

May 27, 2025

Hayley Sanon
Acting Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20202

Re: Request for Reconsideration of Non-Continuation of Grant S184H220228, School-Based Mental Health Grant to Rochester Public Schools

Dear Acting Assistant Secretary Sanon:

Rochester Public Schools (RPS) respectfully requests reconsideration of the Department's decision to discontinue our School-Based Mental Health grant (S184H220228) effective December 31, 2025. We believe this decision is not in the best interest of the Federal Government, our students, or the effective use of taxpayer dollars.

There is currently a critical shortage of school-based mental health professionals in our country. National mental health organizations recommend a ratio of one school counselor and one school social worker for every 250 students, and a ratio of one school psychologist for every 500 students. Unfortunately, across each profession, the national ratio is more than double the recommendation, with some states and school districts faring even worse.

The \$1.9 million federal grant to RPS addresses this urgent need by enabling talented staff already working in our school system to earn the licenses and degrees necessary to provide professional mental health services to students. This grant fills a critical gap that school districts cannot address alone, covering tuition for social work programs at Winona State University, substitute pay during internships, and mentoring for emerging mental health practitioners.

Ninety percent of parents across the country agree that schools should provide mental health services through school psychologists, counselors, or social workers to help their children feel safe and supported. Students are six times as likely to receive needed mental health care when it is provided at school, and the majority of youth who receive needed services do so at school. This includes prevention, early detection, and early intervention efforts, which are critical components of comprehensive school mental health services and crisis prevention.

The grant to Rochester Public Schools actively promotes merit and excellence in education. Participants must earn their positions through the same rigorous process as any other candidate—the grant only guarantees an interview, not employment. All participants must demonstrate merit through their performance in the program and compete fairly for positions.

Furthermore, while the original grant guidelines encouraged consideration of applicants from underrepresented backgrounds, RPS has implemented the program in a balanced manner: two-thirds of participants are people of color or Indigenous individuals, while one-third are white. This reflects our commitment to both diversity and merit-based selection.

The premature termination of this grant is an inefficient use of valuable federal funds. Significant federal funding has already been spent on tuition, stipends, and training for current participants. Six participants graduated from the program this spring, demonstrating the program's effectiveness and its potential as a replicable model for schools across the United States. Terminating the grant now would largely waste these investments. Ten individuals are currently in the program but will be unable to complete their credentials if the grant is terminated. This creates significant personal hardship and represents a broken commitment to these dedicated professionals. An additional twelve participants were scheduled to begin the program next year, representing lost potential to address student mental health needs.

By allowing RPS to complete this grant as originally funded, the Department would enable more than two dozen professionals to gain credentials to serve student mental health needs. It would demonstrate federal commitment to addressing the youth mental health crisis and ensure taxpayer dollars already invested achieve their intended purpose.

I respectfully urge the Department to reconsider its decision and allow the School-Based Mental Health grant to Rochester Public Schools to continue through its planned completion. This program represents exactly the type of innovative, merit-based approach needed to address the critical mental health needs of our students. The termination of this grant sends a troubling message about the federal government's commitment to student mental health and efficient use of taxpayer resources. We hope that upon further review, the Department will recognize that continuing this grant is indeed in the best interest of the Federal Government and the students we serve.

We agree to not use any factors related to race, gender, or sexual orientation to select or support candidates for the grant program. Our focus is on merit, excellence, and meeting the urgent mental health needs of students.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to your response and remain committed to working collaboratively to support student mental health.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kent Pekel".

Kent Pekel, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools