

IMPORTANT
Federal Aid Is
Available
to Schools
Battling the
Post-Pandemic
Mental Health
Crisis

*But the Window for
Federal Funding
Will Close on
September 30*

SUMMARY

COVID-19 worsened a growing crisis in youth mental health by increasing social isolation and diminishing connections with peers, teachers, family, and community. Today, students are still feeling the pandemic's negative impact on their emotional well-being and academic progress.

The mental health of teachers has also suffered. Burnout-related teacher turnover has fallen from its 2022 peak, but staff losses continue to impact class sizes and educational quality.

The good news is that billions of dollars in Federal pandemic relief are available to address these challenges in the form of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund grants. The final and largest wave of ESSER funding—\$122 billion—is available to schools/districts that commit dollars to an eligible project by September 30, 2024.

- ✓ The **obligation deadline** for the final and largest wave of ESSER funding is 9/30/24.
- ✓ Schools/districts **must act now** to secure these funds **or forfeit** them.

ESSER funds provide a lifeline for schools/districts to address the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs associated with the pandemic. Funds can be used for evidence-based mental health practices that benefit the entire academic community, such as social and emotional training for teachers and students, adding more mental health professionals to staff, and increasing connections to private and community-based supports.

BACKGROUND

The Youth Mental Health Crisis

The COVID-pandemic is usually blamed for starting the youth mental health crisis, but facts show that emotional and behavioral problems among children and teens had been increasing over the prior 10 to 15 years.

In the decade leading up to the pandemic, the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System reported a 40% increase in persistent sadness and hopelessness, as well as suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Between 2016 and 2019, the number of children diagnosed with anxiety or depression grew by 27% and 24%, respectively. That's a sizeable jump in only 3 years.

Mental health professionals believe the roots of the crisis are multi-factorial, and point to social media, academic and sports pressure, gender and identity issues, and other causes.

What COVID did was worsen a growing crisis by upending the academic and social lives of children and teens. Young people found themselves isolated from peers, teachers, family, and community. They mourned the death of relatives and saw parents lose jobs. **A sizeable percentage also became victims of emotional and physical abuse in the home.** Consequences were higher rates of anxiety, depression, sleep issues, withdrawal from family and aggressive behavior and significantly more pediatric emergency room visits for mental health services.

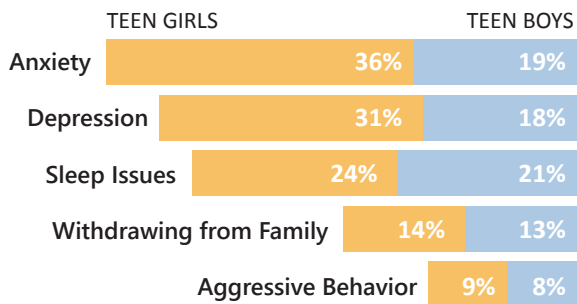
COVID-19's impact on mental health was evident even after the lockdown ended and schools reopened.

In a Rand Corporation survey conducted in the spring of 2022, 75% of parents said their child would benefit from mental health counseling – up from 68% in 2021. About a third said their child had recently shown symptoms of mental health issues, including anxiety and depression.



Effects of the pandemic on teen mental health

Percent of parents noticing a new problem or worsening of an existing problem



Source: CS Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health 2021

Since children and teens spend so much time in the classroom, schools offer a tremendous opportunity for problem prevention or early identification and intervention. However, more school counselors and school psychologists are needed to meet the growing demand for services. Hiring is a challenge given budget limitations amid stiff competition for a limited number of qualified candidates.

Historically, teachers have played a critical role in identifying emotional and behavioral problems early and recommending mental health assessments and follow-up. Teachers, however, face increasing mental health challenges of their own that impact the school environment.



Teacher Burnout: Chronic Stress from Increasing Demands

Teaching has always been stressful, but COVID-19 exacerbated the problems, forcing teachers to work harder and longer due to changes in teaching modalities and staffing shortages. Today, teachers report they are still working extended hours to help students catch up on pandemic-related gaps in knowledge and fill in for colleagues who left the profession or retired early due to COVID. Job dissatisfaction has rebounded somewhat from recent lows, but low morale is still a problem.

FAST FACTS

During COVID, the anxiety level of teachers exceeded that of healthcare workers.

Source: Educational Researcher

Teachers and principals are more likely than other professions to report burnout and symptoms of depression and less likely to feel resilient.

