



# Support & ACCESS

School districts are focusing on mental health services and support for students

*Shelby Anderson*

Last fall, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) released some alarming numbers. According to the DPI, it is “estimated that one in five children and adolescents experience a significant mental health issue that impairs their functioning in the community, at home or in school.” More troubling, the DPI reported that in any given year, a mere 20 to 30 percent of students receive the services they need.

The DPI and many school districts across the state have taken notice and are taking steps to

provide mental health support and services to students. For some districts, this means educating staff about the signs of mental health issues and how to refer students to available support and resources. Other districts are partnering with local community health care providers to establish mental health clinics directly in their schools.

At the state level, the DPI has secured five federal grants that have brought in nearly \$23 million to support mental health initiatives in Wisconsin school districts.

Last fall, the DPI launched the

Wisconsin Schools Mental Health Framework. The framework, which is being piloted by 53 schools, focuses on big picture issues such as policy and universal screening as well as more intensive needs such as one-on-one counseling. A major part of the framework is also education — specifically trauma-sensitive training for school staff.

Under the trauma-sensitive training model, all school staff who come in contact with students, including support staff, are trained to watch for signs of potential mental health distress in students.

**An estimated one in five children and adolescents** experience a significant mental health issue that impairs their functioning in the community, at home or in school.

“If they observe a student who might be withdrawn or showing some signs of depression, they can alert someone who can intervene and provide proper interventions and support,” said Steve Fernan, assistant director of the DPI Student Services, Prevention and Wellness Team.

The goal is to provide help to those students who need it. In some cases, this may mean changing the way schools view adolescent behavior.

“Some students bring trauma to schools — they’re agitated, disruptive, aggressive or violent,” Fernan said. “If we just react to the behavior, we usually punish them by kicking them out of school. But when we do that, we don’t get at the root issue. The focus on mental health issues is to engage kids differently to understand what is behind the behaviors.”

### ■ New Beginnings

The Racine Unified School District has brought care to its students. In partnership with the Racine Collaborative for Children’s Mental Health and the Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin, the district has opened a mental health clinic called New Beginnings in two of its elementary schools — Johnson and

Wadewitz elementary schools. The clinics are composed of one licensed clinical social worker each, who focus on serving students in that school.

“The more resources for children and families we can provide in the school building, the better,” said Andrea Rittgers, director of student services. “Students don’t have to be taken out of school to go to an appointment. They’re not missing classes. Their needs are being met

right there in the school.”

Staff are trained to spot students who may be struggling with mental health issues. They can refer a student to the school’s counselor or social worker who then screen the student to determine if the student would benefit from attending the mental health clinic or if their needs can be addressed in another way.

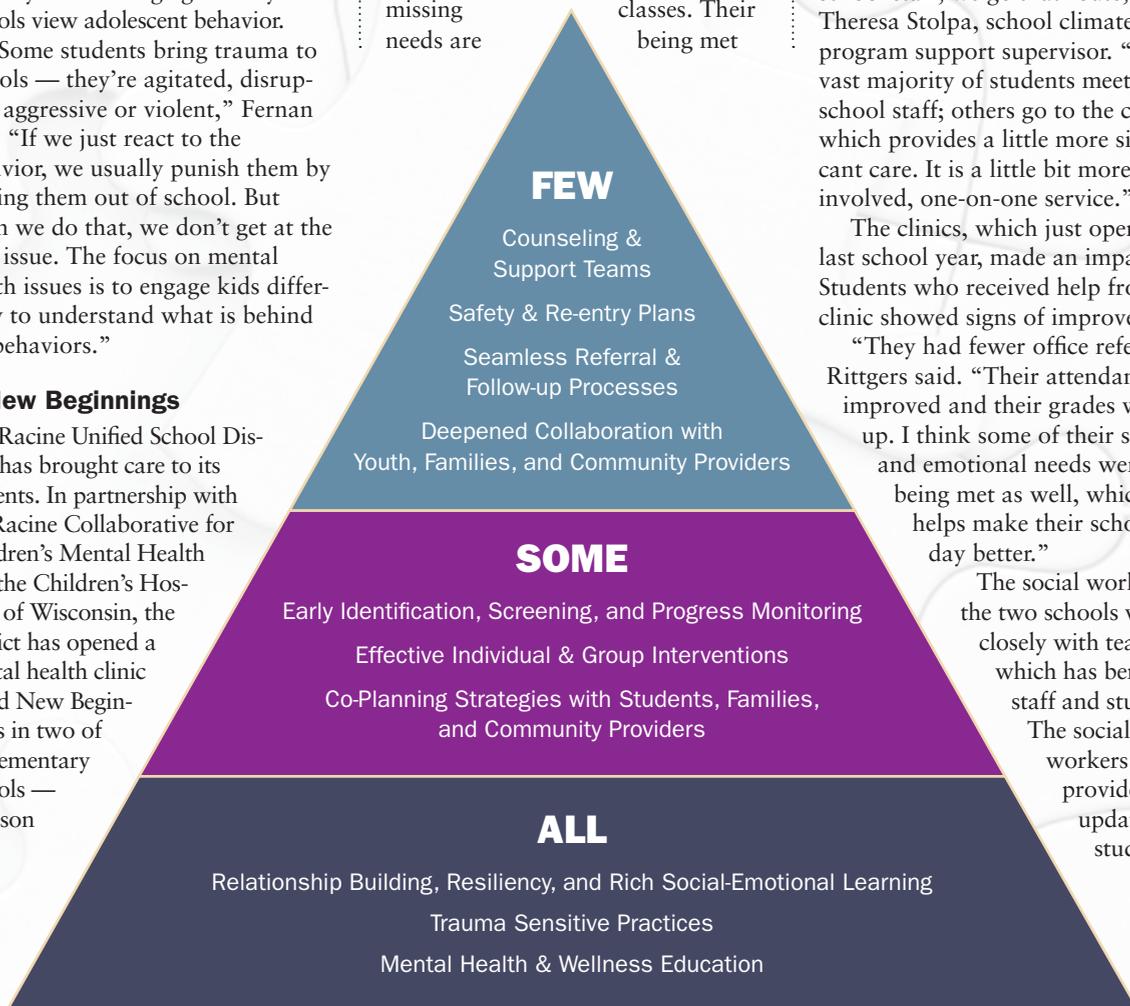
“If it’s an issue that can be met by school staff, we go that route,” said Theresa Stolpa, school climate and program support supervisor. “The vast majority of students meet with school staff; others go to the clinic, which provides a little more significant care. It is a little bit more of an involved, one-on-one service.”

