Student Mental Health and Education

FACT SHEET

What is the state of young people's mental health?

Research shows that good mental health is key to the success of all children and adolescents in school and life. Students' mental health challenges encompass overall social, emotional, and behavioral health challenges such as feelings of anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness or thoughts of self-harm. Data reveal young people today show troubling signs of declining mental health, raising alarm among parents, educators, health professionals, and policymakers and creating an urgent need for solutions.

The rates of young people experiencing persistent sadness or hopelessness have been on the rise since 2013. In 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 40% of high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, roughly one third experienced poor mental health, and 20% reported that they had seriously considered suicide. Female and LGBTQ+ students were found to be more likely than their peers to experience these mental health challenges.

What factors contribute to students' mental health challenges?

- **Extreme social isolation during COVID-19** for many young people exacerbated the rate of children's mental health emergencies. Numerous studies find links between social isolation and anxiety, depression, higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and worse cognitive development among children and adolescents.

- **Overexposure to social media** (3 or more hours per day) also has been associated with poor mental health outcomes in young people, including experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

- **Experiencing an adverse childhood experience (ACE)** has been associated with poor mental and physical health conditions and increased risk behaviors. These experiences include emotional or physical abuse, neglect, poor household mental health or substance abuse, or witnessing intimate partner violence. In a 2023 national survey of high schoolers, more than three quarters reported experiencing an ACE, and nearly one in five reported experiencing four or more ACEs.

What role do schools play in supporting students' mental health?

Schools play a key role in supporting students' mental health and well-being. When students feel welcomed and connected to their school community, they have improved mental health and academic and behavioral outcomes and are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors. Students' connection to school is supported when schools:

- Foster positive relationships
- Implement restorative practices
- Promote social and emotional development
- Provide mental health supports

Schools that increase their use of social-emotional learning and restorative practices—approaches that teach conflict resolution and reduce exclusionary discipline—show significant decreases in student depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, as well as improvements in attendance and achievement.

Schools also rely on school counselors, psychologists, and community mental health providers to support students' mental health and well-being. Research reveals that providing school-based mental health services in elementary schools positively affects students' mental health, and the presence of qualified and supported school counselors reduces disciplinary incidents and disciplinary recidivism, improves teachers' perceptions of school climate and student behavior, and increases boys' academic achievement.

Beyond these core practices, some public schools—known as community schools—partner with families and community organizations to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and in- and out-of-school resources (e.g., mental health services, meals, health care), an evidence-based strategy to support student success.

What is the status of students' access to mental health supports in school?

Studies estimate that more than half of children with mental health issues have an unmet need for mental health care. When left unaddressed, mental health issues can lead to negative outcomes for students, including academic and behavioral challenges, delinquency, and permanently leaving or disengaging from school. However, schools' ability to provide needed mental health supports is strained, and many students do not have adequate access.

- The American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1, but in the 2023–24 school year, the national school average of student-to-school counselor was 376:1.

- The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 500 students to 1 psychologist, yet in the 2023–24 schoolyear, the national average of students to psychologists was 1,065:1.

- Students of color and students from low-income families have unequal access to school counselors.

  o In high schools serving predominantly students of color, school counselors serve 34 more students per year than counselors in schools with fewer students of color.

  o Middle and high schools where Black students comprise the demographic majority are more likely to have law enforcement officers or security guards, but not mental health providers.

- Likely due in part to insufficient staffing, many schools lack the ability to provide diagnostic mental health assessments to evaluate students for mental health needs.

  o During the 2019–20 school year, only 55% of public schools reported providing diagnostic mental health assessment services, and only 42% offered mental health treatment services to students.

  o More than half of schools reported that their ability to provide mental health services to students was limited in a significant way by inadequate funding, while 40% described insufficient access to mental health professionals as a barrier.

Medicaid provides more than $4 billion annually to school districts, and recent cuts to Medicaid could reduce or eliminate crucial programs and services that support students' mental health. In a survey of school district leaders, 86% reported using Medicaid funds to support salaries for school health staff, including school psychologists, and 59% reported using these funds for mental and behavioral health services. Most district leaders also reported that cuts to Medicaid would lead to a reduction in school health staff and mental and behavioral health services.

What can policymakers do?

Policymakers can support student mental health by adopting research-backed strategies, including the following:

- **Improve student access to mental health and counseling resources.** Increasing funding for mental health staff and services can help reduce the student-to-school mental health professional ratios and support external partnerships with community mental health providers.

- **Invest in integrated student support systems and community schools.** Adopting and providing funding for comprehensive, multi-tiered systems of support and community school models can support schools in integrating a range of opportunities for students, families, and the community to promote students' physical and mental health and well-being.

- **Prepare all school staff to better support student well-being.** Investing in preparation and training for all school staff on child and adolescent development and how to support students' mental health is crucial to promoting all students' well-being and recognizing students in need of greater mental health services.

Learn more

Content for this fact sheet was taken from *Safe Schools, Thriving Students: What We Know About Creating Safe and Supportive Schools* report. Access the full report to learn more.