Source: CDC

When teachers have poor mental health, schools have lower-quality learning environments and students do not perform as well academically.

Source: CDC

In 2023, 66% of teachers were satisfied with their jobs – up from 56% in 2022. Despite the increase, they remained less satisfied with their jobs than U.S. workers generally.

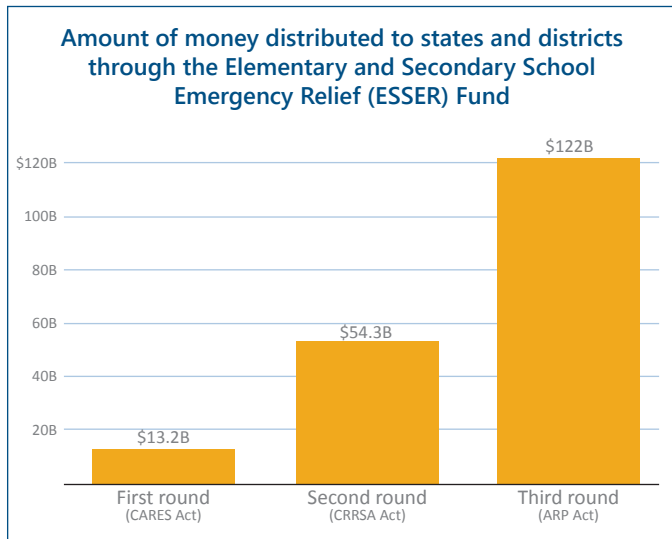
Sources: Education Week and Pew Research Center

The growing mental health crisis among students has adversely affected the emotional wellbeing and job satisfaction of teachers, thereby compromising the quality of the entire school environment. Focusing on the mental health of both teachers and students can improve academic performance, leading to higher school and district rankings.

LOOKING AHEAD

Putting ESSER Funds to Work for a Healthier Future

Over \$200 billion in pandemic-related relief assistance has been allocated in three waves. The first two waves of funding have already concluded, but the final and largest wave is fast approaching, with an obligation date of September 30, 2024.



Schools/districts must use ESSER funding to address pandemic-related challenges, such as helping students and teachers with mental health needs and addressing learning loss due to remote instruction during lockdown. Reports on fund utilization show there are many ways these dollars are being used. Two of the more common ones include:

More School-Based Mental Health Professionals

With more Federal aid, schools have made headway in hiring more mental health professionals to staff. Compared to pre-pandemic years, the number of school-based social workers, school nurses, and psychologists in the U.S. had increased by 30%, 29% and 6%, respectively, as of December 2023. (Source: Current Population Survey; President’s Council of Economic Advisers calculation)

Schools and districts in many states have reported on their plans for ESSER-funded mental health initiatives. South Carolina, for example, is using ESSER funding to hire school-based mental health professionals with master’s degrees. These staff members will provide students with assessment, intervention, and treatment services, including individual, group, and family therapy.

New Jersey is using ESSER assistance in a similar way and plans to establish a grant to districts that will make new mental health services and supports available to both students and educators.

New Private and Community Partnerships

While some schools are adding to staff, others are forming new partnerships with mental health organizations. Rhode Island, for example, has earmarked ESSER funds to build partnerships between districts and community-based organizations that will address family engagement and social and emotional learning.

Public school districts in 40 states have formed successful partnerships with Care Solace, a mental health care coordination service that increases capacity for existing school staff by navigating the complexities of the mental healthcare system on behalf of families to get them quickly connected and into an appointment with an appropriate treatment provider from a vetted network. The Methuen Public Schools is one of several school systems in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that has used the service successfully for several years to help students and staff. Other Care Solace partners include the Rutherford County Schools in Nashville, Tennessee the Wayne Westland Community Schools in Metro Detroit, and the school system of Bullitt County Kentucky.

Take Action

The third and largest round of ESSER funding (\$122 billion) offers immediate opportunities for schools to hire more mental health professionals and partner with community organizations or private service providers. This emergency relief provides significant hope not only for the emotional wellbeing of students and faculty but ultimately for improved academic outcomes. Funding is ready and waiting, but it’s essential that schools do not delay. The absolute deadline for obligations is September 30, 2024.



Contact U.S. Retirement & Benefits Partners (USRBP) today to discover how to obtain

ESSER funds and direct them to your school or district’s mental health needs before the September 30 deadline.

Don’t miss out on these FREE funds and the tools, programs, and services they can bring to your students and teachers.

