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Bolter: Collaborative approach to mental health in schools is needed

Alan Bolter The Detroit News

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The recent passage of Michigan's FY 2025 budget has raised significant concerns by various school-based interest groups regarding substantial cuts in the mental health and school safety grants line item — dropping from a historic \$491.8 million investment to \$136.7 million, a 72% decrease from the previous year.

School groups argue this reduction threatens to undermine the progress these funds have made during the last several years in providing additional mental health resources for students. The Community Mental Health Association of Michigan (CMHA) shares these concerns. While all of us who are committed to the mental health of Michigan's children, youth and families are working to restore funding for both school-based and community-based mental health services, we must use this moment to rethink how we approach mental health care for students and how schools and community mental health organizations can work together to maximize limited resources.

The Community Mental Health Association of Michigan (CMHA) believes that we should act now to align school-based mental health resources and aims with those of Michigan's community-based public mental health system. By doing so, we can build a more cohesive, efficient and effective system of care for students across the state.

The concerns voiced by school groups in the wake of these budget cuts are valid. Districts worry that this reduction in funding threatens to lead to district-wide lay-offs of school resource officers and mental health professionals, potentially resulting in the loss of crucial security measures and student mental health resources. In the face of this loss, CMHA is underscoring its long-held belief that the solution lies not in isolated efforts but in a collaborative integrated approach — one that encourages all of Michigan's school districts, as

many have done, to partner with community mental health agencies and use their school-based mental health financing and related resources to contract for a range of mental health services from the state's community mental health system.

As many Michigan school districts have found, such partnerships leverage the expertise and infrastructure of these community-based mental health organizations to provide comprehensive and evidence-based services to students and their families. This approach benefits school services and enhances the existing framework of Michigan's mental health care system in its entirety.

While the recent cuts to mental health and safety funding in schools are a real loss of mental health resources focused on the needs of school-age Michigianians, the state's education and community mental health communities must take this opportunity to build a comprehensive system that covers both the school room and the community. The Community Mental Health Association (CMHA) is confident that with the right approach, we can, collectively, achieve strong outcomes for students and their families.

The debate over mental health funding in schools should not be centered on whether schools or community mental health systems receive the lion's share of resources. Instead, it should be about how we can break down the existing walls between schools and community mental health organizations, and build a more seamless, resilient system that serves all students more effectively.

As we continue to navigate these challenges of a rapidly evolving mental health landscape, it is essential that we advocate for a collaborative model of care that equally values both school-based services and community mental health resources. This approach not only addresses the immediate concerns arising from recent funding cuts but also provides an opportunity to build a more cohesive and resilient mental health system for the future.

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