

More Wisconsin school districts move to provide mental health services

By [Kelly Meyerhofer](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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Eight years ago, a community health report from the Fox Valley uncovered an alarming trend among local high school students: one in four reported experiencing depression, and more than one in 10 had attempted suicide.

An experiment soon followed that placed licensed therapists with expertise in children's mental health in elementary, middle and high schools.

"We decided if students had trouble making their appointment (at community clinics), let's bring the appointment to them," said Mary Wisnet, one of the [program's officers](#).

The results four years later: Almost three-quarters of the students served reported reduced symptoms. Eight in 10 improved their academic performance.

Today, having school-based mental health services is a nationwide trend, offering a promising new tool for improving the lives of young people. That's especially true for those who might have otherwise fallen through the cracks of the health care system, resulting in delayed diagnosis and treatment.

The rationale behind the services: Because state regulation prohibits school therapists from providing mental health therapy, bringing mental health services directly into the schools opens lines of communication between the student, therapist and teachers, which in turn boosts students' mental health and academic performance.

The program, which spread from the Menasha Joint School District to nine other area districts, continues to assist other districts — from Waukesha to Oshkosh to Superior — in starting similar efforts.

Linda Taylor, co-director of the UCLA-based [Center for Mental Health in Schools](#), pointed to [Madison's](#) and [La Crosse's](#) programs as other standouts.

The services in those districts make Wisconsin a leader in provided school-based services, Taylor said.

Still, many of their neighbors provide no mental health services.

"What we have are isolated school districts pushing the needle but not necessarily statewide," said Jeannette Deloya, mental health support coordinator for the Madison Metropolitan School District.

Almost a year ago, the [Department of Public Instruction](#) established a procedure to allow clinics to apply to be in schools. Most of the 116 clinics that opened are concentrated in the northwestern portion of the state where the

nearest clinic is sometimes over an hour away, said Kathryn Bush, DPI's educational consultant for school psychology.

Because of [federal health privacy rules](#), the assessment process is dependent upon parental consent. Students cannot be referred to the therapist without permission, and parents must also consent to any information that is shared with the school.

"Our biggest barrier is still parent engagement," Wisnet said. "But without it, we're at a standstill."

Struggle with costs

The cost of expanding mental health services is another roadblock for many school districts.

At a recent community briefing, a group that formed the [Racine Collaborative for Children's Mental Health](#) back in 2012 presented solutions for increasing the likelihood of detection and treatment.

Many of the group's proposals — a 24-hour hotline and communitywide anti-stigma campaign — are in effect or will be soon. But in-school services, which arguably make the biggest impact, won't be implemented until next school year, when a formal funding plan is in place, said Ashley Staeck, who helped lead the two-year [Johnson Foundation](#) study.

Some schools that might need more of such services, such as those in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods where trauma is common, may not be getting them.

Each of the Milwaukee Public Schools is staffed with a psychologist, counselor and social worker, but a select few — Audubon Technology and Communication Center Middle School, Oliver Wendell Holmes School, Hopkins Lloyd Community School and Wedgewood Park International School — were chosen for a [pilot program](#) that brought community provider agencies into the schools.

Though funding dried up in 2012, providers continue to work through grants, even adding two schools, Benjamin Franklin School and Henry David Thoreau School, to their coverage this year.

[At a time when school budgets continue to shrink](#), some argue that districts can't afford not to provide these services.

Multiple studies have found that, if left untreated, [students with mental illnesses show significantly lower levels of school performance and are more likely to drop out](#).

[The cost of a Fox Valley Clinic was estimated to be \\$1,700 per student](#) by graduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who concluded that the benefits outweighed the cost.

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