



**YOUTH-LED SOLUTIONS FOR MENTAL
WELLNESS IN WASHINGTON COUNTY**

**TAKE ACTION
FOR YOUTH
WELLNESS**

WHO THIS BOOKLET IS MEANT FOR

**Parents
Coaches
Youth Group Leaders
Educators**

**Youth
Health/Mental Health
Providers**

Everyone who loves and cares about young people

WHY YOU MIGHT WANT TO READ IT

Two reasons.

You'll see the very real emotional challenges families and their kids are facing in Washington County, statistic by statistic.

You'll discover the evolution of a discussion among Washington County middle-school and high-school aged youth that led to an exciting result: their Action Plan for Mental Wellness.



YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SUMMIT PARTNERS



**Washington County
Coalition for Children**



The Chris Collins Foundation
Shining a light on mental illness

THE
UNIVERSITY
OF RHODE ISLAND
COLLEGE OF
HEALTH SCIENCES

Human Development
and Family Science

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Susan Orban at wccc@washcokids.org

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**RHODE ISLAND
FOUNDATION**

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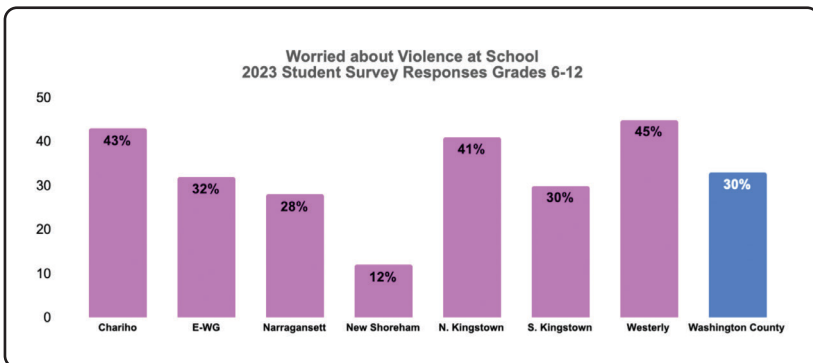
THE UNSETTLING FACTS THAT BRING US TOGETHER.

The RI Dept. of Education (RIDE) 2023 SurveyWorks Student Survey revealed the following about 6-12th graders in Washington County:

One in 3 (32.4%) of Washington County students admitted that in the last year they felt sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities.

One in four (24.7%) indicated in the survey they had been bullied on school grounds, and 43% of students thought it likely someone from their school would bully them online.

One in 3 (33%) reported that they worry about school violence.



RI Dept. of Health-Center for EMS (Emergency Medical Services) data regarding service calls to Washington County youth <age 21 revealed:

In 2023, local EMS teams responded to almost 500 (496) requests for help involving youth experiencing mental health crises, including alcohol and substance use.

Hospital Discharge Data for 2018-2022 from the RI Dept. of Health for Washington County residents <age 24 showed the following related to Emergency Dept. (ED) visits:

Nearly one-third (31% or 90) of the 290 county residents of all ages treated in EDs or hospitals following suicide attempts were youth between the ages of 10 and 17. Of these youth, more than twice as many girls as boys were treated, a recent but growing trend.

675 Washington County youth ages 10-17 were treated in EDs for suicidal thoughts and threatened attempts.

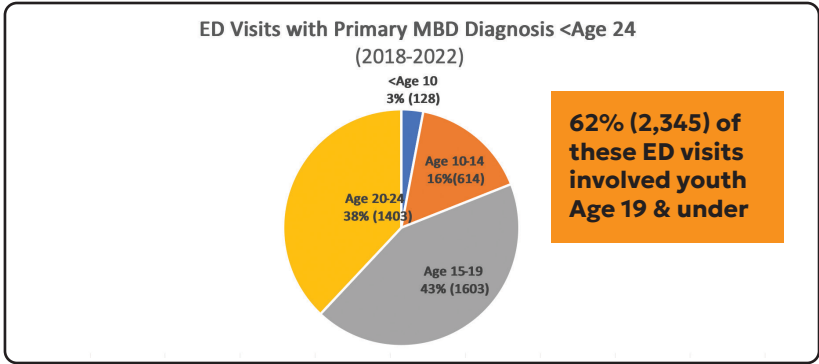
3,748 ED visits occurred with county residents <age 24 who had primary diagnoses of mental & behavioral health disorders (MBD), including substance use disorders.

982 (26%) of these ED visits were for substance use disorders only.

