

Legislative Report

Children's Mental Health School-Based Training & Support 2026



Department of Education



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To provide a more in-depth view of children's mental health and grief support provided in PK-12 educational settings across the state, this year's report also includes information about children's mental health services delivered by Iowa's area education agencies (AEAs).

2025-26 AEA Mental Health Grant End-of-Year Report

During the 2025-26 fiscal year, Iowa's AEA's, through a memorandum of understanding with the Iowa Department of Education, utilized \$3,180,398.90 in appropriated funds to support school districts across the state with targeted services in school-based mental health. These supports focused on providing the delivery of training programs designed to build school capacity for mental health awareness and intervention, supporting students exhibiting challenging behavior and providing support to districts in times of crisis.

The AEAs provided statewide access to three trainings for educators: Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) training and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These professional learning opportunities were offered and available to all educators and school personnel across Iowa to equip them with tools to recognize, respond to and de-escalate mental health challenges in students. Each training focused on a different aspect of student mental health, including awareness of impact on students affected by childhood trauma, how to recognize signs of depression and risk of attempted suicide and how to de-escalate and respond to student behavior.

Additional funds are used to provide full-time employees (FTEs) to serve as members of Challenging Behavior and Autism Teams (CBATs).

The following tables show the required mental health professional development delivered by Iowa's AEAs.

Table 1. MHFA Professional Development Sessions

AEA	Total Allocation (for all three training types)	Number of Sessions	Number of Participants
Central Rivers	\$392,610.97	0	0
Grant Wood	\$454,876.88	0	0
Great Prairie	\$211,780.07	1	187
Green Hills	\$228,418.62	0	0
Heartland	\$942,828.70	7	210
Keystone	\$192,874.85	3	47
Mississippi Bend	\$291,131.74	1	32
Northwest	\$274,499.32	3	31
Prairie Lakes	\$194,914.85	0	0

Table 2. CPI Professional Development Sessions

AEA	Total Allocation (for all three training types)	Number of Sessions	Number of Participants
Central Rivers	\$392,610.97	2	14
Grant Wood	\$454,876.88	17	392
Great Prairie	\$211,780.07	19	347
Green Hills	\$228,418.62	15	202
Heartland	\$942,828.70	38	987
Keystone	\$192,874.85	8	239
Mississippi Bend	\$291,131.74	28	354
Northwest	\$274,499.32	11	142
Prairie Lakes	\$194,914.85	7	83

Table 3. ACES Professional Development Sessions

AEA	Total Allocation (for all three training types)	Number of Sessions	Number of Participants
Central Rivers	\$392,610.97	0	0
Grant Wood	\$454,876.88	0	0
Great Prairie	\$211,780.07	0	0
Green Hills	\$228,418.62	0	0
Heartland	\$942,828.70	0	0
Keystone	\$192,874.85	1	5
Mississippi Bend	\$291,131.74	0	0
Northwest	\$274,499.32	1	10
Prairie Lakes	\$194,914.85	0	0

Additional Use of Funds

Additional use of funds by the AEAs included the following:

1. Central Rivers AEA: CBAT FTE, trainer certifications, training materials and school district CPI trainer certification
2. Green Hills AEA: CBAT FTE and training materials
3. Great Prairie AEA: CBAT FTE, trainer certifications and training materials
4. Grant Wood AEA: CBAT FTE, I-Fast Mobile Crisis Counseling, Care-Solace and training materials
5. Heartland AEA: CBAT FTE, trainer certifications and training materials
6. Northwest AEA: CBAT FTE, trainer certifications and training materials
7. Keystone AEA: CBAT FTE, trainer certifications and training materials
8. Mississippi Bend AEA: CBAT FTE
9. Prairie Lakes AEA: CBAT FTE, trainer certifications and training materials

Children's Grief and Loss Rural Pilot Program

Of the \$3,383,936 appropriated to AEAs by the Iowa legislature to provide school-based children's mental health services and educator training, lawmakers allotted \$200,000 to implement a children's grief and loss rural pilot program. This program, serving students in rural school districts and accredited nonpublic schools, is administered by the nonprofit EveryStep Grief and Loss Services. Their annual report for 2026 is on the following page.



Behind every number in this report

is a student who found a safe place to share their story, a family who felt supported during a difficult time, or a school better prepared to respond when grief impacts its community. Through legislative funding, EveryStep's Grief & Loss Services, home of Amanda the Panda, continues to provide no-cost grief support to rural Iowa schools, ensuring students have access to compassionate care regardless of where they live.

