.

Hathaway -Sycamores

Hispanic Health Network

Immigrant Social Services, Inc.

Inseparable

Japanese American Citizens League

Lanai Community Health Center

LWD Consolidated Trust CDC Inc.
MCCOY (Marion County Commission on Youth, Inc.)
Mental Health America
MindWise Innovations
NAPAFASA
National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE)
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Behavioral Healthcare
National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Black Justice Coalition
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Crittenton
National Federation of Families
National Indian Education Association
National Juvenile Justice Network
National PTA
National Women's Law Center
National Youth Employment Coalition
Next100
Opportunity Youth United
Pacific Islander Center of Primary Care Excellence
Prevention Institute
Psychotherapy Action Network Advocacy
Public Justice
Remedy Foundation
RI International, Inc.
Sandy Hook Promise
SEE CT

Silver State Equality-Nevada
Solidarity-Equity-Education CT
South Asian Youth Action
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)
Strategies for Youth
Students for Sensible Drug Policy
The Center for Community Resilience at George Washington University
The Children's Partnership
The Forum for Youth Investment
The Gathering for Justice
The Institute for Compassion in Justice
The Jed Foundation
The Trevor Project
Union for Reform Judaism
UNITED SIKHS
Youth Guidance
YWCA USA