BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

An increasing number of students require behavioral health support to succeed both academically and in life. We are committed to addressing these needs with a clear purpose and providing responsive, effective support that empowers every student to thrive

Behavioral health is critically important for the healthy development of our youth. There is a current and rapidly increasing mental health crisis in our schools. The increased number of students reporting poor mental health in Washington state and nationally since 2020 is of great concern due to short-term impacts on attendance, grades, and school completion as well as long-term impacts into adulthood.

- Approximately 50% of mental disorders begin by age 14, 75% begin by age 24
- The average time from first onset of symptoms to diagnosis is approximately 11 years
- Only 51% of youth with a mental disorder receive clinical treatment in a given year
- In 2023, 42% of students reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless, and 22% of students seriously considered attempting suicide
- Students with behavioral health challenges are 3x more likely to repeat a grade and high school students with significant symptoms of depression are twice as likely to drop out compared to their peers

Short-term and long-term outcomes are improved by promoting positive relationships, healthy coping skills, school and community connectedness, and a focus on prevention and early intervention.

When evidence-based universal education and prevention are available, biases that may arise with targeted strategies are eliminated, and all students benefit. Prevention and early intervention strategies implemented in schools also help reduce the number of students who might progress from emerging behavioral health challenges to developing a mental disorder, subsequently decreasing the number of students requiring clinical treatment.

Part of our current youth mental health crisis is the continuing increase in youth needing behavioral health services, compounded by a persistent mental health workforce shortage. Much of the efforts to address youth behavioral health focus on problem-solving and resolving issues related to access to clinical treatment and crisis care. However, equal focus needs to be placed on prevention and early intervention services. Efforts to invest in upstream services (prevention and early intervention) will lessen the flow of need for downstream services (clinical treatment).

Our youth are increasingly voicing their experiences of behavioral health challenges and demanding meaningful strategies to address the issues they face (UW CoLab). Our schools must be empowered to respond without reticence for what adults perceive as uncomfortable topics, such as suicide, to foster school environments that are supportive of positive behavioral health. Our youth are ready for and are demanding open and honest conversations about behavioral health. We should not shy away from what they are ready for.

Youth are ready to talk. They do not want sugar-coated conversations; they are using the words adults are reluctant to use, like depression, anxiety, trauma, and suicide. Our youth are asking for higher commitment from adults and want more adults to be better equipped to recognize signs and symptoms of behavioral health challenges. They want teachers and other adults to know how to talk to youth about behavioral health concerns and how to facilitate connection to help. Youth are asking for culturally relevant behavioral health services that span the continuum from prevention and early intervention to clinical treatment.

https://www.nami.org/about-mental-illness/mental-health-by-the-numbers/

https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf

https://doh.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023-08/141-076-AdolescentMentalHealthSignificantChallengesAndStrategiesForImprovementWA.pdf?uid=64e6a2b0e1f1c

CoLab. (2024) Policy Codesign for King County Youth Wellness (Mental Health Promotion & Substance Misuse Prevention). Seattle, WA https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5935ee95893fc011586f1304/t/67eda79bbc435b52bc59a0ab/1743628242447/King+County+Youth+Wellness+Policy_Full+Report_reduced.pdf

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