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Data shows Wisconsin students face significant mental health and emotional challenges

DPI publishes statewide 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey data

MADISON – Statewide data published today by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction indicates Wisconsin students have significant mental health needs, and further investment and support is essential to address troubling trends and challenges they face daily.

The data is from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which was administered to Wisconsin public school students on a voluntary basis in fall 2021 in collaboration with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The YRBS provides a window into the mental health and emotional well-being of Wisconsin's youth.

Wisconsin students generally reported experiencing significant mental health challenges while having fewer supports at school and at home. More than half of all students surveyed (52.2 percent) self-reported “significant problems with anxiety,” with 80.5 percent of students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) saying they have anxiety challenges. Two of every three female student surveyed (66.2 percent) also reported experiencing anxiety. Over one-third of all Wisconsin students surveyed (33.7 percent) reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for more than two weeks in a row, a statistically significant increase of 5.2 percentage points since 2019 and the highest rate since the YRBS was first administered. Among those students, 66.1 percent who identify as LGB and 46.1 percent of female said they felt sad or hopeless.

Results from the YRBS showed 18.1 percent of all students surveyed seriously considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months, the highest rate since 2003. Nearly half of LGB students surveyed (48 percent) reported they seriously considered or attempted suicide – four times higher than their peers – and at 24.6 percent, female students were more than twice as likely than males to seriously consider suicide. Among all students, 8.5 percent said they physically attempted suicide, with 22.4 percent of LGB students and 11.4 percent of females saying they have attempted suicide.

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Females, students who are LGB, students of color, students receiving special education services, students with health conditions, and students facing food insecurity all reported experiencing greater challenges while having fewer supports.

“When we talk about our youth mental health crisis, we must also talk about the LGBTQ+ youth and other marginalized students in our classrooms across Wisconsin,” State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly said. “Learning environments that foster a sense of belonging take on a different significance for LGBTQ+ kids and students of color because the world at large is not always safe for them. The reality is that hateful rhetoric and misguided policies are only exacerbating the stress this vulnerable population of students already feel. As adults and leaders in our communities, we must care for all children, and that means we must commit to doing the work necessary to foster belonging for every child in every school, and in every community.”

The DPI urges school districts to implement policies and practices that support belonging at school, to encourage open dialogue with family members and school staff about feelings and worries, and to work to ensure students can identify supportive adults at home and in school. Additionally, barriers to youth mental health support must be removed to increase access and make resources readily available to all students. Research has shown that inclusive policies and affirming practices help promote the health and safety of all students and are especially important in supporting the most vulnerable students, including LGBTQ+ youth.

“Our children and youth in Wisconsin are in crisis, and they have been for too long. It is past time to take drastic measures to do something about it,” Dr. Underly said. “We must focus our efforts on what will create the most impact, because our kids are hurting and what we have done as schools and communities has not been enough to prevent that. I implore you to picture a child in your life and consider that this is them, and if not, it very well could be their friend, or your neighbor’s child experiencing this hurt and isolation. We must do better. Their lives literally depend on us as adults coming together to solve this crisis.”

In September, the DPI submitted its 2023-25 biennial budget request, which seeks to address student mental health and expand supports to students. The request includes a \$235.8 million increase to support comprehensive mental health services for students during both in-school and out-of-school time, and \$36 million to expand aid for school-based mental health professionals. Additional information on the DPI’s budget request can be found [on its Policy, Budget, and Research webpage](#).

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Additional information and resources on school mental health can be found [on the DPI's Student Services/Prevention and Wellness webpage](#). Resources and best practices for creating safe schools for LGBTQ+ students can also be found [on the Wisconsin DPI's SSPW webpage](#).

Data at the school, district, county, and state levels can be found [on the DPI's website](#). Additional information sheets and graphic representations of the data highlighted in this release can also be found [on the DPI's website](#). Graphic representations of all other YRBS data are available from the DPI upon request.

About YRBS

The DPI has administered the YRBS to Wisconsin public high school students every two years starting in 1993. Survey procedures were designed to protect the privacy of students by allowing anonymous and voluntary participation. Local parent permission procedures were followed before administration, including informing parents that their child's participation was voluntary. A scientific sample of 1,838 students at 43 randomly selected Wisconsin high schools completed a self-administered, anonymous, 90-item questionnaire in fall 2021. The next YRBS will be administered between Jan. 3-June 30, 2023. Schools interested in administering the 2023 YRBS [can register using this form](#). More information can be found [on the DPI's Conducting a YRBS webpage](#).

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