



Wisconsin
Evaluation
Collaborative

CONNECTING RELATIONSHIPS, MENTAL HEALTH, AND ACP

03

**Academic
& Career
Planning
Brief Series**

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Co-Authored with
Andréa Donegan, DPI

This report, a collaboration between the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), leverages evaluation findings, research, and expertise to provide educators with strategies and resources pertaining to the role of safe, supportive relationships between students and adults and their connection to college and career readiness and mental health. Parents, community members, policy makers, and others may also find this valuable.

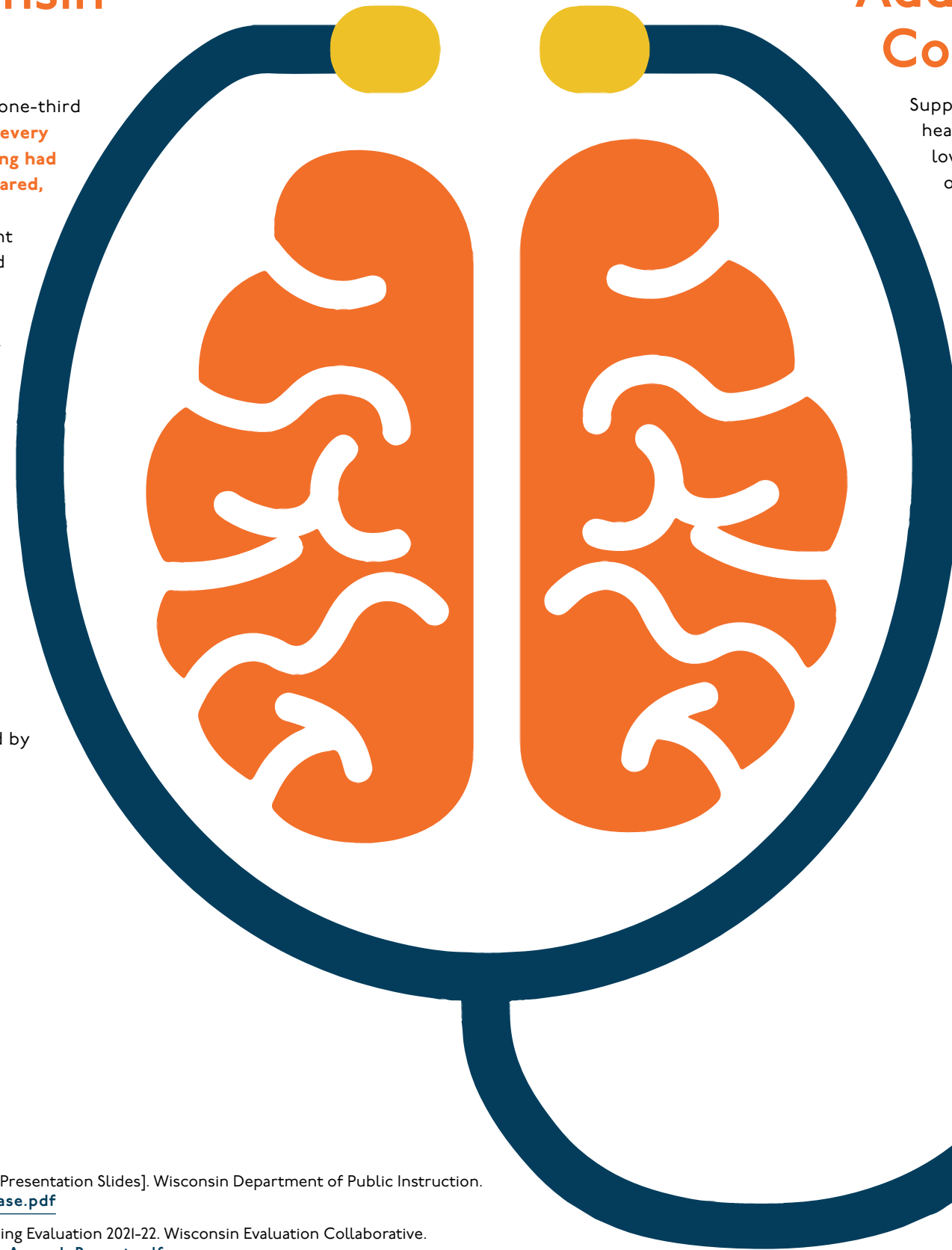
Mental Health in Wisconsin Schools

The most recent Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that one-third of high school students reported “feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for more than 2 weeks in a row,” and over half reported “having had significant problems with feeling very anxious, nervous, tense, scared, or like something bad was going to happen.”¹ When broken out by race/ethnicity, gender identity, and/or sexual identity, some student sub-groups (female, LGB, Asian, Hispanic/Latino students) reported considerably higher rates of depression and anxiety.

ACP Evaluation case studies in several large Wisconsin districts

revealed a similar theme among high school students: students repeatedly described feeling hopeless or lacking interest in their futures due to issues such as climate change, war and other world events, the COVID-19 pandemic, violence, racism, and other social and political issues.² National and international research has reported similar findings. For example, a large-scale study of 16- to 25-year-olds in ten countries found that participants feel they will have no future, with 84 percent of participants at least somewhat worried about climate change and 59 percent very or extremely worried, and with 75 percent thinking the “future is frightening.”³

These findings help illustrate some of the challenges that educators and families face in helping prepare young people for their lives after high school and for education in general. What can be done to help ameliorate the negative feelings being experienced by a large number of students?



