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Editorial: Invest in students' mental health

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Experts warned for months of the negative consequences of keeping children out of school during the pandemic. In addition to academic losses, students have faced serious mental health challenges, and the state should do what it can to help these young people.

After all, it was state-mandated school closures and the decisions of local public school districts that kept so many children from the classroom.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has proposed several forms of mental health funding for students in her latest budget, including \$11 million for on-site school health centers that offer both primary care and mental health support for students.

Yet medical providers and public health advocates are requesting a bigger investment. They are asking lawmakers to up the amount to \$25 million, which could help address the growing need for the centers across the state.

Currently around 200 schools have a school-based center, but there are 150 Michigan school districts on a waitlist for the on-site facilities. The coalition backing the increased funding says its goal is to have at least one school in each county with a medical center, and there are 41 counties still without one.

The \$25 million could support the opening of 100 on-site centers. The timing is important, given the rise in depression and suicide and other behavioral difficulties caused by the disruptions from COVID.

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“As we’re working to help students overcome the trauma associated with two years of pandemic-related social and emotional hardship, as well as ongoing health concerns, it is encouraging to hear from lawmakers they recognize the extreme need for funding support,” said Deb Brinson, interim executive director of the School-Community Health Alliance of Michigan, in a statement.

The Legislature still has about \$2.7 billion in discretionary federal COVID funds, along with billions in surplus tax revenues. Since the federal funds are finite, ongoing programs such as the health centers should come from a more stable funding source.

While schools in Michigan have already received about \$6 billion in federal relief, those dollars weren't awarded equally to school districts. Schools with the highest poverty rates gained the lion's share of the funds, including districts in Detroit and Flint.

So ensuring more schools can meet the needs of students is a worthy goal.

Tom Livezey, superintendent of Oakridge Public Schools outside of Muskegon, says his 2,000-student district opened a health clinic in 2016, and it's given families much better access to a full range of health care they didn't have before. Now, instead of heading to the emergency room, parents take their children to the school center.

Proponents say the clinics boost student achievement by catching physical and mental problems earlier.

Oxford Community Schools has also expressed an interest in a health center. After the mass shooting last November at Oxford High School, that school community is clearly in need of additional support services, and Brinson says she's been working with school administrators there.

The Legislature should consider this request. But the spike in student depression and anxiety should serve as a strong warning to avoid school closures and disruptions.