

YouthTruth

STUDENT SURVEY

A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

LEARNING FROM STUDENT VOICE:

Emotional & Mental Health

Emotional and mental health is essential for student achievement, but many students are struggling. [Research](#) shows that when students receive social-emotional and mental health support, they perform better academically. Students do not always receive the support they need to thrive, however. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, mental health issues are increasing among school-aged children, and rates of suicide for youth ages 10 to 19 are on the [rise](#).

As a national nonprofit that elevates student voice on critical issues in education, YouthTruth wanted to know: **how do students perceive their own experiences with their emotional and mental health? What are their perceptions of the resources available to them when they are upset or stressed?**

To answer these questions, we analyzed survey data from more than 70,000 students in grades 5-12. The data was gathered between 2012 and 2019 through YouthTruth's anonymous online surveys, administered in partnership with public schools across 18 states. Here's what we learned.

- 1 Programs and services in school matter, especially for vulnerable populations.
- 2 Middle school students report more positive experiences with their emotional and mental health than do high school students.
- 3 A greater proportion of students who identify in a way other than male or female report thoughts about suicide.
- 4 Female students are twice as likely to report experiencing prolonged sadness or hopelessness.

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT A GLANCE

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among youth in the United States. In our analysis, we found that 14 percent of students say they have seriously considered attempting suicide in the 12 months prior to taking the YouthTruth Survey. That's about one in seven, with little variation based on school size, geography, or family income. This is consistent with the findings of other studies.

One piece of good news is that our data found that most students – 68 percent – report that when they are feeling upset, stressed, or having problems, they know some ways to make themselves feel better and cope with it.

ONE DISTRICT'S STORY

Corvallis School District (CSD), located south of Portland, serves approximately 6,500 students across 13 schools. The district uses the YouthTruth Survey to track progress around goals including students' emotional and mental health and overall health and wellness. "The survey allows us to look at what keeps students from doing their best at school," says Superintendent Ryan Noss. "It's really important to hear from students. Their experiences matter. Through the survey, we got concrete data that overcommitment to extracurricular activities was causing anxiety in our students. It's really important that we know that and can now have that conversation with the community."



Through the anonymous student survey data, district leaders in Corvallis also learned that secondary students' responses to the emotional and mental health questions were less positive than at the typical school in the YouthTruth aggregate dataset. Based on the Youth Truth results, the school district began a new investment in mental health. The investment started at the elementary level as a proactive way of meeting student's social and emotional needs throughout their school careers. With the baseline, comparative, and disaggregated data, the district took action to provide more support that could benefit all students across the eight elementary schools. After asking students directly about their experiences, here's what the district did in response to what they learned from the data:

STAFFING: *Hired full-time district therapists to increase the availability of trained school staff and programs*

SKILL DEVELOPMENT: *Hired "skills trainers" to help students improve their ability to cope when feeling upset, stressed, or having problems (where the district ranked near the bottom quartile in the YouthTruth survey)*

COMMUNICATION: *Heightened the quantity and reach of messaging about available services available to students*



Principals from Corvallis School District unpack YouthTruth data during summer professional development

The district will continue to track progress with annual surveys.



RYAN NOSS - Superintendent

If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741

1

Programs and services in school matter, especially for vulnerable populations.

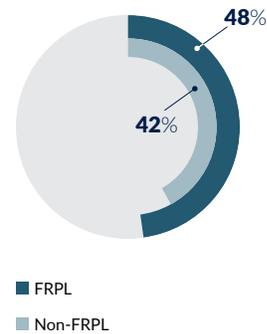
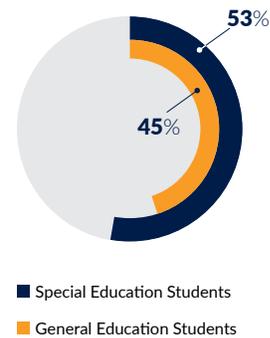


