

Investing in Youth Mental Health in New Mexico



New Mexican Youth Need Mental Health Support

For the past two years, Instituto del Puente has asked students what they need to thrive in school. Support for their mental health and wellbeing was one of the top three responses.

Future Focused Education has developed and piloted Youth and Teen Mental Health First Aid training, along with paid internships that focus on behavioral health career pathways. These programs and internships offer immediate support by growing a school community's capacity to prevent, identify, and respond to mental health challenges experienced by young people. Schools have highlighted the gaps and challenges youth and families face in accessing culturally and linguistically responsive mental health and social service resources in local communities. This has underscored the overall lack of a well resourced and supportive community and statewide ecosystem of care, especially when schools are unable to adequately address the social determinants of health and wellbeing of youth and their families.

What's Working

Future Focused Education's Community Care Collective has formalized partnerships with Central Region Educational Cooperative schools and districts, while also leveraging Department of Health-Behavioral Health funding and the Department of Labor's Foundation's of Growing Our Own¹, to engage 14 schools across the state in the following three-pronged strategy:

1. Training students as Teen Mental Health First Aiders to increase mental health literacy, student-driven action (e.g. clubs, wellness rooms, campaigns) and positive peer support.
2. Training school administrators, educators, support staff, parents, and community members in Youth Mental Health First Aid to improve their awareness and responsiveness to youth mental health needs and challenges.
3. Engaging youth in paid internships for those interested in pursuing careers in behavioral health professions, while earning stackable credentials in Mental Health First Aid, Youth Peer Support Specialist, Comprehensive Community Support Services, etc. This includes convening and working closely with behavioral health organizations, workforce coalitions and employer partners.

This, and other "grow your own" mental health professional programs, are a critical step toward keeping New Mexico's promise to improve mental health and community well-being as well as growing a comprehensive infrastructure, backed by policy.

This fall, we convened students, teachers, administrators, school board members, and community members. Here's what they had to say about mental health in schools:

"This policy work is critical to my community of the statewide school work including youth suicide prevention."

"Mental health supports for educators. Minimize burnout. Minimize harm done to youth by a lack of consistency of staff."

"Youth are facing significant direct and vicarious trauma due to the generational impact of Substance Use Disorder in the community."

"Need for community-based opportunity for young people to learn about, ideally pursue, school mental health roles (internships-paid, scholarships, mentoring, placement, and transition support)."

"Provide leaders, educators, teachers, and other staff learning on emotional intelligence, SEL, relationship building in their training programs—embedded in higher education curriculum."

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Recommendation:

The State of New Mexico is poised to spend \$100 million on behavioral health reforms in the 2025 legislative session. Future Focused Education applauds and supports the State's effort. However, specific references to young people and public schools are absent from the proposed legislation. We recommend the following:

- **Increase the appropriation from \$1.0 million to \$2.0 million in the "Specials" section of House Bill 2."2,000,000 for behavioral health career development programs including youth mental health first aid training and behavioral health internships."**
- **Include funding for Behavioral Health Infrastructure and Capacity Building in schools within the Senate Bills 1, 2, and 3.**
- **Include Behavioral Health in the At Risk factor as a strategy to engage vulnerable students.**



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Youth Mental Health First Aid Internships in New Mexico