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Commissioner

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Department of Education
and Early Development

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STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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DEED Awarded \$9.1M Grant to Promote Student Mental Health

JUNEAU – The Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) has been awarded a five-year \$9.1 million Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education) grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The grant will assist the state in improving mental health by growing mental health literacy, reducing mental health stigma, strengthening early identification and intervention for student mental health conditions, as well as providing more robust services for students who are experiencing severe mental health issues.

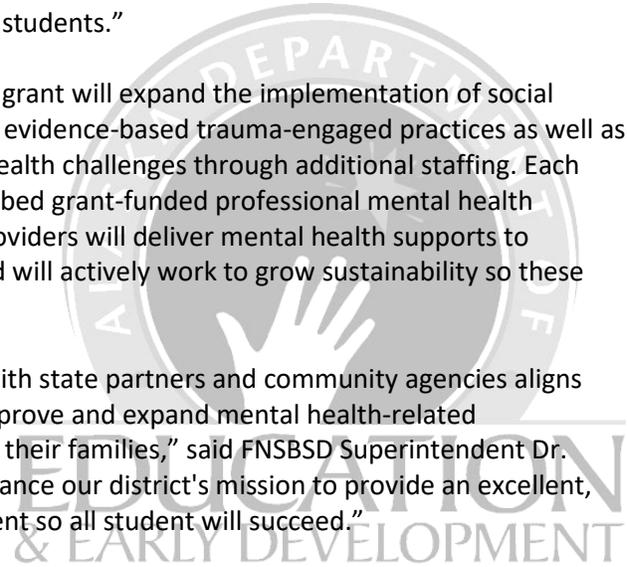
“With the COVID-19 pandemic impacting every aspect of life, mental health and wellbeing is a top priority for the department,” said DEED Deputy Commissioner Karen Melin. “The Project AWARE grant will allow DEED to enhance mental health services during a period when it is of particularly high need.”

This is the second Project AWARE grant DEED has been awarded. While these grants clearly expand Alaska’s capacity to improve school-based mental health statewide, the grants require the selection of three districts to receive the concentrated mental health services. In the first Project AWARE grant, Kenai Peninsula Borough, Anchorage, and Matanuska-Susitna Borough School Districts were chosen as priority districts. This cycle Juneau Borough School District (JBSD), Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (FNSBSD), and Bering Strait School District (BSSD) were selected.

“The first Project AWARE grant was a powerful catalyst for DEED and empowered the department to expand the scope and depth of health and safety resources and services to districts,” said Todd Brocius, DEED School Health and Safety Education Administrator. “We expect equally great things from this second Project AWARE grant and are deeply grateful to SAMHSA for their renewed commitment to supporting the mental health and safety of Alaska’s students.”

In JBSD, FNSBSD, and BSSD the new Project AWARE grant will expand the implementation of social emotional learning, restorative practices, and other evidence-based trauma-engaged practices as well as significantly increase capacity to meet the mental health challenges through additional staffing. Each district strategically selected schools in which to embed grant-funded professional mental health providers to deliver these essential services. The providers will deliver mental health supports to students for the entire five-year life of the grant and will actively work to grow sustainability so these vital services can continue after the grant ends.

“The SAMHSA Project AWARE grant collaboration with state partners and community agencies aligns perfectly with the district’s strategic plan goal to improve and expand mental health-related interventions and services for school-age youth and their families,” said FNSBSD Superintendent Dr. Karen Gaborik. “Participation in this project will advance our district’s mission to provide an excellent, equitable education in a safe, supportive environment so all student will succeed.”



This sentiment was echoed by Ted Wilson, JBSD Director of Teaching and Learning Support, who noted “JBSD is thrilled to have these additional resources available at three of our schools! Now more than ever our students need support as they navigate a school life that is very isolated, and, for some, unhealthy. The mental health support will be a difference-maker in the lives of our at-risk adolescent students. We appreciate the support that this grant, through DEED, will be providing the district and its families.”

On statewide level the Project AWARE grant will offer interested districts the ability to receive Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) training. YMHFA is an evidence-based training that provides adults who work with youth and other youth-serving agencies across the state with the tools they need to informally assess students who may be experiencing a mental health issue, provide reassurance and immediate care, and direct these students to more professional services when deemed appropriate. This training has proven to be very effective and well-received by Alaskans, and the need for expansion of mental health supports is clear as Alaska responds to multiple challenges like the mental health impact of the pandemic and having the highest youth suicide rate in the nation.

The first Project AWARE grant received by DEED in 2014 helped shape DEED’s [Trauma-Engaged Schools Framework](#); enabled the department to create an administrative position to better respond to the barriers mental health issues pose to academic success; expanded counseling services to the majority of Alaska’s most high-risk students in Alternative High Schools; empowered DEED to conduct two highly successful statewide Health and Safety Summits that offered scholarships to support participation from every district; and delivered mental health literacy and intervention training to thousands of educators and other youth service providers statewide.

*The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development provides information, resources, and leadership to support over 130,000 students in 503 public schools across Alaska. The mission of the department is to ensure an “**Excellent Education for Every Student Every Day.**”*

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