

Suicide reveals missed opportunities, parents say

[Liz Welter](#), USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 11:13 a.m. CDT March 17, 2016

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On the day 14-year-old Skyler Rogers attempted suicide, she left behind a book on the kitchen counter of her home: “My Anxious Mind, A Teen’s Guide to Managing Anxiety.”

A Green Bay school counselor had given Skyler the book after she revealed she suffered from anxiety attacks. Skyler’s parents never knew of her visit to the counselor, or the book on anxiety, or that their daughter was so desperate for help in October 2014.

That, her parents said, is an indication of the inadequacies of Wisconsin’s system of getting mental health care to kids. Skyler died in the hospital a day after being taken off life support.

“They gave her a book about how to handle panic attacks. She needed help and she was given a book,” said Skyler’s mom, Nikki Rogers. “How can we help our kids, how can we prevent another suicide, when these sorts of things happen?”

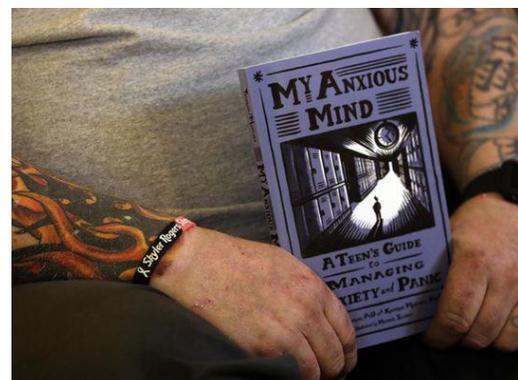
As the state’s teen suicide rate has soared and more students reported feeling anxious and depressed, school systems have struggled to keep pace.

Stevens Point offers a snapshot of the challenges: Over the past decade the number of students getting mental health services has doubled. About 20 percent of the district’s 7,500 students have a mental illness diagnosis, which is on par with the national average.

“Student problems have become much more complicated. I’ve seen the prevalence of anxiety, depression and eating disorders go up and up and then there are the students who suffer from things like anxiety and depression who are not diagnosed,” said Michelle Comeaux, a Stevens Point school psychologist.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction last year launched a five-year Wisconsin School Mental Health Project to create a plan to improve the quality and accessibility of mental health services for students.

In the meantime, the level and quality of services varies dramatically across the state. Some like Stevens Point offer a range of school and community-based services, while others have little-to-nothing. Nikki Rogers fears that more kids like Skyler will die before new programs are in place.



The tattooed arms of Tim Rogers, father of suicide victim Skyler Rogers, holds the book a school counselor gave his daughter when she suffered a panic attack at school. He is wearing a bracelet memorializing his daughter on his right wrist. (Photo: Jim Matthews/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wis.)

“This is happening all over and we need to do something,” Rogers said. “The schools need to do more to help our kids.”

DPI is using federal grant dollars to fund the Mental Health Project to offer models and guidelines for school districts to create solutions tailored to the needs of their students.

“We have been involved in suicide prevention, violence prevention, and substance abuse prevention for decades, but simply did not have the resources available to conduct this kind of advanced and specific work until these grants came available,” said Steve Fernan, a DPI official who oversees student services.



Tim Rogers, father of suicide victim Skyler Rogers, talks about their daughters' last day before she committed suicide during an interview at their home in Bellevue February 9, 2016. (Photo: Jim Matthews/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wis.)

Specific models for mental health services are going to vary by district but common to all will be partnerships between local health providers, community leaders, parents and school officials, he said.

In the Fox Valley, for example, a regional collaborative approach is helping thousands of students. The effort started in 2008 when Providing Access to Healing, or PATH, started in Menasha. PATH is a school-based program designed to improve access to mental health services for students unable to obtain care elsewhere.

PATH expanded to a collaboration between 10 school districts, including Appleton, Freedom, Hortonville, Kaukauna, Kimberly, Little Chute, Menasha, Neenah, Seymour and Shiocton. In partnership with the United Way Fox Cities and local mental health providers, it serves more than 1,000 students.

