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Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., center, speaks with reporters on Capitol Hill in Washington on June 9, 2022.
Patrick Semansky AP

OPINION

Before Thom Tillis exits, he needs to defend one of his legislative triumphs

Opinion By Robert Weiner and Coby Rinke

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North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis recently made the courageous decision not to support the “Big Beautiful Bill” due to its Medicaid cuts, and then announced he would not run for the Senate again in 2026, rather than face a Trump-backed primary challenger. Tillis, now a national hero for courage against the Trump cuts, should speak against cuts to mental healthcare for children meant to address mass shootings as funded by one of his most important legislative triumphs.

Tillis deserves a peaceful retirement. However, before he goes, he must defend one of his greatest political achievements, the passage of the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. The law, which was intended to reduce gun violence in the wake of the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, brought millions of dollars in mental health funding to North Carolina’s schools. Unfortunately, the Trump administration recently moved to revoke more than \$1 billion of these grants in an effort to root out DEI programs, threatening this crucial initiative.

Two North Carolina school systems, Wake County Schools and Guilford Public Schools, have each lost millions of dollars when their grants were revoked. Unless the federal education department changes course, their funding will not continue past the end of 2025.

Cutting such funding is especially hypocritical, as many Republican politicians blame America's gun violence epidemic not on the weapons, but on mental health issues. Yet, far too many of them, including Tillis, are silent as the funding for mental health is slashed.

Tillis must speak out against these reckless funding cuts. It would be fitting if one of his last acts as a senator is to defend his accomplishment, while simultaneously ensuring the safety of North Carolina's students.

The costs of not doing so are clear in North Carolina, where the stakes are deeply personal. In 2021, two school shootings occurred in the same week in the state, leaving one dead and two injured. Both acts of violence were committed by 15-year-old students. More broadly, the suicide rate for teens and young adults has increased dramatically in recent years.

These tragedies are exactly what Tillis's 2022 legislation aimed to prevent by helping schools hire mental health professionals, add counseling services and intervene early before crises escalate. To that end, other North Carolina school districts like those in Iredell-Statesville, Surry County and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction each received over \$5 million—sometimes as much as \$17 million—from the legislation Tillis helped pass.

The Department of Education is claiming that it canceled the grants (issued under the Biden administration), because they allegedly violated federal non-discrimination laws by engaging in DEI efforts, like race-based hiring quotas. In the case of Wake County, for instance, the grant proposal did call for hiring a more diverse group of mental health professionals. To their credit, research suggests students are more likely to seek out counselors who share their backgrounds.

But focusing on DEI misses the bigger picture. The goal of the grant was clear: to put trained adults in schools to help students in crisis. Among other efforts, Wake County planned to hire 20 new therapists and expand services to 40 more schools.

Whether or not one supports DEI initiatives, cutting existing mental health programs is reckless. These schools have already begun spending the funds. Staff have been hired. Programs have launched. Students are receiving support. The sudden loss of funding threatens to upend that progress and abandon the very children the grants were meant to help.

Senator Tillis's decision to vote against the "Big Beautiful Bill," and not to be a victim of a Trump-backed primary in 2026 was the latest courageous choice in political career defined by such decisions. In 2022, Tillis showed the same courage by reaching across the aisle to pass the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and protect North Carolina's students. Before he leaves the Senate, he must find that courage one last time and speak out against the Trump administration's shortsighted cuts. This is not about DEI. It's about keeping kids safe and ensuring they get the mental health care they need.

Robert Weiner was a spokesman in the Clinton and Bush White Houses and spokesman/senior staff for Cong. Claude Pepper, John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Ed Koch, Sen. Ted Kennedy, and 4-Star Gen./Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey. He was also the spokesman for the House Government Operations Committee.

Coby Rinke is a senior policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions For Change Foundation.

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