

executive summary

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SAN MATEO AREA TEEN MENTAL HEALTH STUDY

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A collaboration between the Gardner Center, the Stanford Center for Youth Mental Health & Wellbeing, and Peninsula Health Care District

Adolescence is a time of remarkable growth and development. It is also a time of great vulnerability. According to national indicators of adolescent health and well-being, the most significant health issues young people face are related to mental health. When a young person is supported to develop the skills and habits associated with robust mental health and their mental health needs are effectively diagnosed and treated, they are more likely to experience positive outcomes associated with their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development as well as overall quality of life. Conversely, when a young person is not supported to develop the skills and habits associated with robust mental health and their mental health needs are left undiagnosed or untreated, they are more likely to experience a wide range of negative outcomes including, but not limited to, an acute mental health crisis. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention and The National Institute of Mental Health have reported that suicide, often considered to be an indicator of acute mental health distress, was the second leading cause of death for American youth ages 10-24 in 2017. In San Mateo County, a recent report on adolescent health frames the prevalence of mental health needs among public school students as “staggering.” Both locally and nationally, schools are grappling with the challenges of students’ mental health needs, and the resulting demand it places on them not only to respond to students experiencing acute mental health distress, but to more effectively promote the mental health and well-being of all students.

To address these challenges in Northern California’s San Mateo County, San Mateo Union High School District, Peninsula Health Care District, and Stanford’s Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences’ Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing have been collaborating to strengthen mental health supports for youth in both the high school district and its K-8 partner districts. To better understand which efforts have the greatest potential for impact, we joined their collaborative to conduct a mixed methods study to examine three questions:

- 1.** How do students, parents, teachers, and providers perceive mental health needs and student supports throughout middle and high school?
- 2.** What predictive factors appear to be related to positive transitions, high school readiness, or risk indicators of later mental health challenges?
- 3.** What are the opportunities for intervention and support to improve teen mental health?

Key Findings

- Schools are experiencing earlier onset, increased prevalence, and greater complexity of student mental health needs across all ages (K-12) and across the socio-economic spectrum.
- Student mental health is affected by a wide range of school *and* non-school factors.
- Student mental health needs are often difficult to detect until they manifest as crisis.
- Resources to address student mental health needs vary across schools and districts, primarily focus on crisis management, and rest heavily on individual responses rather than a comprehensive or integrated system of support.
- Most students and families navigate transitions between grades, schools, and districts with relatively little guidance, leaving them vulnerable to gaps in services and support.
- Information regularly collected by public school districts provides little insight into students' mental health strengths/challenges and the effectiveness of mental health supports; available data do not yield any predictive factors related to mental health challenges.
- There are many opportunities with high potential for transforming how participating schools and districts support student mental health and well-being.

Opportunities

The research findings point toward four opportunities for schools and districts to transform their approach to supporting mental health and well-being:

1. Situate student mental health in the broader context of comprehensive development and well-being that is cultivated over the course of a lifetime
2. Shift from an individual view of the problem and solution to a systems view
3. Strengthen continuity of care across grades, schools, and districts
4. Expand data systems to include meaningful measures of well-being

These opportunities are accompanied by a tri-level framework for comprehensive change which emphasizes an integrated approach to innovation that simultaneously addresses the system (district/cross-district), setting (school site), and the individual (student/family). The Research Brief includes concrete examples of strategies that can be used to address each of the opportunities at each of these levels, across the K-12 continuum. In so doing, it offers multiple entry points for activating a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to supporting student mental health and well-being.

For more information, please visit the project's [website](#) or contact the project lead, Dr. Kristin Geiser, at kgeiser@stanford.edu.