

Help Where it's Needed Most

School districts are increasing their mental health support systems through partnerships

According to the American Psychological Association, less than half of children with mental health issues get treatment. However, mental health plays a key role in student achievement and research increasingly shows the connection between social-emotional development, mental health, and academic achievement.

Schools in Wisconsin are working to address the challenges of mental health. Those challenges include identifying the students who need help and connecting them to mental health services. Districts are also working to provide training to students and staff and promote efforts to remove the stigma of mental health issues in their schools and community.

Mental health is a tremendous challenge facing our entire society — not just our schools. However, the importance of providing support in our schools is very clear. Studies have found that students are more



One of the rooms of a new wellness clinic located in an Ashland elementary school.

likely to seek mental health services when they're available in school.

■ Providing Service Through Partnerships

► *Ashland School District*

One of the biggest challenges school districts face is connecting students

who are in need, to the appropriate mental health professionals. That was the challenge the School District of Ashland was facing in 2015. Based on data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, the district knew that it had students who needed help. According to survey data, approximately

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20 percent of students in grades 6-12 reported having “seriously considered suicide” in the past 12 months. However, getting students connected to providers was challenging. There was no clear process for teachers and staff to help students get the behavioral health services they needed.

In 2014, the district was awarded an “Advancing Wellness and Resilience Education” (AWARE) grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), which allowed the district to begin to tackle the problem. Among other initiatives, the district created an online behavioral health “referral pathway” that teachers, staff and administrators could use to refer students who they

believed could benefit from behavioral health services.

The initial work of creating the referral pathway helped the district develop and strengthen partnerships with community behavioral health providers. It also illuminated the need for these services to the community at large.

In 2016, Ashland passed a referendum that allowed the district to build wellness clinics in each of its school buildings along with other significant construction projects around the district. The clinics within each building provide appropriate, comfortable, confidential space for behavioral health providers to meet with students inside the school, which removes one of the most significant barriers that many students face —

transportation to and from their appointments. The clinic spaces have been completed in the district’s elementary schools, the others will be completed this summer.

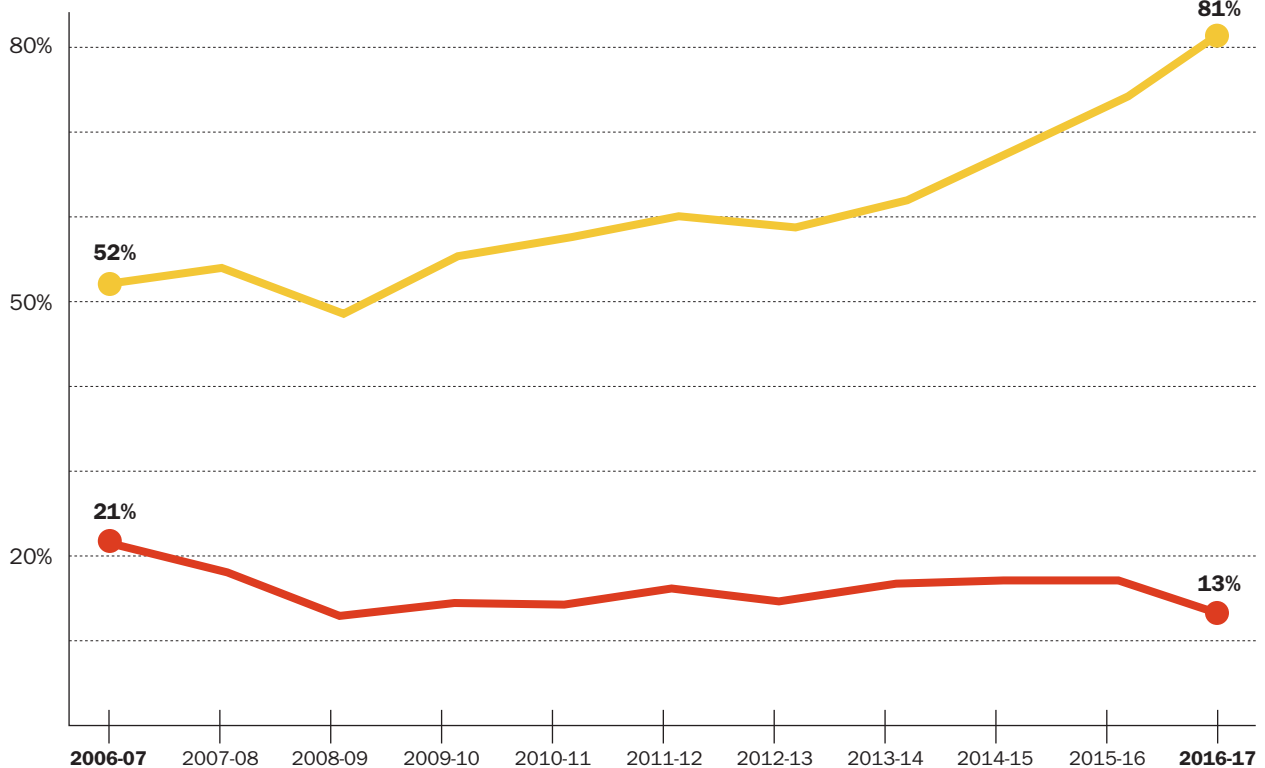
“Increasing access to our kids is so important,” Greta Blancarte, district wellness coordinator, said. “Access to mental health services in the school ensures that these students get the support they need.”