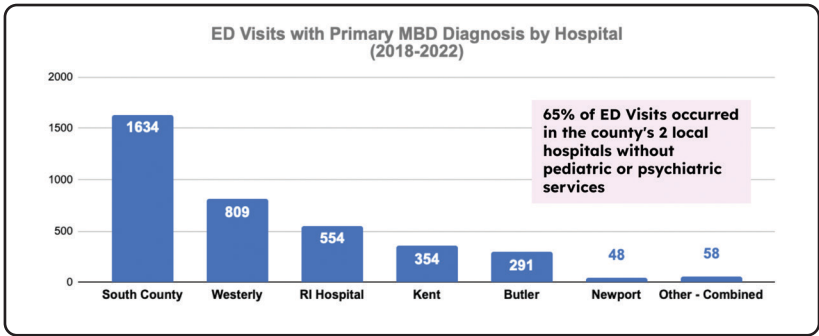
1,603 of these visits (**43%**) occurred among those age 15-19.

128 (3%) occurred with children <age 10.

All these young people were evaluated and released (not admitted to the hospital).



65% of these ED visits with primary MBD diagnoses occurred at the region's 2 local hospitals: South County Hospital (44%) and Westerly Hospital (21%), neither of which provide pediatric or psychiatric/ behavioral health services (except for newborns or geriatric patients).



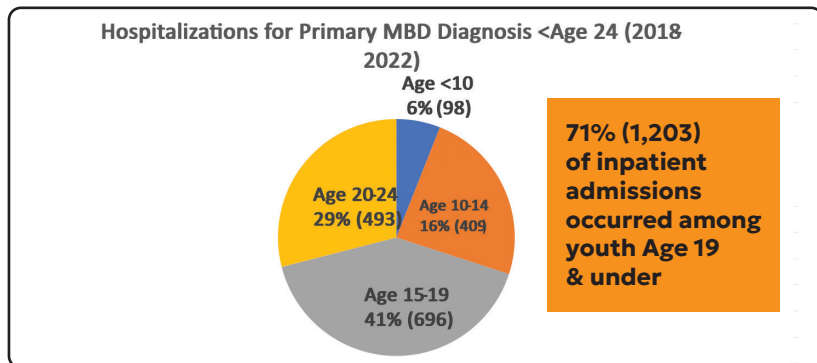
Hospital Discharge Data from 2018-2022 for Washington County residents <age 24 with also revealed:

1,696 inpatient hospital admissions with primary MBD diagnoses, including substance use disorders. These 1,696 MBD admissions comprised of 22% of all hospital admissions among Washington County young people - reflecting the national 1 in 5 prevalence of mental health disorders.

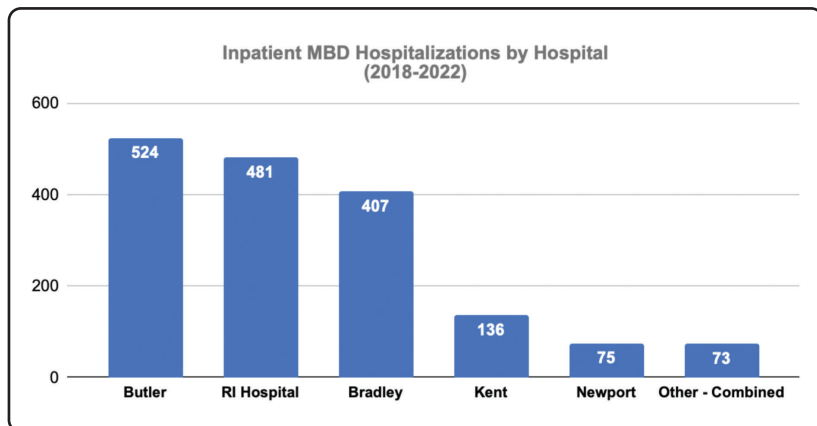
112 (7%) of the 1,696 admissions were for substance use disorders only.

Similar to ED visits, the majority 41% (696) of MBD hospitalizations occurred among teens age 15-19.

Almost 100 (98) children under age 10 were hospitalized during this period.

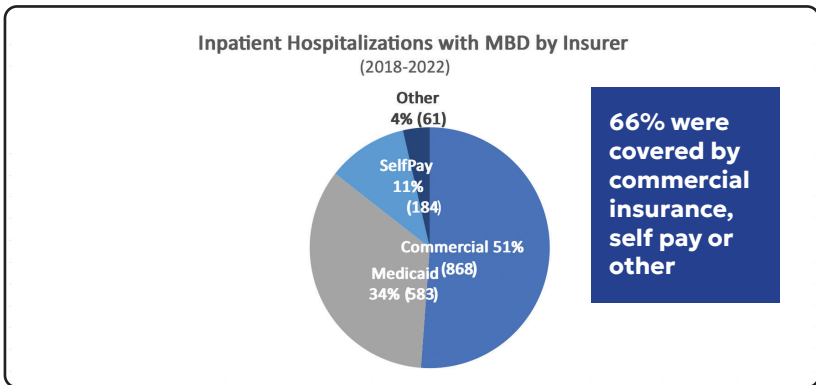


Not surprisingly, the vast majority (83%) of young people were hospitalized at one of the state's 3 major inpatient psychiatric facilities for youth: Butler, Hasbro (RI Hospital), and Bradley.



