

Therapists in schools help save young lives

[Katherine Lymn and Rory Linnane](#), Post Crescent 7:52 p.m. CDT November 2, 2016



Kristine Sack is a counselor through the United Way PATH program. She is pictured here Thursday, October 13, 2016, at Appleton East High School in Appleton, Wisconsin. Dan Powers/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin (Photo: USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

For Appleton East junior Hannah Ceccon, getting mental health help is finally easy. When she's at a low point, rather than turning to old habits of self-harm, she can walk down the school hallway to see her counselor.

"I've always had very thin skin. There were times I was low and I didn't know how to handle it," Ceccon said. "Now it's easier for me to go through anything I have to go through. I just feel like I have someone."

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What Ceccon now has is rare in Wisconsin. Behind Texas, Wisconsin needs more mental health professionals than any other state to address chronic shortages. Throw insurance problems and transportation barriers into the mix, and it's a recipe for unaddressed mental

illness. Wisconsin's teen suicide rate is higher than the national average and children here experience high rates of depression and other problems, but getting help can be difficult.

Ceccon sees a mental health counselor at her school once a week because of a United Way program called PATH (Providing Access to Healing). So unlike countless other students in Wisconsin, Ceccon is not stuck on a wait list or shut out based on ability to pay. Her mom doesn't have to get off work to take her to appointments. And she only misses a minimal amount of school that is perfectly synced with her schedule.

PATH is a model that could soon be replicated around Wisconsin, if state Superintendent Tony Evers has his way. He asked Department of Health Services officials to earmark funds for putting mental health clinics in schools in the next two-year budget, which will move through the Legislature next year.

"We have been having ongoing conversations with DHS," Evers said. "I don't know what will be the upshot of that but we're hopeful."

DHS officials were not available to comment on the proposal. A spokesperson said it was too early in the budget process to know whether there would be funding for clinics in schools.

Currently, PATH is limited in expanding because it relies on philanthropic funding. Many families are underinsured, and insurance payments only cover about half the cost of care. State funding to supplement insurance payments would allow the program to serve more students and remain sustainable, organizers say.

Evers' words were music to their ears — if a little overdue.

"We, for a long time, for a number of years, have been advocating for public support of some kind in order to sustain this program long-term," said Peter Kelly, president and CEO of United Way Fox Cities. "We cannot continue to invest in the level that we are unless we get additional support for the programming."

The PATH model has fans throughout the state. Since the program started as a 2008 pilot in the Menasha Joint School District, it has expanded to 30 schools in nine districts. Schools in Superior, Waukesha, Racine and Sheboygan have their own programs modeled after PATH.

Some states, like [Minnesota](#), have gone a step further and formalized a structure for direct financial support for school-based clinics. It is unclear what shape such funding could take in Wisconsin, but programs like PATH have shown they can work using a public-private approach with nonprofits, health care providers and school districts collaborating on a regional basis.

Mary Wisnet, a PATH expert at the United Way, said she has fielded calls from districts interested in the program from Marathon, Door, Brown, Dodge and Eau Claire counties. The model appeals to communities where kids are struggling to get to appointments because their parents can't take off work, they don't have reliable vehicles, or the families feel stigmatized when they pull their kids out of school.

"If we can't get the children to the appointments in the community, let's bring the appointments to them," Wisnet said, explaining the philosophy behind the program.

Making a difference

Ceccon's counselor, Kristine Sack, is employed by Lutheran Social Services and spends two days a week at Appleton East. Catalpa Health and Family Services of Northeast Wisconsin also provide therapy in the schools through PATH.

As with traditional therapy, students usually start out meeting with Sack once a week, then wear off to twice a month, then monthly. The most common mental health challenges she sees in her patients are depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from childhood abuse.

Tucked away off a hallway on the way to the school's gym, Sack's space is private. She sometimes runs a noise machine to ensure passersby can't overhear conversations; an orange sheet of paper covers the lower half of the elongated door window required by the school in case of an evacuation.

The appointments are a dash shorter than typical, clocking in at 47 minutes — the length of a class period.

Unlike traditional therapy, Sack rarely has no-shows or cancellations. After all, if a client doesn't show up, she can call the secretary, who can call the student's teacher for that class period.

And to make sure the appointments don't interfere with academics, the therapy is scheduled at different times each week — so a student doesn't miss algebra week after week. It's so integrated, Sack said, students will ask her about changing their class schedule, and she'll have to remind them she's not an employee there.

Judy Baseman, assistant superintendent for school services at Appleton Area School District, knows principals would welcome more PATH time.

"They'd say yes in a heartbeat, there's no question, because the results that we're seeing in terms of student outcomes, both in terms of their attendance and their school performance, it's just been phenomenal, the difference it's made," she said.

Seventy-four percent of roughly 1,100 PATH students from 2008 through January saw reduced symptoms, according to therapist assessments, and 44 percent showed improved academic performance, according to school records.

Uncertain funding

This month, United Way began meeting with stakeholders to talk about long-term funding options for PATH, and the state is one option on the table.

"While I can't tell you today for your story that yes, we're gonna be there for another five years or whatever, that is certainly our intent. But along with that is ... we can't do it alone," Kelly said.

Elizabeth Hudson, director of the state Office of Children's Mental Health, said she supported the idea of expanding mental health clinics in schools, but she wouldn't say whether DHS should be chipping in funds.

"I won't speak to where funding should come from but the model of having mental health support in schools is a great opportunity," Hudson said. "Having support and services accessible in schools has the potential to really meet needs of kids and families that otherwise may not be able to access services and support."

Baseman said in addition to making appointments more convenient, having counselors in the schools has helped students and their families overcome stigma around mental health.

"We have seen so many positive outcomes for our students, and just the fact that they have been willing to participate in the therapy has sent a strong message to not only other students but also to their families that it's OK to ask for help," Baseman said. "It's OK to recognize that you have mental health challenges, and that there is hope for them."

Ceccon said while awareness is improving, stigma around mental health still exists at Appleton East. When she misses a class for counseling, sometimes she tells other students where she was; sometimes to avoid judgment she just says she was at an appointment. She hopes that talking publicly about her experience with PATH will make it a little easier for everyone to talk about.

"I wish there wasn't a stigma, and I could just be like, 'I had counseling,' and people wouldn't think, 'Oh, she's crazy,'" Ceccon said. "It's going to take time to change society's perspective."

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