

Student mental health supports strained across Connecticut schools as needs rise, federal funds end

By [Natasha Sokoloff](#), Staff Writer Oct 20, 2025

Strapped for funds and staff, Connecticut schools are struggling to keep up with [climbing mental health and behavioral challenges](#) among students, experts say.

Pandemic relief dollars that funded mental health services and staff positions in schools have dried up, leaving educators across the state [reporting](#) that escalating student challenges are not being addressed. State experts say the combination of insufficient funding, staffing shortages and rising student needs in the wake of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) have created a crisis for Connecticut schools.

“I feel like since COVID, we've kind of been in a mental health crisis,” said Michelle Boss, executive director of the Connecticut School Counselor Association. “We know that this is a very real problem for kids. ... Students in Connecticut are struggling.”

In 2024, Connecticut saw record numbers of students needing behavioral health services, as well as an increased number of youth suicides, according to a recent request for funding by the state Department of Education.

About three-quarters of Connecticut educators surveyed said they do not feel equipped to deal with their students' mental health challenges.

Mental, behavioral health challenges rising in schools

Hundreds of Connecticut educators have seen students face increased stress, anxiety and depression, reduced concentration, increased aggression, and more distraction over the past few years, according to a [recent survey](#) by the Connecticut Education Association.

“Schools are a natural place to address behavioral health needs for students,” said Jeana Bracey, associate vice president of school and community initiatives at the Child Health and Development Institute, a nonprofit.

But school budgets are stretched to the brink, she said. More than 500 Connecticut educators said there was not sufficient support for student mental health needs at their school, according to the CEA survey.

“Many schools often, out of necessity, operate in a crisis-driven approach that can be described as sort of putting fires out all day, responding to whatever the highest need is in the biggest issue of that moment,” Bracey said. “And it can be difficult to get out of that cycle.”

Many school districts in Connecticut were able to use federal pandemic relief funds to bolster student mental health services and strengthen staffing. More than two-thirds of Connecticut districts invested a total of \$71 million in mental health support using relief funds, according to the [School + State Finance Project](#).

But those funds have run out.

There is still an array of federal and state resources and grants available for schools to support mental and behavioral health and wellbeing, but not necessarily enough to keep up with rising student challenges, Bracey said.

“Providing reliable, longer term funding to enable schools to really invest sustainably in high quality services that are comprehensive to meet all the needs — that’s always a need,” she said. “There probably will never be adequate or enough funding to fully meet that need.”

Citing this need, the state Department of Education is now seeking an additional \$5.5 million to support student mental and behavioral health in fiscal year 2027, according to its request to the state Office of Policy and Management dated Oct 8.

“The social, emotional, mental and behavioral health needs of students have not lessened post-pandemic,” according to CSDE’s request. “Unmet behavioral, emotional, and psychological challenges among students leads to minor issues like classroom disruptions to major concerns like suicidal ideation and attempts.”

State experts are concerned about how the current [federal landscape](#) and [educator shortages](#) will also impact schools' ability to address student needs.

Fallout of pandemic relief funds

The full fallout from the loss of pandemic relief funds is yet to be seen.

So far, the most immediate impact has been on staffing, Bracey said. Nearly half of Connecticut school districts dedicated pandemic money to bringing mental health professionals into schools, according to the School + State Finance Project.

When the funds ran out, some Connecticut districts did not have a plan, or the capacity, to keep supporting positions that focused on student needs, Boss said.

“And so those positions, unfortunately, did get cut,” she said.

[Filling vacancies](#) and hiring enough school counselors, social workers and psychologists was critical to address students' worsening mental and behavioral challenges, Boss said. Schools are now scrambling to find grants and other sources to pay for staffing, she said.

"There just aren't enough (staff) in schools to address all of the varying needs and the degree of needs of students in all of the different schools," she said.

At the same time, there is a shortage of available support staff because of a [behavioral health workforce crisis](#). "We might not have the work pipeline to fill all of them right now, even if we wanted to offer more positions," Boss said.

People may be reluctant to work in schools because of the [persistent hardships](#) many educators face, Boss said.

"People see how hard it is to work in education right now, and what a heavy lift that this job can be because of the growing needs of our students in Connecticut," she said.

More than 600 educators who responded to the CEA survey said students' behavioral problems contributed to a shortage of educators in their school district and fewer entering the teaching profession. School morale is hurt when staff feel "overwhelmed or feel like they're unable to fully meet students' needs," Bracey said.

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Natasha Sokoloff is a reporter with Hearst Connecticut Media Group covering education across the state. She reports on both K-12 schools and higher education, from federal and state policy impacts to inequities and other issues in Connecticut schools. She is originally from Southern California and graduated from the University of Richmond with a double major in journalism and leadership studies. Natasha previously covered the Farmington Valley area and has experience covering local news, public affairs and politics, art, education and social justice issues.