Throughout the year, Amanda the Panda partnered with rural schools to provide school-based grief support groups, educator consultation, classroom education, grief day camps, and community outreach tailored to each school's unique needs. By working alongside educators and school staff, the program helps create supportive school environments where grieving students feel understood, develop healthy coping strategies, and remain connected to their peers and learning. The following report highlights the reach and impact of these efforts during the past year.

Amanda the Panda Takes Kids Surfing and Soaring Through Grief Journey

In south central Iowa, it is not an uncommon site on a clear day to see hot air balloons crossing the rolling hills. With the National Balloon Museum in Indianola the hobby has become part of the fabric of the community. The culmination of the season is the week long National Balloon Classic celebration at the end of each summer that sends hundreds of balloons soaring above the Iowa landscape.

In April, EveryStep's Amanda the Panda team welcomed a group of kids and youth to take flight like those balloons in their journey through grief.

"Soaring Your Way Through Grief," a daylong camp for those who've suffered a recent loss in their life, was held at Creston Elementary School. Vanessa Spencer,

Amanda the Panda's Rural School Coordinator, says there are corollaries to be drawn between the two kinds of journeys. "We use it as a play on words meaning to navigate a challenge in your life with confidence. We designed this camp to give participants confidence while navigating the challenges and losses they have been through," Vanessa says.

Ballooning wasn't the only form of transportation the kids used as metaphors. Kids built and designed paper surfboards – including messages about their feelings and those whom they've lost. They then "rode" their surfboards on waves of emotion created by a parachute waved by their fellow campers.



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RECAP

July 2025 – June 2026

386

Students served through school-based support group sessions

- 218 Elementary School
- 168 Middle/High School

526

Students, staff and caregivers served through outreach events

22

Schools served

12

Elementary & Middle School Students served through *Soaring Your Way Through Grief Day Camp* Creston/Union County



STUDENTS CREATING MEMORY JARS TO HONOR THEIR LOVED ONE



MORE ►



2025-2026 Participating Schools

SCHOOL NAME	CITY	COUNTY
Berg Middle	Newton	Jasper
Bondurant Intermediate	Bondurant	Polk
CAM High	Anita	Cass
Central Decatur	Leon	Decatur
Creston Elementary	Creston	Union
Creston Middle	Creston	Union
Edwards Elementary	Ames	Story
Hartford Upper Elementary	Hartford	Warren
1-35 Elementary	Truro	Madison
Indianola Middle	Indianola	Warren
Lenihan Intermediate	Marshalltown	Marshall
Martensdale-St. Marys	Martensdale	Warren
Murray	Murray	Clarke
Nevada Elementary	Nevada	Story
Nevada Middle	Nevada	Story
North Mahaska Elementary	New Sharon	Mahaska
North Mahaska Jr./Sr. High	New Sharon	Mahaska
North Polk High	Alleman	Polk
William Penn University	Oskaloosa	Mahaska
Winterset Elementary	Winterset	Madison
Winterset High	Winterset	Madison
Winterset Middle	Winterset	Madison

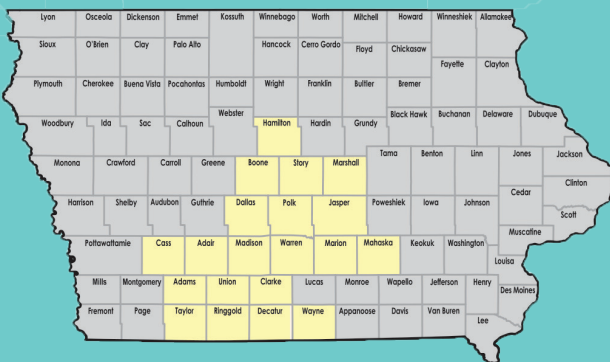


USE OF FUNDS

Personnel	\$129,442
Supplies	\$216
Communications	\$652
Marketing/Client Resources	\$9,576
Mileage/Travel	\$10,044
Admin/Other	\$32,825
Staff Development	\$17,245
Total	\$200,00

COUNTIES SERVED TO DATE

Adair, Adams, Boone, Cass, Clark, Dallas, Decatur, Hamilton, Jasper, Madison, Mahaska, Marion, Marshall, Polk, Ringgold, Story, Union, Taylor, Warren & Wayne



SUPPORT GROUP SURVEY RESULTS

96% of students reported that the support group was overall helpful in supporting them as they processed their grief.

97% of students reported that they learned safe and healthy ways to cope with their emotions and feelings.

98% of students reported they would tell their friends to try this group if they also have experienced a loss in their life.

"Rachel facilitated a small group that was so engaging, informative and fun that students looked forward to joining each week. They connected with each other on a level that will support them for years to come! By sitting in on the group, I learned new activities and ideas to implement in future small groups as well!"

—School counselor whose students received our support services