Mental health providers are reimbursed through individual student health insurance plans and grants from local foundations that cover students who have no insurance. The program costs almost \$500,000 each year.

While expensive, it's projected to have already saved nearly \$10 million, according to an analysis by the Robert M. LaFollette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The report found students involved had reduced medical costs, increased productivity and lifetime earnings and improved quality of life. Schools have seen fewer absences, and lower costs related to behaviors and student counseling. When students get the mental health services they need, they also are less likely to commit crimes.

“We're trying to take new creative ways to dealing with this, and PATH is one of those,” said Peter Kelly, United Way Fox Cities President and CEO. “We figured out a way to come together and do this.”

Ideally PATH would be a program in all the schools in the participating districts, Kelly said.

“I think this is one of the solutions but right now, the program is limited by financial resources,” he said.

Still, it offers an approach that could be used across Wisconsin, especially with solid numbers showing long-term cost savings.

“We know that untreated mental health problems with children leads to more problems as they grow-up,” said Mary Wisnet, who helps lead community programming efforts for the United Way Fox Cities.

Some schools have also sought to improve mental health care for students by inviting more counselors inside the building. That approach is being used in about 300 of the 2,000 schools across the state which have community mental health providers offering in-school office hours. Stevens Point has providers based in all 13 schools — one of the most comprehensive programs in Wisconsin.

In-school clinics provide multiple benefits. Students with complex mental health issues can be referred to the satellite clinics, said Valerie Fetting, a counselor at the district’s high school.

“Students often lack transportation to appointments, or there’s scheduling issues and parents need to take time off of work so having the mental health providers in the schools adds another direct layer of confidential support to address the social/emotional needs of students,” Fetting said.

The program doesn’t cost the district anything because the counseling fees are paid through health insurance.

Michelle Comeaux, a psychologist based at two Stevens Point elementary schools, concedes it’s not a perfect system.

“If you look at this from the ideal point of view, you would have more money to hire more psychologists because there is a need. But there is also this whole matter of budgets,” Comeaux said. “Right now school districts are strapped. This partnership helps to take care of that.”

Another solution used in some rural areas is delivering services through a local government-based agency. More than two dozen students in rural Neillsville School District in central Wisconsin are getting help through Clark County Community Service.

The county provides mental health services on a sliding fee schedule to students in the district, said Tonia Anderson, a psychologist who is the Neillsville district director of special education. A similar arrangement exists with a therapist from Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin, based in Marshfield.

Students who use the partnership struggle with anxiety, depression, anger or other problems that impair their ability to learn. They are referred to the service by school staff to see a therapist during school hours.



Nikki Rogers, mother of suicide victim Skyler Rogers, talks about her daughters' death at their home in Bellevue February 9, 2016. (Photo: Jim Matthews/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wis.)

Anderson said 3 years ago the district looked into hiring more school psychologists but developed the partnerships because it was the cheaper option.

"I think this arrangement is working well for our students and the district," Anderson said.

The Rogers family created the Skyler Rogers Stay Strong Organization to raise awareness about bullying, suicide and mental health services.

"There is no reason for another child to kill herself or himself. We are talking about children, they have their whole lives ahead of them," Rogers said.

The Green Bay district said rules about student confidentiality prohibited it from commenting on Skyler's death or what the district did or didn't do to intervene.

"We are doing all we can to help all of our students," said Jennifer Higgs, the district's associate director of pupil services.

Higgs said school social workers and psychologists keep an eye on student mental health and those with acute needs are referred to professionals in the community.

Rogers said while schools need to offer mental health services, they also need to make sure parents and students understand how to get help and don't feel shame about seeking help.

"You wouldn't believe the number of people who talk about ending their lives. I listen, I let them know there are people who love them, that there are alternatives to suicide," she said. "I think I've helped about half a dozen people who would have died."

Hundreds of people follow the Facebook Skyler Rogers Stay Strong Organization where Rogers posts inspirational pictures and sayings to honor Skyler's memory.

"This is a nation-wide thing and kids need help," Rogers said. "If we can stand up and save one kid's life, we've done our part."

<http://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/local/2016/02/18/mental-health-support-widely-varies-schools/80524298/>