In addition, the mental health services that the district provides is available to students year-round, including the summer months. However, Scott Griffiths, Project AWARE coordinator, said that it is still challenging to provide enough mental health professionals to students.

“Our whole region has struggled to attract mental health providers,”

■ Youth Participating in Screening vs. ■ Youth Who Considered Suicide

Fond du Lac High School, 2006-07 thru 2016-17 school years



As participation in the high school’s voluntary emotional health screening rose to 81%, the percentage of students reporting considering suicide has declined to 13%.

Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework

The Department of Public Instruction has developed the Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework to help school districts strengthen mental health services. The framework intentionally integrates school mental health work with existing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Rather than creating something new, the framework helps schools use existing supports to build upon their mental health support systems.

The framework takes into account each district's unique factors. It includes a needs assessment that helps school districts solve a particular problem or challenge. The framework also helps districts coordinate resources and assess their local needs to inform next steps and create sustainable school mental health practices.

Below are the foundational principles of the Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework. Eight of the 10 principles are fundamental PBIS components.

1. Strong Universal Implementation
2. Integrated Leadership Teams
3. Youth-Family-School-Community Collaboration at All Levels
4. Culturally Responsive Evidence-Based Practices
5. Data-Based Continuous Development
6. Positive School Culture and Climate
7. Staff Mental Health Attitudes, Competencies and Wellness
8. Systemic Professional Development and Implementation
9. Confidentiality and Mental Health Promotion Policies
10. Continuum of Support

For more information about the Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework, visit dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health/framework.



The wellness clinics in the Ashland School District's buildings provide students with mental health services in school.

he said. "There have been regional recruitment efforts, but it continues to be a challenge."

One issue is location. The city is located near both Minnesota and Michigan. Both of those states offer higher Medicaid reimbursement rates, which means mental health professionals can earn more money by driving an hour in either direction.

Because of these challenges, partnerships have really been important to the work in Ashland. This is especially evident when the district and the local hospital, Memorial Medical Center, collaborated to create a day treatment center for some of the district's students. Before the center opened across the street from the high school, the nearest day treatment option was nearly four hours away, making access to day treatment impossible.

"The percentage of our students who need help is pretty high," Blancarte said. "But, overall, this work is helping. It is going well and we continue to improve and expand our services."

■ A County-Wide Effort

► *Fond du Lac School District*

In 2001, the Fond du Lac School District opened a large, new high school. Although the reasons were not known, pupil services noticed more students at risk. Data from the student Alcohol, Tobacco and other Drug and Health Experience and Attitudes Survey backed that up, showing an increased number of students reporting mental health issues.

In response, district leaders met with local mental health providers to

determine some best practices in youth suicide prevention. It was determined that mental health screenings were the best first step. In 2002, district leaders implemented a pilot program in which the district offered screenings for all ninth-grade students. The voluntary screenings (with parental permission) covered mental and physical health. Although not all students participated, the results showed about 15 to 20 percent of students were being referred for mental health services.

The district, in partnership with local mental health providers, connected these students to the proper services. Since 2002, the screening has evolved, and it is now known as YScreen. It has become a county-wide tool and every student in high school in Fond du Lac County is offered its services. Marian Sheridan, coordinator of school health and safety programs, said the screening, since it is so widespread in the community, has helped decrease some of the stigma with mental illness.

"It has gotten to the point where YScreen is viewed in the same way as a vision test or a physical," she said. Last school year, 81 percent of high school students voluntarily took the screening.

The screening consists of a five-minute questionnaire about physical health, symptoms of depression and anxiety, suicidal thinking and behavior, and use of drugs and alcohol. All students then meet briefly with program staff to answer questions they may have about the program and to give them the opportunity to ask for help with any other concerns the screening did not cover.

Last school year, 81 percent of Fond du Lac high school students voluntarily took the [mental health] screening.

Students whose screen results reveal a possible concern and students who ask for help then meet with a trained mental health professional in private to determine if further evaluation would be needed. If a need for evaluation is identified, parents are contacted and given resources to follow through with accessing mental health services as recommended. On average, each family is followed by a registered nurse case manager for three to six months.

In Fond du Lac County, screening is conducted at public and private school systems including alternative education sites, the major medical system in the county and the juvenile court. Nearly 12,000 youth have participated in screening, more than 2,000 have received a referral, and approximately 1,300 have been

connected with services.

The district's mental health work really took off when the YScreen advisory board, made up of mental health professionals, educators, health care workers and others, formed a new program — Comprehensive Service Integration of Fond du Lac County. This program expanded social services in the county and connected even more organizations like law enforcement to the county-wide mental health effort. It was so successful that when the grant funding the program ended, the board decided to continue the program and is in the process of turning it into a non-profit organization.

In addition to the screenings and county-wide mental health initiatives, Sheridan said the district was focusing on professional develop-

ment for teachers, continuing to increase social services in its schools, and building upon initiatives aimed at youth suicide prevention and removing the stigma from mental illness. Sheridan said this work is making a difference. Between 2002 and 2016, the percentage of students reported considering suicide decreased from 21 to 13 percent.

The success of this work, not only in the district, but across the county, is that students can get consistent care and support whether it takes place in the school or outside of the school. Sheridan said it doesn't matter if their students get the mental health support in the school or elsewhere, all that matters is that they get help.

"Mental health is everyone's issue," she said. ■



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