Insurance coverage often impacts access to mental health care for children and youth. A look at the breakdown of the insurance coverage of those hospitalized provides a glimpse of the insurer payor mix in Washington County.

1/3 (34%) of those hospitalized were covered by Medicaid, while 66% of admissions were covered through commercial insurance (51%), self-pay (11%) or other (4%).



From the state’s Violent Death Reporting System 2018-2022 maintained by the RI Dept of Health, we know that:

Though relatively rare, suicides do occur among young people in Washington County. Seven young people under the age of 25 took their lives between 2018-2022. Another 83 older Washington County residents ended their lives during the same time.

Each one a tragedy beyond words.





OUR YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL RESPONDS WITH AN "ACTION PLAN"

More than 40 Washington County Middle and High Schoolers met in 10 focus groups from August 2023 to February 2024 to assess Washington County's youth mental wellness needs from their own unique vantage point. A summary of their comments begins on page 23.

We also recruited a 13-member Youth Advisory Council, (see next page) many of whom had attended the focus groups. They pored over the focus group discussions and added their own insights to the following Action Plan.

**I FEEL LIKE YOU CAN HAVE FRIENDS
AND STILL FEEL LONELY BECAUSE THEY
DON'T ALWAYS UNDERSTAND CERTAIN
ASPECTS OF YOUR LIFE. IT CAN JUST
BE DIFFERENT THINGS IN YOUR LIFE
THAT NOBODY UNDERSTANDS AND YOU
DON'T REALLY FEEL LIKE YOU CAN REACH
OUT ABOUT IT OR YOU DON'T WANT TO.
IT'S HARD BECAUSE EVERYONE IS SO
DIFFERENT.**



WASHINGTON COUNTY YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS

Broad Rock Middle School
Sara Clarke

Chariho High School
Brendan Gleason
Benjamin Donahue

Narragansett High School
Amber Leonard

Narragansett Pier School
Libby Webster
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North Kingstown High School
Liza Mackrell
Rory Ennis

The Prout School
Joel Carpentier
Ella Martin
Hannah Paolino
Ella Procaccianti

South Kingstown High School
Jackson Hopkins



ACTION PLAN

PART I

CONTROL SOCIAL MEDIA

Put off social media for young people as long as possible

Parents should wait as long as possible to give children access to social media. We understand it's difficult because of the social pressure to engage in social media. Although some researchers recommend waiting until 16, parents should wait until they trust that their kids will make good decisions on social media platforms. This may be earlier than 16; it may be later. Adults should monitor usage habits and/but with open discussions about how we are using our phones and computers.

Prioritize and start with educational apps

Before we're ready for social media, parents should introduce us to appropriate educational accounts and apps. Starting with apps can open up a broader discussion about social media use.

SCROLLING REALLY NEGATIVELY AFFECTS MY MENTAL HEALTH SOMETIMES. I KNOW I NEED TO STOP, BUT I DON'T. AND THEN I FEEL VERY UNPRODUCTIVE AND IT KIND OF RUINS YOUR MOOD AND COULD RUIN YOUR DAY. I THINK THAT HAS NEGATIVE EFFECTS.



ACTION PLAN PART I

Encourage teens to take regular breaks from social media

We need to take regular breaks from social media and the internet. Parents should teach youth strategies for managing our time online effectively. Help us prioritize activities such as hobbies, sports, and spending time with friends and family. (Which includes modeling good behavior yourselves!)

Let's talk "algorithms"

Social media's algorithms drive the content that we see on social media. That doesn't mean we understand it or how social media is manipulated to draw our attention. Adults and young people need to understand how the technology works so that we can be confident about the content.

Also, it may seem like we're not listening, but we look to adults to (model and) encourage teens to seek information from a diverse range of sources representing different viewpoints and perspectives. Schools and community programs should be offering **media literacy education** to help all of us – not just teens -- analyze media messages, recognize propaganda and misinformation, and understand how media influences perceptions and attitudes.

I THINK SOCIAL MEDIA DOES HAVE GOOD ASPECTS. SOME THINGS ARE GOOD AND PEOPLE ARE SHARING IMPORTANT THINGS.



ACTION PLAN

PART 2

RELIEVE PRESSURES & EXPECTATIONS

Communicate with us about OUR priorities

Don't ignore us and don't just lecture us. If we are looking overwhelmed, ask us why. Ask us what is important to us, especially when we are expected to participate in a lot of activities. Sometimes we just need to vent; other times we will need your help to refocus on our priorities.