The clinics, which just opened last school year, made an impact. Students who received help from the clinic showed signs of improvement.

“They had fewer office referrals,” Rittgers said. “Their attendance improved and their grades went up. I think some of their social and emotional needs were being met as well, which helps make their school day better.”

The social workers in the two schools work closely with teachers, which has benefited staff and students.

The social workers provide updates on students



## WISCONSIN SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK

The Department of Public Instruction has developed the Wisconsin Schools Mental Health Framework, a document that provides guidance to build and strengthen a comprehensive school mental health system. It builds on already widely adopted methodology of multi-level systems of support. The framework’s three-tiered pyramid mirrors the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) pyramid.

For more information, visit [dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health](http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health).



and talk to teachers about what they are working on with the students. They give teachers ideas and training about what they can do to reinforce positive behavior with the student.

“This is a great opportunity for teachers to learn new skills, which benefits not just the students in therapy, but all of our students,” Stolpa said.

In addition to the two clinics, the district is doing other work focused on teacher training and support for all students. The district received a Safe Schools/Healthy Schools grant from

the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which has supported professional development for staff focused on trauma-informed care.

The district also utilizes the Second STEP curriculum, which is a social/emotional curriculum used in all kindergarten to eighth grade classrooms.

“Second STEP is a universal intervention for all students to learn about themselves, develop friendship-making skills as well as learn how to deal with their own emotions and deal with bullying,” Rittgers said.

At the high school level, school resource officers have received trauma-sensitive training. “We’re changing the way we approach the adolescent at the high school level,” Rittgers said.

The focus in the district’s high schools is on restorative work and building leadership abilities in students. For instance, students lead

restorative circles, which are discussion groups set up to talk through conflicts. The groups are overseen by adult faculty but, ultimately, led by students.

“We have students who are trained in how to have those restorative conversations and problem solve,” Stolpa said. “It’s much more effective to have intervention with peers than adults.”

The district continues to examine and look for ways to expand its work around building mental health support for its students. For instance, a third mental health clinic will be added to Knapp Elementary School — an existing school that is being rebuilt with funds from a recent referendum. The school will be opening this coming school year.

“We have some really exciting things happening in Racine as far as addressing the whole child,” Stolpa said. “That trickles down to supporting our staff, which makes our

Therapist Annie Hysaw works with students in New Beginnings, a mental health clinic located in a Racine Unified School District elementary school.



Photo credit: Journal Times



Photo credit: USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

The Berlin Raises AWAREness grant has helped the school district train 260 adults, 109 of whom are staff in the Berlin Area School District.

staff happier and healthier. It creates a climate that's conducive to letting students thrive and be successful."

### Community Education

The Berlin Area School District received a two-year, \$100,000 grant from SAMHSA to train adults in the community to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health issues. Over the course of the previous two years, the Berlin Raises AWAREness grant has helped the school district train 260 adults, 109 of whom are staff in the school district. Almost all teachers in grades four through 12 have received the eight-hour training to learn how to spot signs of mental health issues in children and how to connect those students to help.

Amanda Hughes, grant project director for the Berlin Area School District, said spotting mental health issues in children can be difficult. The training aims at giving adults the knowledge to tell the difference between a student who is having a bad day and a student who may need help.

"Typical adolescent development

includes physical, mental, social, and emotional changes that may be challenging to distinguish from mental health problems," Hughes said. "However, adults can watch for signs of a mental health crisis by looking for the impact of the change; does the change result in school, social, or daily struggles?"

