

# Grant Approval Memo



**Contract:** The Stellar Group, LLC  
**Request Amount:** \$60,000.00  
**Project Title:** Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice Facilitator-Contract  
**Grant Term:** August 29, 2026-June 30, 2027  
**Trust Staff:** Tina Voelker-Ross

## Requested Motion:

*The Program & Planning Committee recommends that the Board of Trustees approve a \$60,000 authority grant to The Stellar Group, LLC for the Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice Facilitator contract. These funds will come from the FY27 budget.*

## Staff Analysis

- What does this project do?

This contract supports a statewide Community of Practice that brings together school districts and community behavioral health partners to improve mental health supports in schools. The Trust issued an RFP in January 2024, which established the scope of work, contract deliverables and the three (3) 1-year renewal options. The Stellar Group was the most advantageous offeror and began work in February 2024. In May 2025, the board of trustees approved the first renewal, or the second year, of the contract. This memo is in support of the second 1-year renewal option, or the contract's third year, for the 2026-2027 school year.

A Community of Practice is a group of people with a shared interest who work together to learn, share best practices, and strengthen their professional skills. In this case, the focus is helping schools build effective mental health supports using the Interconnected Systems Framework. This framework helps schools organize mental health services across three levels:

- Tier 1: strategies for all students
- Tier 2: targeted supports for students needing early or additional help
- Tier 3: intensive, individualized services—often provided through community partners

Trust funding pays The Stellar Group to coordinate and facilitate this work. The Stellar Group also helps ensure that both rural and urban districts—regardless of capacity—are included, and coordinate with state partners from the Department of Health and the Department of Education and Early Development.

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- Who is receiving the funds?

The Stellar Group is a consulting firm that provides research-based services, including program evaluation, needs assessments, professional reports and presentations, business and sustainability planning, program design and coordination, project management, technical assistance, stakeholder engagement, and community planning. They have experience in early childhood and youth services such as juvenile justice, early intervention, child welfare, and primary prevention. The Stellar Group has experience working with the State of Alaska and local partners. Examples of their work in the State of Alaska include conducting the Alaska Infant-Early Childhood Mental Health Needs Assessment, Alaska's Early Childhood Education Workforce: Challenges & Opportunities Report for the Governor's Task Force on Child Care, The Mental Health in Schools: Phase 1 Report and The Mental Health in Schools: Phase 2 Report.

- Why is staff recommending this project?

This contract builds on work the Trust began in 2021–2022, which included two major reports assessing mental health needs and practices in Alaska schools. These findings highlighted the importance of strong school-based mental health supports.

Schools play a critical role in both preventing and addressing mental health challenges. They reach large numbers of children and youth, help identify concerns early, and make it easier for students to access services. The 2024 passage of Medicaid in Schools further increased demand by allowing districts to bill for many school-based services, including mental health. As a result, districts are actively seeking guidance on how to implement these supports. Nine districts participated in the Community of Practice during the 2024–2025 school year, demonstrating strong interest and need. Participants in the 2025-2026 school year included twenty-five school districts, community organizations and state agencies.

Data from the 2023 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey underscore the urgency:

- 23% of high school students seriously considered suicide in the past year
- 43% felt so sad or hopeless for at least two weeks that they stopped usual activities
- Rates are even higher for Alaska Native youth (24% and 47%)

The Community of Practice helps districts and community providers explore and implement effective mental health strategies for their students. This work benefits Trust beneficiaries and supports all students, including those who may struggle silently or hesitate to seek help. Universal Tier 1 supports strengthen protective factors and may reduce the likelihood of students later needing more intensive services. Staff recommend continued funding for this contract to maintain momentum and support statewide implementation.

- Will this be a multi-year project?

Yes, this is a multi-year contract. This memo requests approval for a third contract year, representing the second renewal option.

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| Comp Plan - Area of Focus                | Strategic Priority Area                     |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Area of Focus 1: Early Childhood & Youth | Priority 1: Prevention & Early Intervention |

## **Year 2 Outcomes**

See attached 2025-2026 Alaska Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice Report.  
Highlights include:

- The 2025-2026 cohort comprised of 54 participants representing 25 school districts, community organizations, and state agencies.
- Statewide reach included the following districts: Bering Strait, Bristol Bay Borough, Fairbanks North Star Borough, Galena City, Juneau Borough, Kenai Peninsula Borough, Ketchikan Gateway Borough, Kodiak Island, Kuspuk, Mt. Edgecumbe, North Slope Borough, Petersburg, Southwest Region, Valdez City, Yakutat, Yukon-Koyukuk.
- Organization involvement included Alaska Behavioral Health Association, Alaska School Counselor Association, National Alliance on Mental Illness Alaska (NAMI), Maniilaq Association, Spirit of Youth, Volunteer of America (VOA).
- State agencies included Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, Alaska Department of Health.
- The Community of Practice met for 8 sessions over the school year; on average, 11 attendees per session, and an average of 4 online views per available session.
- Three half-day sessions on relevant topics related to mental health supports in schools. These sessions were open to the public (not just the Community of Practice):
  - Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports Learning Session- 32 attendees, 4 views
  - Youth-Centered Approaches to Substance Use Prevention- 24 attendees, 6 views
  - A Deep Dive into the AK Safe Grant- 16 attendees, 2 views

## **Year 3 Contract Scope of Work**

- Facilitate monthly Community of Practice discussions with education and mental health practitioners statewide during the school year (8-9 virtual meetings per state fiscal year).
- Facilitate monthly virtual Mental Health Supports in Schools State Leadership Team meetings year-round.
- Attend and present in person at the annual Alaska School Safety & Wellbeing Summit on the work and findings over the prior fiscal year. The next Summit will be in Anchorage in September 2026.
- Coordinate and prepare for all meetings, develop agenda, arrange for space/videoconferencing, accommodations, and other meeting needs.

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- Maintain group communication, meeting reminders, share meeting notes, plans, presentations, or other documents, prepare related materials for next committee or workgroup.
- Document and maintain work plans, resources, toolkits, and other best practice materials developed for recommended by the group and track progress on activities.
- Provide an annual summary of themes, activities, results, and work of the Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice.
- Conduct best practice research or other knowledge support for the group. Example: Monitor and integrate local, state, and federal funding strategies and policy developments.
- Engage Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice members and provide background information to new members.
- Utilize the Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF) as a planning tool with the Mental Health Supports in Schools state leadership team and others, as identified.
- Monitor and integrate local, state, and federal funding policy workgroup findings while ensuring inclusion of rural and urban school districts with varying capacity for the purpose of exchanging ideas and sharing policy and best practices examples.

## **Year 3 Contract Deliverables**

- Document meetings for the Community of Practice and leadership team meetings
- Produce annual summary of the themes and activities emerging from the Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice meetings.
- Prepare a presentation, attend and present in person with members from the Leadership Team at the Annual Alaska School Safety & Wellbeing Summit on the work and findings of the Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice over the prior fiscal year. The next Summit will be in Anchorage in September 2026.