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NYC Education Dept. school social

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A massive city Education Department effort to hire hundreds of new school social workers is coming at the expense of nonprofit mental health clinics that also operate in public schools, providers say.

DOE officials are attempting to hire [500 new social workers by the start of the school year](#) to address the steep mental health toll of the pandemic and have a dedicated DOE social worker at every school.

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But the hiring spree is also luring dozens of social workers away from non-profit school-based clinics to similar DOE jobs with higher pay. The job openings have sparked a staffing crisis for the non-profits right before the start of the school year, potentially interrupting services for kids who relied on the clinics, providers said.

“We’re dealing with far greater turnover than is typical, and it’s happening at the worst possible time,” said Todd Karlin, the Chief Program Officer at Astor Services, a nonprofit that runs mental health clinics in city schools. “I can safely say most left for higher-paying positions in the DOE.”

“You’ve disrupted continuity of treatment for your highest-need kids,” he added.

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The Tweed Courthouse on Chambers Street in Manhattan that houses the DOE offices. (Jeff Bachner/for New York Daily News)

The DOE jobs offer wages and benefits that the nonprofits say they can't match, with starting salaries between \$72,000 and \$90,000, Karlin said. Some outside organizations including Astor have started boosting salaries in recent months, but it's not enough to match the DOE rates, Karlin said.

Karlin's organization surveyed roughly 30 organizations that run mental health clinics and found they'd lost over 100 social workers during the summer. The most frequent reason cited was moving to the DOE, Karlin said, estimating that more than half the resignations left for city jobs.

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Karlin hasn't tracked resignations across the sector in previous years, but said anecdotally this year's numbers are far higher. At Astor alone, 10 or 11 social workers have quit this school year, up from four or five annually in past years, he said.

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Social workers have long been in short supply in city schools.

The DOE reported [1,447 full-time social workers as of February](#) — less than one per school. Officials have tried to fill the gap in part by partnering with outside organizations like Astor to bring mental health clinics into schools.

The clinics are run by hospitals or nonprofits and provide on-site counseling for students and referrals to outside services like therapy. Karlin said there are roughly 240 clinics currently operating in city schools.

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But the labor market for school social workers was thrown into disarray when Mayor de Blasio announced in April that city officials — flush with federal stimulus cash — were

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The hiring spree is luring dozens of social workers away from non-profit school-based clinics, sparking a staffing crisis right before the start of the school year and potentially interrupting services for kids who relied on the clinics, providers said. (MikeDotta // Shutterstock)

Nonprofit clinic operators say they fully support the idea of expanding mental health services in schools, but argue the sudden glut of new hiring and lack of coordination with school-based clinics caused unintended ripple effects.

“They’ve put all their eggs in this basket....and they’re pulling away from other initiatives in high-need schools to support this initiative,” Karlin said.

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DOE spokesman Nathaniel Styer reiterated the benefits of the city’s hiring spree.

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“By hiring 500 caring adults for schools that previously did not have a school-based social worker, we are taking the important, and necessary step to ensure our children are returning to safe, welcoming schools this fall,” Styer said.

DOE officials say they worked with local colleges to recruit a pool of roughly 1,000 applicants. The “vast majority” of the 500 open positions have been filled, agency officials said.

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Many of the recently-vacated clinic social worker positions will be tough to fill because “there’s only so many social workers to go around,” Karlin said.

That could mean interrupted services for vulnerable kids getting mental health treatment from a school-based clinic, he added.

The situation has echoes of the [labor flux](#) that followed Mayor de Blasio’s expansion of city-funded Universal Pre-K. In that case, DOE-based preschools paid sometimes [tens-of-thousands of dollars more than community-based preschools for teachers with identical positions and credentials](#), prompting complaints from private daycare

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