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CATHY WURZER: In our lead story, schools in Minnesota will soon be able to apply for federal money to invest in school safety. The pot of \$10 million is from legislation passed earlier this year in response to the mass shooting in an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. That legislation is called the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. Here to tell us more about what this means for Minnesota schools is our education reporter Elizabeth Shockman. Hey, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: Hi, Cathy.

CATHY WURZER: So tell us how this law is going to affect Minnesota schools.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: We don't have quite all the details yet. The announcement we're seeing here is from the US Department of Education. And that is that more than \$10 million are being allocated to Minnesota as part of the so-called Safer Communities legislation.

The next step is for Minnesota's Education Department to pick up the baton and develop a grant program. They're still in the process of doing that. And we should get more concrete information from them about who can apply, how to apply, the size of the grants, and other details in coming days and weeks.

But I wanted to follow this legislation to Minnesota, so I reached out to the US Department of Education and I spoke with Education Secretary Cardona. The agreement included some new gun laws, like an enhanced review process for gun buyers under the age of 21, as well as school-based mental health supports. So I asked Dr. Cardona what sort of funding will be available for Minnesota. And here's what he had to say.

MIGUEL CARDONA: What this bill did is really pay attention to some laws around firearms, but also ensure that our schools have the supports that they need to make sure their school emergency plans can be fully funded, but also making sure that we increase the number of support staff available to help students who are struggling with mental health issues or communities who are struggling with trauma because of mental health needs.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: So the Education Department has put out some guidance on what sorts of proposals they're hoping schools will put forward on safety when they're applying for these grants.

CATHY WURZER: OK. So wondering here about whether the stat that he cited about a student counselor-- hang on, I think I lost my computer here. It just kind of went black on me. Go ahead.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: Yeah, no, that's right. So I mean, I continued asking-- you know, I spent a few minutes with Secretary Cardona, and he offered some specifics about proposals that would be considered. He didn't give a lot of concrete details, but gave a few examples. He also said that it will be crucial to get the input from Minnesota families and teachers involved in the process.

MIGUEL CARDONA: They know best, right, what their community needs. Some examples of what I've seen working across the country are hiring additional school social workers and school counselors. You know, unfortunately, many of our schools have a counselor to student ratio that's over 350 to 1. That's unrealistic.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: So that statistic that Cardona cited about a student to counselor ratio of 350 to 1 is actually much worse in Minnesota. As you said earlier in the program, our state has an average ratio of nearly 600 students per counselor.

And so this is a bipartisan bill, which includes funding to help schools administer more mental health counseling to students. But I have discovered in some of my reporting that there has been some pushback to these types of programs. So there are districts around the state facing political pressure to include or exclude certain types of programming or curriculum.

And there is also a partisan push in some places to get rid of social and emotional learning. Social and emotional learning is meant to, of course, teach students about their emotions, how to build good relationships with others. But some conservative groups claim that this type of learning, social and emotional learning, is an indoctrination tool. So I also brought this up in my interview and asked Cardona about that. Here's what he had to say.

MIGUEL CARDONA: What I would tell those folks who are questioning that is spend some time in a school. Talk to an educator. Talk to your child's educator. And let's trust our educators, and let's listen to them. They know what's working. Our parents, trust our parents. Our parents are saying that their kids need help.

CATHY WURZER: OK, my computer's back on here, Elizabeth. What do we know about how effective it is to invest in mental health if we're trying to solve the problem of school safety, right? I mean, the legislation is in response to a school shooting. So are we going to try to prevent school shootings by hiring more mental health workers and basing them in schools?

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: So I actually-- I reached out to some Minnesota researchers about this. James Densley is a professor of criminal justice at Metro State University and author of the book *The Violence Project-- How To Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic*. He said this legislation is a step in the right direction. It's the first federal firearms legislation in a generation.

And it also acknowledges that school safety is about more than security infrastructure, like metal detectors and bulletproof furniture. In his words, as he said, school safety is about, quote, "supporting the most vulnerable young people and ensuring that their social and emotional needs are met." But he also thinks the legislation and funding that we are discussing today don't go far enough. And he mentioned also a very important caveat when it comes to tying school mental health to school safety.

JAMES DENSLEY: If we just repackage this as a mental health problem, that could get lost in translation, and it could end up stigmatizing the broader community, in terms of mental illness, and sort of drawing a direct line between mental illness equals violence, which is not true.

CATHY WURZER: You touched on this a little bit at the beginning here, Elizabeth. Do you have any sense of what the schools might do with the money?

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: Well, like I said, the grant program in Minnesota, of course, hasn't been announced yet. It's one-time money, which we know from recent COVID money given to schools around the country, can be hard for those school administrators to use to build sustainable programs with. I asked Densley for his recommendation on designing a grant program with these funds. And he told me what he thinks is best.

JAMES Ideally, what this is is a first step toward building the evidence base that can be turned into sustainable policy.

DENSLEY: We have to make sure is that there is a plan in place to evaluate whatever it is we're doing, to then build the evidence base that this should be sustained going forward beyond the life cycle of the grant and after the money dries up.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: So Densley also advised putting in, building an equity element to this. So figuring out how to get the money to the schools that need it the most, not just the schools with the best grant writers. And he pointed out that it would not be a good idea to invest this money in, quote, "hardening schools." So there's not a lot of evidence that investing in, like, metal detectors or security guards at school entrances is going to prevent school shootings.

CATHY WURZER: And we've seen a few pretty high-publicized events around gun violence in Minnesota recently.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: That's right. So we've seen reports of firearms at sporting events and other violence that affects students. There's been national reporting on this, as well-- it's not just Minnesota-- an increase in gun confiscations, shootings, hoaxes at schools this year. Densley pointed out that, although Uvalde prompted this legislation and funding, it really was sort of an exception, if you want to talk about the sorts of violence that students face. He pointed out that students are dealing with the spillover of everyday gun violence in their classrooms and in their communities.

CATHY WURZER: All right. Elizabeth, thank you so very much.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: Thanks for having me.

CATHY WURZER: Elizabeth Shockman is MPR's education reporter.