Certain groups of students, such as those who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, receive special education services, or are English Language Learners, can be more [vulnerable](#) to mental health struggles. For example, we see in our analysis that a greater proportion of students who receive special education services (22 percent) say they seriously considered attempting suicide in the 12 months prior to taking the survey compared to their peers (14 percent). However, certain students have more positive perceptions of the relationships and/or resources in their school that can help them:

RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS IN SCHOOL

Our analysis reveals that a greater proportion of students who receive special education services feel that there is an adult in school that they can talk to when they are feeling upset, stressed, or having problems compared to other peers — 53 percent compared to 45 percent. Similarly, 48 percent of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch say the same, while only 42 percent of other students feel this is the case. There is no significant difference between the proportion of students who are English Language Learners, versus that of their peers, who say they feel there is an adult in school who they can talk to.

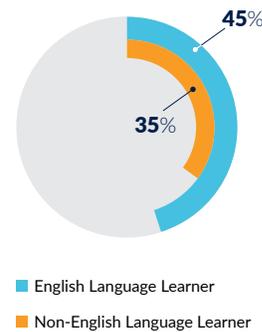
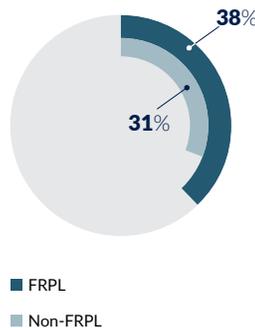
When I'm feeling upset, stressed or having problems there is an adult in school who I can talk to about it.



PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AT SCHOOL

The data also reveal that a greater proportion of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch — 38 percent — feel that there are programs or services at their school to support their emotional and mental health when they need help, compared to 31 percent of other students. Additionally, while 45 percent of students who are English Language Learners say that there are programs and services in school that can help them, only 35 percent of other students say the same. There is no significant difference between the proportion of students who receive special education services, versus that of their peers, who say they feel there are programs and services in school that can help them.

When I'm feeling upset, stressed or having problems there are programs or services at my school that can help me.



If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741

2

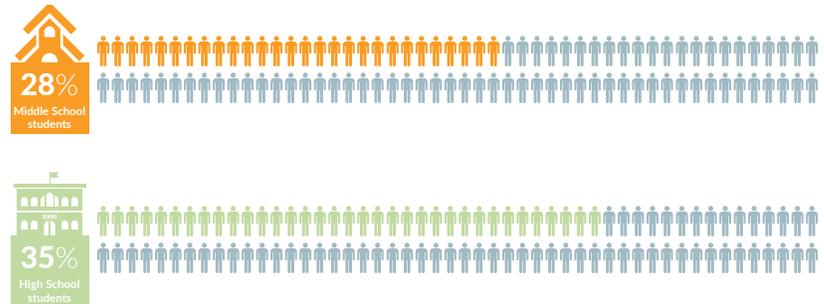
Middle school students report more positive perceptions of their emotional and mental health than do high school students.



We all know that middle school can be a challenging time developmentally and that middle school students often have less positive experiences with [engagement](#), [bullying](#), and [safety](#), among other dimensions of the school experience, but our data offers some good news here: a smaller proportion of middle school students report prolonged sadness than do high school students.

Sadness

In the last twelve months, have you ever felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that you stopped doing some usual activities?



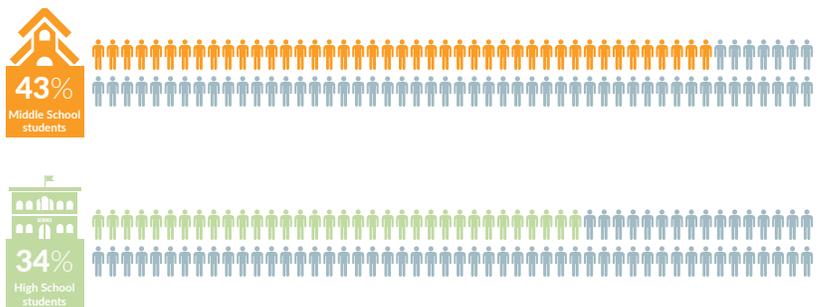
EXPLORING BY SCHOOL LEVEL:

Twenty-eight percent of middle school students say that they have felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that they stopped doing some usual activities in the last 12 months, while a larger proportion of high school students – 35 percent – say the same.