Connect us to the appropriate therapy or treatment

We may not know all the names, but our generation is probably more open to therapy than any before us. We want to manage our anxiety and other strong feelings. Don't hesitate to offer therapy as an option for helping us to manage our emotions and to learn stress management techniques. We won't be ashamed or embarrassed unless you and others see mental wellness as a negative thing.

I THINK SOMETIMES THERE'S A LOT OF STRESS IN ONE ACTIVITY. I CAN'T REALLY MAINTAIN IT AND I CAN'T FIND WAYS TO COPE WITH IT. SOMETIMES WHEN I'M AT SCHOOL IT'S HARD BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE EXPECTING YOU TO ACT NORMAL. WHEN I CAN'T. BECAUSE OF ALL THE STRESS.



ACTION PLAN PART 2

Watch for changes in us

Anxiety is often hard to see. We may look like model students but – just as you did when you were young – many of us quietly struggle with anxiety. Adults should learn more about the signs and symptoms of anxiety, trauma and other issues. Mental Health First Aid training, offered for free in Washington County by the Washington County Coalition for Children (see next page) teaches you how. Most important, check in with us if you see changes in our behavior. Sure, we'll resist at first, but you're used to that by now, aren't you?

I THINK THAT PARENTS AND PEOPLE IN POWER IN SCHOOL. THEY'LL LISTEN TO. THEY HEAR YOU. THEY SAY THEY UNDERSTAND AND THEN NOTHING HAPPENS. OR YOU ADVOCATE FOR SOMETHING AND THEY SAY. 'OH. WE'LL DO THIS LATER.' AND THEN THINGS DON'T COME.





MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID TRAINING

**FREE COURSES IN WASHINGTON COUNTY
TO TEACH ANYONE HOW TO IDENTIFY AND
RESPOND TO EARLY SIGNS OF MENTAL
STRESS.**

What is Mental Health First Aid?

Like classic First Aid, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) teaches anyone how to recognize, understand, and respond to someone who may be struggling with a mental health or substance use challenge. More than 6 million people in 25 countries have been trained as Mental Health First Aiders.

What is the course like?

Participants learn a 5-step Action Plan which includes assessing risk, respectfully listening to and supporting the individual in need, and identifying appropriate professional help and other support.

Mental Health First Aid has three youth-focused models:

- 1. Youth Mental Health First Aid** is a 6.5-hour course for adults serving youth, e.g. parents, teachers, coaches, pastors, youth group leaders, and camp counselors.
- 2. Teen Mental Health First Aid** is a 4.5-hour course for teens in grades 9-12 as part of the school curriculum or youth group programming.
- 3. Mental Health First Aid for Higher Education** is an 8-hour course designed to address mental health challenges encountered on college campuses. This course is designed for college students, faculty, resident advisors, academic/career advisors, clergy, coaches & administrators. URI offers classes on campus.

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

How do I sign up?

The Washington County Coalition for Children (WCCC) has been offering free Mental Health First Aid trainings since 2015. To join a class or learn more about MHFA, contact WCCC Director Susan Orban at wccc@washcokids.org.



ACTION PLAN

PART 3

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

We need more student-led supportive environments

We need more opportunities to talk and have meaningful interactions with other people our ages, and for that to happen, we need safe spaces. This includes both physical spaces like recreation centers and student break rooms in schools and organized activities like student-led clubs. In either case, teens should feel comfortable being ourselves and be able to decompress.

Most importantly, these spaces should cater to adolescent needs, not adult needs. So ask us what would make us comfortable.

Another example is the Peer 2 Peer clubs located at most schools in Washington County (see page 24). Peer 2 Peer organizes meetings to teach youth how to support peers who are struggling with their mental health.

COPING MECHANISMS AND STUFF SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS AS A PART OF A CURRICULUM. I THINK WHEN IT COMES TO MENTAL HEALTH. CHANGING SCHOOL POLICIES AND THE WAY THAT SCHOOL WORKS ISN'T NECESSARILY GOING TO HELP WITH STUDENT'S MENTAL HEALTH. A MINDSET SHIFT NEEDS TO OCCUR FOR SOMEONE TO TRULY BE MENTALLY HEALTHY.



SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Parents and other adults must advocate for youth mental wellness in our communities

We need adult **voices for mental health** in our community; including advocacy at school board meetings, budget hearings, etc. Model for us how to advocate for what's important. Model for us how to serve our communities and connect with others. Small acts, such as understanding the importance of using pronouns or realizing that diversity efforts are intended to give everyone an equal chance to thrive, can help us to feel seen, heard and valued.

