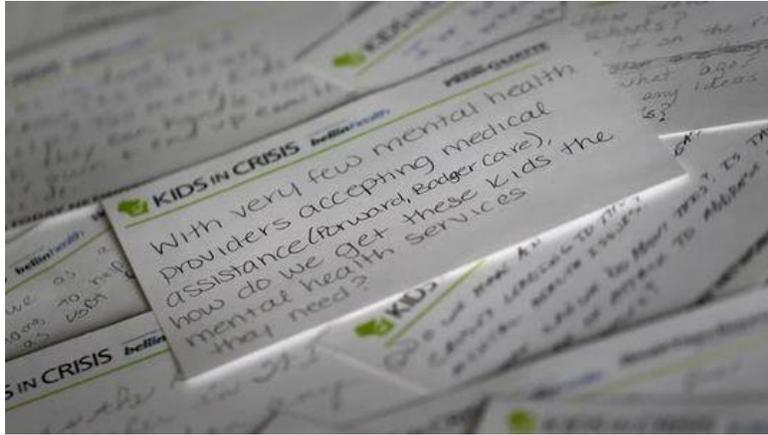


\$6 million sought for school mental health

Rory Linnane, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 1:28 p.m. CST November 16, 2016



Wisconsin's top educator Tuesday requested nearly \$6 million to expand mental health services for students, including hiring more social workers, establishing clinics in schools and training school staff.

State Superintendent Tony Evers' request will be considered as part of the state's 2017-19 budget. Gov. Scott Walker is preparing a proposal that will be sent to the legislature early next year.

Evers said the proposal came in response to USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin's [Kids in Crisis series](#), which found school staff shortages and a lack of support for students dealing with mental health challenges. Wisconsin's teen suicide rate is higher than the national average, but a shortage of providers often makes it hard for families to get treatment.

Related: [State's teen suicide rate sharply higher than national average](#)

Related: [Kids in Crisis inspires school mental health plan](#)

The Department of Public Instruction notes that 20 percent of students live with mental health problems, but 80 percent don't get professional help. The plan calls for spending:

\$2.5 million for collaborations between school districts and community mental health providers to offer treatment to students on or off campus.

\$3 million to help school districts hire more social workers. [Kids in Crisis found staffing levels for social workers are far below recommended levels by professional associations.](#)

\$420,000 for additional training opportunities for school staff in identifying and responding to mental challenges.

All proposals are supported by Mental Health America of Wisconsin. Evers said he is hopeful about finding bipartisan backing.

"In talking with legislative leaders, the governor, and my fellow agency heads in Wisconsin, I am optimistic that we can work together to ensure every small-town kid has access to a quality education and to improve mental health service to our youth," Evers said in a statement.



Tony Evers, Wisconsin superintendent of public instruction. (Photo: Mike De Sisti / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

A spokesman for Evers said school officials are seeking support from the state Department of Health Services in the form of Medicaid payments to cover low-income students in the clinics. Currently, Medicaid and other insurers often do not reimburse providers for the full cost of mental health care provided in school-based clinics.

Linda Seemeyer, the newly appointed secretary of the Department of Health Services, said Tuesday she supports expanding clinics in schools.

"I know DPI is working on that and we've been in discussions with them," Seemeyer said. "That's a great idea; that's where the kids are."

She said the department is closely monitoring a pilot program which increases Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care to see if that approach is effective in expanding care. If that's successful, she said it could lead to payment increases in other areas, including school-based clinics.

"In the long run, while we can advocate, the decision ends with the policy makers in the state Capitol," Seemeyer said.

Evers' proposal to expand school-based clinics is based on Minnesota's approach, which was highlighted in the Kids in Crisis series. State funding in Minnesota helps support community mental health agencies providing mental health assessments, treatment, teacher consultation, care coordination and training for school staff.

The program has reported fewer disciplinary actions and improving school performance for students involved — many of whom had never before had mental health services.

Under the DPI proposal, districts would have to apply for grants from the \$2.5 million pool to secure funds for collaborating with community health agencies. In some cases, the collaboration could mean that the school refers students off campus to existing clinics for help. In other cases, it could mean public or private health agencies would open a satellite clinic on campus.

Some school districts have already done this, often relying heavily on philanthropic funding. USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin recently [highlighted one such program in the Fox Valley](#), backed by United Way, which allows students to see a Catalpa Health therapist on campus during the school day.

"Students struggle every day in our schools," said Peter Kelly, president of United Way-Fox Cities. "Having services available to them when they need it in the school, which they view as a safe place, is going to be something that will benefit students and help families and society."

He said the United Way's PATH program could expand its services within the districts it operates in if it can get some of the grant money.

"Everything we're currently doing is thanks to the generosity of our community," he said. "In order to serve a broader need, we can use all the support we can get. ... I know firsthand that every district could easily use more time from a therapist in their community. We're just meeting a very small portion of the need."

Keegan Kyle contributed reporting.