When it comes to navigating resources when they need help, middle school students feel more positively than do high school students. Forty-three percent of middle school students say that there are programs and services at their school that can help them when they are feeling upset, stressed, or having problems, while only 34 percent of high school students feel this is the case.

Resources to help

When I'm feeling upset, stressed or having problems there are programs or services at my school that can help me.



EXPLORING BY GRADE LEVEL: YouthTruth's analysis also revealed that 6th and 7th grade students feel comparatively more positively than students in other grade levels about whether there is an adult in school they can talk to when feeling upset, stressed, or having problems.

When looking at older grade levels, conversely, 9th and 10th grade students have the lowest-rated perceptions of whether there is an adult in school to talk to, compared to students in all other secondary grades.

If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741

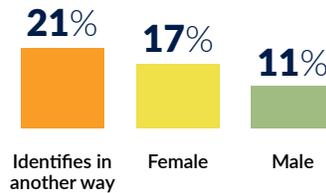
3

A greater proportion of students who identify in a way other than male or female have thoughts about suicide.



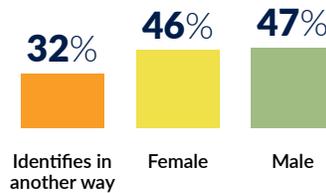
In our analysis, 21 percent of students who identify as a gender other than male or female say that they have seriously considered attempting suicide in the last 12 months. This is compared to 17 percent of female students and 11 percent of male students.

In the last twelve months, have you seriously considered attempting suicide?



Our analysis also looked at how students' experiences with support from adults in school varied by gender identity. We learned that while 47 percent of male students and 46 percent of female students report that there is an adult in school they can talk to when they are feeling upset, stressed, or having problems, only 32 percent of students who identify in another way say the same.

When I'm feeling upset, stressed or having problems there is an adult in school who I can talk to about it.



All students, regardless of their gender identity, should feel that they have access to the supports they need when they are struggling with their emotional and mental health. Students who identify in a way other than male or female may find themselves fighting both against stigmas based in prejudice against their gender identity, as well as against stigmas associated with mental illness.

If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741

4

Female students are twice as likely to report experiencing prolonged sadness or hopelessness.



In our sample, females are 2.1 times more likely than male students to say that in the last twelve months they have felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that they stopped doing some usual activities. While not an area of our analysis, other [research](#) indicates that the rate of suicide has been rising more quickly for girls than boys.

Prior [research](#) also shows that adult women are more at risk for severe depression and self-harm. Researchers have also explored the role of [social media](#), and how the increased stress and [pressure to succeed](#), plays into the emotional and mental well-being of school-aged girls.

There are many theories as to why more of today's students are experiencing mental health issues than previous generations. Whether it's the result of the impact of technology and social media, changes in school support staffing post the 2008 recession, or increases in bullying and harassment, the uptick must be addressed. While educators cannot address mental issues alone, they are uniquely positioned to support students' emotional and mental health, and not just because it boosts academic performance and school outcomes. Educators are able to help students develop the skills they will need to thrive.

Public awareness and understanding of students' mental health and wellness needs is growing. But studies about increased anxiety, depression, and suicide ideation reveal that young people need support more than ever – and schools are a necessary place for prevention, intervention, and positive skill development.