I FEEL LIKE BACK IN THE GOLDEN DAYS. IT WAS NORMAL TO TALK TO STRANGERS. JUST APPROACH THEM. I GUESS. MORE NORMAL THAN NOWADAYS WHEN EVERYONE JUST KIND OF AVOIDS EACH OTHER. IF YOU GO TO TALK TO A STRANGER. THAT COULD BE SEEN AS FISHY OR CREEPY.



ACTION PLAN

PART 4

EDUCATION & AWARENESS

More openness and conversation about mental health

However willing you are, we need adults to increase their openness about **talking with us about mental health**. We need to have more natural conversations about what it means to be healthy, including physical, mental, social and emotional health. Including **social-emotional learning (SEL)** in school is important and should remain a focus of schools.

However, it isn't as powerful as actually being social and emotional. We need time to interact with adults and other young folks in ways that help us to learn how to deal with conflict, solve problems and to develop the tools to thrive as adults.

I THINK THAT PARENTS WOULD START TO GET THE IDEA THAT MENTAL HEALTH IS REALLY IMPORTANT IF SCHOOLS JUST VALUED IT MORE AND REALLY DISPLAYED IT IN EVERYTHING. IF THE SCHOOL HAD MORE WAYS OF MAKING SURE THAT EVERYBODY IS AWARE OF MENTAL HEALTH.



EDUCATION & AWARENESS

Create a CTE pathway for careers in mental health

A great way to improve and destigmatize mental health at the same time would be to add a **CTE (Career and Technical Education) pathway dedicated to mental health**. This would help to introduce more of us to the field at a younger age and hopefully increase the number of therapists available to help others over time. CTE Mental Health students could also lead the programming for mental health promotion in schools, similar to healthcare CTEs.

CERTAIN TEACHERS IN MY SCHOOL ARE AMAZING AND I LOVE THEM. BUT OTHERS AREN'T VERY EASY TO TALK TO. IT MIGHT HELP IF I WERE ABLE TO TALK TO MORE PEOPLE.



Train all adults that work with youth about mental health

All educators and people who work with youth should be **trained about youth mental health**. This could include participating in continuing education credits or workshops. (See Mental Health First Aid Training, page 15.)

IF YOU WANT TO BE ENGAGED



As a youth:

- ▶ Join P2P in your school or work to bring P2P to your school
- ▶ Join the Youth Advisory Council - Contact Sue Adams at suekadams@uri.edu if you are interested in joining the Council to help implement our Action Plan

As a parent, educator, or provider of youth services:

- ▶ Be an approachable adult for young people to talk to
- ▶ Take a **Youth Mental Health First Aid** course
- ▶ Support P2P or your local Prevention Partnership
- ▶ Join the Washington County Coalition for Children - We engage volunteers in a variety of committees and community initiatives. Contact Susan Orban, Coalition Director to explore ways to get involved.



ELEVATING YOUTH VOICES:

SUMMARY OF YOUTH FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS



At a Youth Mental Health Data Briefing convened by the Washington County Coalition for Children in Feb 2023, the entire audience was captivated by the youth in attendance, who spoke eloquently about their concerns and ideas for improving youth mental health. Many of the youth in attendance were active in their school Peer-to-Peer Programs. The event made us realize that we needed to do more to listen and engage youth in our community change efforts related to mental health. To help with this idea, the Coalition turned to familiar partners: Mark Collins, Executive Director of the Chris Collins Foundation, and Sue K Adams, PhD, URI Professor in the Human Development & Family Science Dept (HDF). Professor Adams recruited PhD candidate (at the time) Emma Pascuzzi to assist us. With her research focused on adolescent mental health and a passion for working with youth to understand and support their growth and well-being, our project team could not have been better matched. Drs. Adams and Pascuzzi designed and implemented the youth focus groups as well as facilitated the Action Plan development with our Youth Advisory Council.

Recruiting Youth Voices

Recruitment kicked off in the summer of 2023. The team reached out to **Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds Washington County** Youth Organizers working in Bradford, Peace Dale, Davisville, and Chariho (thank you Emily Fish, Duane Searles, and Dan Fitzgerald!), Narragansett Prevention Partnership and similar coalitions, school departments, and Peer-to-Peer programs to recruit focus group participants.

Over the course of 6 months, we recruited more than 40 youth participants from middle and high schools across Washington County and gathered input during 10 youth mental health focus groups conducted between September 2023 and February 2024.

Dr. Pascuzzi facilitated each one-hour focus group. All discussions were audio-taped with permission of the participants and then transcribed and coded for analysis. Youth participants received \$30 Amazon gift cards as a thank you for their time

Each focus group began with a list of topics based on the barriers and challenges that we know youth are facing in today's world. For example,

“What do adults need to know about the realities and pressures of growing up today?”