For example, Hughes said, it is typical for adolescents to withdraw from family and prefer the company of their peers, but it may be a warning sign if the youth withdraws from family, friends, and social activity. Another example would be an adolescent changing from childhood to teen pursuits (such as not wanting to participate in a certain sport or activity anymore), but it may be a warning sign if the youth loses interest in favorite activities and does not replace them with anything else.

If adults come into contact with a student who may be struggling, they are trained in how to sensitively support the student and, if necessary, refer them to a school counselor who then decides how the student

## RESOURCES

### TeenMentalHealth.org

A non-profit organization focused on education, support, and advocacy of youth mental health initiatives. Their website includes resources for educators.  
[TeenMentalHealth.org](http://TeenMentalHealth.org)

### National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

The nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness.  
[NAMI.org](http://NAMI.org)

### DPI School Mental Health

Information on the Wisconsin Schools Mental Health Framework, Mental Health Toolkit and more.  
[dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health](http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health)

### Wisconsin Association of Family & Children's Agencies

Promotes effective human services programs. Select "Resources/Data" for school-based mental health resources on their website.  
[wafca.org](http://wafca.org)



can be assisted. Between October 2015 and March 2016, the trained adults referred almost 400 students in the Berlin Area School District for some level of intervention. About 1,500 students attend the school district, meaning more than one-quarter of students were referred for help of some kind. While that may seem high, Hughes said it is in line with most national data.

“In any given year, one in five people will experience a mental health problem,” Hughes said. “And in a lifetime, one in two people will have an issue at some point in their life.”

The two-year grant ends this September, but Hughes said the adult trainings, which cost the district relatively little, will continue. In addition, Hughes hopes to develop a website that includes much of the information that is

shared in the trainings in addition to contacts and resources for local mental health support.

The district is also in the midst of a \$1 million School Climate Transformation grant that has helped to establish a multi-level support system for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

The PBIS and mental health work already seem to be having a positive effect on students. Data from the Youth Risk Behaviors Surveillance System assessment, which students take in seventh grade, showed an improvement regarding questions related to mental health issues. One of the questions asks students if they have ever seriously considered suicide. In 2014, 31.6 percent of Berlin seventh graders said yes, compared to 20 percent in 2016. Another question asks “Do you agree that your teacher gives you encouragement?” In 2014, 54.8 percent responded that they strongly agree and in 2016, that number increased to 65 percent.

“I think we are moving in the right direction,” Hughes said.

### Improving Access

During the 2014-15 school year, the School District of Beloit opened the

Student Health and Wellness Center in partnership with Beloit Health System. The clinic, located in Beloit Memorial High School, can conduct sports physicals, diagnose and treat acute and chronic disease, assess and treat minor injuries, and provide mental health and substance abuse counseling.

Tammy Flanders, director of school health services, said the clinic operates like a regular outreach clinic, that just happens to be located in a high school. Students are billed like they would at a standard clinic. However, one difference is that the clinic sees all students, regardless of their insurance coverage or ability to pay. When it comes to mental health services, if a student is unable to pay, they see an intern mental health provider.

While the medical side of the clinic hasn’t been utilized as much, the counseling and mental health services had 599 instances of a student using the clinic during the past school year.

Students are referred to the clinic for mental health support from school counselors, principals, parents, school nurses, teachers and other school staff. Students can even refer themselves to the clinic if they want help as long as a parent signs a consent form.

“Previous to our opening the clinic, I would frequently receive calls from the school nurses about students who were unable to see their prescriber for their mental health medication,” Flanders said. “But since we’ve had the school-based clinic in place, I’ve had zero of those phone calls.”

Flanders said she also thinks that parents and students feel more comfortable accessing these services in a school setting, “The whole premise behind all of this is making it easy for the students and the families.”

Additionally, Flanders said the clinic has vastly improved access to services for students.

“It’s been very beneficial for our school district,” she said. “I would recommend that other school districts reach out to their community



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health organization to try and remove some of those barriers for populations that have access issues.”

### ■ Looking Ahead

A number of schools have now piloted the Wisconsin Schools Mental Health Framework for a complete school year. Fernan, and others at the DPI, hope to take what they’re learning from the pilot schools to improve mental health services in schools.

“We want to be able to take what we learn from our pilot schools to advise other schools around the state,” Fernan said. “Eventually, we would like to see every school adopt the Wisconsin Schools Mental Health Framework.”

Until then, Fernan urges school districts to look at school policies and take a less punitive approach to student discipline.

“Overall, we’d like to see the number of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions decline,” Fernan



The Student Health and Wellness Center located in Beloit Memorial High School.

said. “And I think that can come with implementing a trauma-sensitive schools approach and the mental health framework.”

School districts are also encouraged to reach out to community health providers to see if there may be an opportunity to run a mental health clinic in their schools.

There is a long way to go but many schools have made progress in providing support to students. Fernan estimates that about 200

schools have some sort of licensed mental health services available to students within the school. While that may sound promising, it is only about 10 percent of schools in the state.

“If we’re going to make schools safer, more conducive to learning, we have to pay closer attention to the mental health issues of students and their families,” Fernan said. ■

*Shelby Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.*

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