Robust and effective programs and services and strong staff-to-student relationships that support students' emotional and mental health create safer schools, improve academic performance, and increase students' quality of life. To more fully understand how well schools are supporting students' emotional and mental health – and where to invest more resources – we must ask students directly and anonymously about their emotional and mental health.



If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741



From Data to Action:

Protocols and strategies to support students' well-being



Here are three steps you can take to help make schools more supportive of students' emotional and mental health:

✔ **CHECK THE PULSE OF YOUR COMMUNITY:** Just like an annual check-up can give a general sense of health, an annual anonymous survey can provide baseline data about general emotional and mental health in your school. Invite students to respond to demographic questions that allow you to disaggregate findings across different demographic subgroups.

✔ **STUDENT COMMUNICATION ABOUT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES:**

A good place to start is by enlisting students to leverage the resources that are already in place. Involving students in spreading the word about the programs and services available to students when they are struggling with their emotional and mental health encourages students to seek help. Here are some strategies:

Videos: Student-made videos are a great way to share the messages that struggling with one's mental health is a common experience, programs and services are available to help, and seeking help is okay.

Posters: Posters around campus can disseminate similarly powerful messages from students' peers while saving precious class time.

For more protocols for how to engage students in the communication processes, check out the YouthTruth resource: [Student Voice in Action Guidebook](#) (or use bit.ly/2RZb6lL).

✔ **INVITE STUDENTS TO WRITE ABOUT THEIR STORIES:** [826 Digital](#) (use bit.ly/2P5anRz), presented by 826 National, offers free writing curriculum focused on student voice and social-emotional learning. Use the lessons and projects to build empathy and communication, and to allow students to share their stories.



If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741



Closing the Feedback Loop: Sample Discussion Questions



For Principals, Teachers, and Professional Learning Communities

Do you think these findings speak to the experiences of students at your school?

Which data points seem most reflective of students' experiences at your school?

How do you think students' perception of their emotional and mental health and the supports available to them on your campus might be similar to or different from these findings? What sources inform your hypothesis?

When and how will you engage students in reflecting on this data with school leadership teams?

What questions do you have after reflecting on this data?

If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741



Closing the Feedback Loop: Sample Discussion Questions



For Students in Conversation with Teachers and Principals

When you reflect on the experiences of emotional and mental health across students at your school, what do you notice? Do you see any differences across students of various gender identities?

Which data points seem most reflective of students' experiences at your school?

What is one thing your school could try this year to improve students' experiences with their emotional and mental health?

What resources are available if a student who is upset, stressed, or having problems?

What questions do you have after reflecting on this data?

If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741



Other Resources



Resources

[Edutopia: Mental Health](#)

Find compassionate perspectives and evidence-based strategies to foster school environments that promote psychological well-being and support students experiencing behavioral, emotional, or social challenges.

[National Alliance on Mental Illness: LGBTQ](#)

NAMI provides data, information, and support for adults who work with students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, in addition to a wide collection of information and resource focused on supporting individual's experiences with their mental health universally.

[National Association of Secondary School Principals Mental Health Resources](#)

Find resources for principals on creating schools with more comprehensive mental health programs and services.

[National Association of School Psychologists](#)

NASP provides research, strategies, professional development, and information about certification and standards for effective school psychologist services and programs.

[The School Counselor Toolkit](#)

Find strategies targeted towards specific issues from helping with self-esteem development, supporting students with disabilities through school transitions, and one-on-one and group counseling models.

[Teen Mental Health](#)

Find resources targeted to students and adults alike to improve mental health literacy, design effective supports, and helpful information about appropriate methods of intervention.

ABOUT YOUTHTRUTH

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student and stakeholder feedback to help educators accelerate improvements. Through validated survey instruments and tailored advisory services, YouthTruth partners with schools, districts, and education funders to enhance learning for all students. To learn more about the research that informs our work, please visit www.youthtruthsurvey.org/resources.

 youthtruthsurvey.org

 [@youth_truth](https://twitter.com/youth_truth)

If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741