“How does social media impact your mental health?”,
and

“What could parents/caregivers, school, and communities do to support youth mental well-being?”

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

THE CURRENT YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS REQUIRES STRONGER INVESTMENTS IN PREVENTION AND THE PROMOTION OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING. WHO BETTER TO LEAD THIS SYSTEMS CHANGE EFFORT THAN YOUTH THEMSELVES WHO KNOW BEST WHAT THEY NEED TO FLOURISH!



Four main themes (as reflected in the Action Plan) were identified by Focus Group participants:

- 1. Impact of social media on youth mental health,**
- 2. Pressures and expectations youth face,**
- 3. The importance of supportive environments, and**
- 4. The need for increased education and awareness surrounding youth mental health.**

PEER-TO-PEER: STUDENT-LED EFFORTS IN SCHOOLS TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH UNDERSTANDING AND ATTITUDES AMONG PEERS



The Peer-to-Peer (P2P) mental health awareness program believes that teens are more likely to listen to other teens than even the most well-meaning adults. P2P can provide early intervention given that many mental health disorders first present themselves during adolescence and the teenage years.

P2P's key goals, explains Mark Collins, executive director of The Chris Collins Foundation, are to raise awareness, encourage help-seeking, and promote early detection of depression, anxiety, and related illnesses among young people.


Middle and high school participants attend a mental health training session at the beginning of each school year. P2P then supports their efforts to build school-wide awareness.

P2P works, Collins says, as results show an increase in mental health literacy and a reduction in stigma.

P2P

“Students not only become aware of available resources, but they also feel comfortable seeking and receiving the support they need and encouraging fellow students to do the same,” he concludes.

The Chris Collins Foundation brought the P2P initiative to Rhode Island from the University of Michigan Eisenberg Family Depression Center where it was developed. It supports the program in 15 RI middle and high schools, including 10 schools in Washington County.



MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL PARTICIPANTS ATTEND A MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING SESSION AT THE BEGINNING OF EACH SCHOOL YEAR. P2P THEN SUPPORTS THEIR EFFORTS TO BUILD SCHOOL-WIDE AWARENESS.

For more information, go to chriscollinsfoundation.org. It supports the program in 15 RI middle and high schools, including 10 schools in Washington County.

STUDENT QUOTES ON THE FOUR THEMES

1: Impact of social media

Social media (including the internet) is increasingly being used by children and adolescents, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Bozzola et al., 2022). Recent reports show that 9 of 10 youth aged 13 to 17 have used social media at least once (AACAP, 2018). Peer friendships and a sense of belonging are pivotal during this phase of life.

Social media can both facilitate connections and present challenges. While it offers opportunities for interaction beyond physical spaces, it can also contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation (Smith, Leonis & Anandaviali, 2021). Our participants agreed that it's crucial for parents, educators, and caregivers to guide young people in navigating social media responsibly.

In our focus groups, students said:

I ALSO THINK ANOTHER THING IS THE SCROLLING REALLY NEGATIVELY AFFECTS MY MENTAL HEALTH SOMETIMES. I KNOW I NEED TO STOP. BUT I DON'T. AND THEN I FEEL VERY UNPRODUCTIVE AND IT KIND OF RUINS YOUR MOOD AND COULD RUIN YOUR DAY. AND SO. I THINK THAT HAS NEGATIVE EFFECTS.



SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT

I THINK SOCIAL MEDIA DOES HAVE GOOD ASPECTS OF IT. SOME THINGS ARE GOOD AND PEOPLE ARE SHARING IMPORTANT THINGS




I DON'T THINK OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A GIANT PROBLEM. IT'S NOT AS MUCH AS PEOPLE MAKE IT OUT TO BE. I'D SAY IT DEPENDS ON THE PERSON, THE SCHOOL AND THE SOCIAL LIFE THERE. I THINK PEOPLE JUST LIKE TO LABEL, ESPECIALLY THIS GENERATION. THE FACT IS, THIS IS HOW WE CONNECT WITH PEOPLE, HOW WE MAKE OUR FRIENDS. THIS IS HOW WE KEEP OUR FRIENDS BASICALLY. YOU'RE NOT JUST FRIENDS WITH THE NEIGHBORHOOD KIDS. YOU CAN BE FRIENDS WITH SOMEBODY ALL OVER THE WORLD.




SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT

I WOULD SAY SOCIAL MEDIA OVERALL HAS A PRETTY NEGATIVE EFFECT. NOT TO SAY THAT THERE AREN'T SOME POSITIVE ASPECTS TO IT BECAUSE THERE DEFINITELY ARE. BUT I THINK IT GENERALLY LEADS TO PEOPLE MAKING COMPARISONS AND ALMOST LIKE PUTTING ON A FAKE LIFE. EVERYONE'S INSTAGRAM IS THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THEIR LIFE. AND I THINK IT MAKES AN UNREALISTIC STANDARD OF THE PERFECT LIFE. ESPECIALLY INFLUENCERS WHO ARE POSTING ALL OF THEIR BEST MOMENTS SO THEY LOOK PERFECT. THAT MAKES US THINK THAT'S HOW OUR LIFE IS SUPPOSED TO LOOK. AND I THINK THAT WILL JUST MAKE YOU SET UNREALISTIC STANDARDS IN YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE.



Participants said most adults don't understand social media because they didn't experience it when they were growing up.

I DON'T REALLY THINK THAT ADULTS GET [SOCIAL MEDIA] A LOT, WHICH IS UNDERSTANDABLE BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T GROW UP WITH IT. I FEEL LIKE IT'S KIND OF HARD TO TEACH THEM. AND, WHEN YOUR PARENTS ARE LIKE, 'GET OFF YOUR PHONE,' THERE'S JUST THIS KIND OF TENSION. AND I FEEL LIKE THAT'S A BIG ASPECT THAT'S DIFFERENT.



PRESSURES & EXPECTATIONS

2. Pressures and expectations

While having high expectations for children can be healthy, putting them under too much pressure can be harmful (Morin, 2020). Adolescents today often face a myriad of pressures, from academic expectations to social dynamics and personal issues, which can lead to overwhelming stress and depression (Arwine, 2024). More than half (60%) of young people feel so stressed by the pressure to succeed that they have felt overwhelmed or unable to cope (Mental Health Foundation, 2018).

Beyond family and peers, play serves as a vital avenue for stress relief, creative expression, and social connection. In essence, play isn't just fun; it's a vital component of a child's growth and preparation for the challenges of life (Gray, Lancy, & Bjorklund, 2023). Yet Rhode Island middle and high schools have minimal or no recess periods or other opportunities for open time.

YOU GET BAD GRADES. THE WHOLE FAMILY KNOWS ABOUT IT. ALL YOUR COUSINS. YOUR PARENTS. YOUR GRANDPARENTS. YOUR SECOND AUNT. EVERYONE KNOWS. LAST YEAR, MY PARENTS WERE REALLY PRESSURING ME. SO, I GOT BETTER GRADES. AND THEN THEY PRESSURED ME TO DO A SPORT. SO, I DID A SPORT AND THEY PRESSURED ME TO DO THIS. THAT. AND IT WAS JUST. LIKE. 'WHEN IS IT ENOUGH?'



PRESSURES & EXPECTATIONS

SOMETIMES TEACHERS WILL COMPARE ME TO MY SIBLINGS. AND IT PUTS A BUNCH OF STRESS ON ME. IT'S EASIER WHEN THE TEACHERS DON'T DO THAT. BECAUSE I TRY MY BEST.



OUR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS DON'T USUALLY HAVE RECESS. WE NEED A BLOCK [OF TIME] OTHER THAN LUNCH. TO SOCIALIZE AND MOVE AROUND.




3: Supportive environment

Mental health-promoting environments allow individual and collective mental health to flourish (World Health Organization WHO, 2021). The presence of a supportive network of family, peers, adults, and community resources is considered essential for healthy youth developments (Decker, 2023). These relationships and resources provide a foundation of emotional, social and practical support that helps youth navigate the transition from childhood to adulthood.


Youth need to have a lot of different people in their lives with whom they feel comfortable and can trust.

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT


I FEEL LIKE YOU CAN HAVE FRIENDS AND STILL FEEL LONELY BECAUSE THEY DON'T ALWAYS UNDERSTAND CERTAIN ASPECTS OF YOUR LIFE. IT CAN JUST BE DIFFERENT THINGS IN YOUR LIFE THAT NOBODY UNDERSTANDS AND YOU DON'T REALLY FEEL LIKE YOU CAN REACH OUT ABOUT IT OR YOU DON'T WANT TO. IT'S HARD BECAUSE EVERYONE IS SO DIFFERENT.



COPING MECHANISMS AND STUFF SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS AS A PART OF A CURRICULUM. I THINK WHEN IT COMES TO MENTAL HEALTH, CHANGING SCHOOL POLICIES AND THE WAY THAT SCHOOL WORKS ISN'T NECESSARILY GOING TO HELP WITH STUDENT'S MENTAL HEALTH. A MINDSET SHIFT NEEDS TO OCCUR FOR SOMEONE TO TRULY BE MENTALLY HEALTHY.



I THINK THAT PARENTS AND PEOPLE IN POWER IN SCHOOL, THEY'LL LISTEN TO, THEY HEAR YOU, THEY SAY THEY UNDERSTAND AND THEN NOTHING HAPPENS. OR YOU ADVOCATE FOR SOMETHING AND THEY SAY, 'OH, WE'LL DO THIS LATER,' AND THEN THINGS DON'T COME.



SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

I FEEL SOME TEACHERS COULD BE MORE WELCOMING OR AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR. JUST SAY, 'IF YOU NEED ANYTHING. COME TO ME.' I FEEL LIKE A LOT OF TEACHERS DON'T DO THAT.



THE SITUATION COULD BE BETTER IF SCHOOLS FOCUSED MORE ON MENTAL HEALTH. I THINK THAT PARENTS WOULD START TO GET THE IDEA THAT MENTAL HEALTH IS REALLY IMPORTANT IF SCHOOLS JUST VALUED IT MORE AND REALLY DISPLAYED IT IN EVERYTHING. IF THE SCHOOL HAD MORE WAYS OF MAKING SURE THAT EVERYBODY IS AWARE OF MENTAL HEALTH. THAT WOULD BE REALLY HELPFUL.





4: Education/Awareness

During adolescence, young individuals grapple with profound physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes (CDC, 2021). In adolescence, youth must learn to identify, understand, and express emotions in healthy ways, also referred to as emotion regulation (Kahn & Graham, 2020). Research indicates the importance of supportive family environments and peer relationships in adolescent development, highlighting their impact on self-esteem, confidence and emotional well-being (Noller and Atkin, 2014; Farley and Kim-Spoon, 2014).

EDUCATION & AWARENESS

One of the biggest barriers to receiving mental health services help is the stigma surrounding it. Many if not most individuals -- youth and adults, professionals and peers -- don't entirely understand mental health and how to support those who are struggling. Schools can help reduce the stigma and make it easier for individuals to get the support they need.

CERTAIN TEACHERS IN MY SCHOOL ARE AMAZING AND I LOVE THEM. BUT OTHERS AREN'T VERY EASY TO TALK TO. I THINK IT MIGHT HELP IF I WERE ABLE TO TALK TO MORE PEOPLE. 

THEY [SCHOOL OFFICIALS] MAY SAY THAT THEY CARE A LOT ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH. BUT ACADEMICS ALWAYS REALLY COMES FIRST THERE. SO I MADE THE RESOURCES FOR MYSELF AND OTHER PEOPLE WHO ARE INTERESTED IN ADVOCATING FOR THEMSELVES. IT ACTUALLY IMPROVED MY MENTAL HEALTH A LITTLE BIT TO KNOW THAT I WAS GOING TO BE PRODUCING SOMETHING THAT I WANTED TO SEE CHANGE IN. IT'S JUST WHAT I LIKE TO DO. BUT I WISH THAT THE GUIDANCE OFFICES IN SCHOOLS WOULD NOT AUTOMATICALLY BE SO REVOLVED AROUND ACADEMICS. 

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Youth Mental Health Projects in Washington County

The Washington County Coalition for Children, one of the three sponsors for this project, has been advocating and innovating for the region's children since 2001. While youth mental wellness has always been a part of its portfolio, WCCC Coordinator Susan Orban reports that "The nation's current youth mental health crisis has spurred the Coalition to make child and adolescent mental well-being its sole and only focus.

The Coalition's past and current efforts all include convening community members and partners just like this Youth Advisory Council initiative.

"We give action to the rhetoric," states Orban emphatically.

Coalition-initiated youth mental health initiatives and programs include:

- **The Greatest 8™** website & Text Messaging Service to instill 8 core mental wellness skills in children age 0-8 - Now available in Spanish! Sign up at thegreatest8.org
- **School-Based Tele-Behavioral Health Services** offering mental health services during the school day to middle and high school students
- **Youth and Teen Mental Health First Aid** trainings (see page 18) to teach laypeople how to help someone who

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may be struggling with a mental health or substance use challenge

- **Recommended Booklists for Children & Youth** related to bullying and children’s mental health
- **Feelin’ Groovy** to introduce 2nd graders to identifying and recognizing their emotions
- **Collaborative Office Rounds** trainings for local primary care/behavioral health providers in best practices & to support the professional development of the workforce
- **Chalk It Up Against Bullying** community arts events to raise awareness about the impact of bullying and promote prevention
- **Adapting CBT for Children**, an intensive workshop series for area mental health professionals in adapting Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy strategies in treating anxiety, depression, and substance use with children
- **Children’s Mental Health Awareness Events**, e.g. Data Briefings, Film Screenings, Panel Discussions, Poetry Slams and More – we bring community members together to learn, share, support, and take action together.
- **For more information**, visit the Coalition at www.washcokids.org.

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