Addressing Mental Health Concerns

Supportive adult relationships are an important protective factor in students' mental health, as well as in ACP success. Research shows that especially for students from low-income households, career counseling, which is often implemented through one-on-one counseling relationships, affects college application behavior and college decisionmaking.⁴ Research also substantiates that “positive relationships with adults are perhaps the single most important ingredient in promoting positive student development.”^{5,6} Supportive relationships may well occur in school and can be prioritized and leveraged to support student mental health and ACP effectiveness. The Wisconsin 2021 YRBS shows 67 percent

of students reported there is at least one teacher or other adult in their school whom they can talk to if they have a problem. Likewise, 84 percent of students would feel comfortable seeking help from one or more adults besides their parents if they had an important question affecting their life.

As students seek out career information and grapple with making post-secondary decisions, being connected to adults at school in tandem with familial support can help them effectively mitigate stressors, get support, and navigate the many opportunities and resources available.

In the context of ACP, building relationships with students can occur at the systems, group, and individual levels. At the systems level, schools can incorporate career conversations and career readiness standards into all content subjects. Staff can then connect content to real world experiences, notice and act on student strengths and interests, and have an open-door policy for career conversations. In a group context, students can connect to supportive adults through dedicated career-focused advisory/homeroom times, small group advising, and/or career embedded discussion in extracurricular activities. At the individual level, students can benefit from developing supportive relationships through school- or community-based mentoring, individual ACP conferences/advising, or informal student-to-staff relationship-building.

1 Tortora, O. (n.d.). Wisconsin Youth Behavior Survey 2021: Preliminary Release [Presentation Slides]. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/yrbs-preliminary-release.pdf>

2 Worth, R., Sim, G., Arrigoni, J., & Marlin, D. (2022) Academic and Career Planning Evaluation 2021-22. Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative. https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/acp/pdf/2022_10_WEC_ACP_2022_Annual_Report.pdf

3 Hickman, C.H., Marks, E.M., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, R.E., Mayall, E.E., Wray, B., Mellor, C., & van Susteren, L. (2021). Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey. *The Lancet*, 5(12), e863–e873. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00278-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00278-3)

4 Avery, C., Howell, J.S., & Page, L. (2014). A Review of the Role of College Counseling, Coaching, and Mentoring on Students' Postsecondary Outcomes. College Board. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED556468.pdf>

5 Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., & Allen, J. P. (2012). Teacher-student relationships and engagement: Conceptualizing, measuring, and improving the capacity of classroom interactions. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 365-386). Springer. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_17

6 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2015). Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience. (Center on the Developing Child Working Paper No. 13). <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/The-Science-of-Resilience.pdf>

Next Steps and Resources for State, District and School Leaders

1. **Raising awareness of the issues.** Those working with students and those who make policy that impacts them must be aware of the prevalent feelings of youth hopelessness, depression, and anxiety, as well as the importance of supportive adult relationships for addressing this crisis.

· [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#)

2. **Reviewing local data regarding mental health issues.** Educators and others need to be informed of the extent of this crisis on the local level and given resources to identify students/groups of students who need support.

· [Mental Health Screening Resources](#)

3. **Assessing current infrastructure and ACP work that allow for relationship-building.** Are staff and students aware of the importance of relationships for mental health as well as high quality preparation for the future? What are counselor caseloads in your school or district? Are relationship-building opportunities available and accessible to ALL students? How can relationship-building that occurs within ACP activities be extended beyond ACP? Are staff aware of, trained, supported, and encouraged to prioritize safe relationship building among ALL students and provided support for their own mental health and well-being? Are funding, time, communication, and other resources in place to adequately support this work? Do students have opportunities to build relationships with adults who reflect their own gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.?

· [Colorado Department of Education's Meaningful Career Conversations](#)

· [Kansas State Department of Education's Kansas Career Advising Model](#)

· [Compassion Resilience Toolkit for School Leaders and Staff](#)

· [Youth Mental Health First Aid](#)

· [Appropriate activities of school counselors](#)

· [ASCA Recommendations on School Counselor to Student Ratio](#)

· [Wisconsin's Guide to SEL and Workforce Readiness: A Powerful Combination](#)

4. **Identifying opportunities for improving practices; implement change, evaluate, and refine.** A variety of methods exist to help inform improvement efforts, including performing a systematic needs assessment, conducting a climate survey, or gathering student, staff, and family voice through listening sessions or focus groups. Findings should inform an action plan as part of school/district strategic planning. Changes in practice should be subject to a continuous improvement process.

· [School Mental Health Quality Assessment](#)

· [Climate Survey](#)

5. **Systems work.** Relationship building to support mental health and a positive future orientation requires a systems focus and can be aligned, integrated and embedded in the vision and mission statement; teaching practices; educator evaluations; school improvement goals; climate, culture, and discipline practices; and current systems such as MLSS (Multi-Level Systems of Support), CSMH (Comprehensive School Mental Health), PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support), career readiness, and ACP, in particular.

· [Comprehensive School Mental Health Framework](#)





References and Resources

- 2021-22 Academic and Career Planning Evaluation: https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/acp/pdf/2022_10_WEC_ACP_2022_Annual_Report.pdf
- Appropriate activities of school counselors: <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/8fe536c2-7a32-41028ce7-42e9b0683b3b/appropriate-activities-of-schoolcounselors.pdf>
- ASCA Recommendations on School Counselor to Student Ratio: <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/ee8b2elbd021-4575-982c-c84402cb2cd2/Role-Statement.pdf>
- Colorado Department of Education's Meaningful Career Conversations: <https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/pwrplaybookmeaningfulcareerconversations>
- Compassion Resilience Toolkit for School Leaders and Staff: <https://compassionresiliencetoolkit.org/schools/a-toolkit-for-schools/>
- Climate Survey: <https://dpi.wi.gov/slids/climate-survey-information>
- Comprehensive School Mental Health Framework: <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health/framework>
- Kansas State Department of Education's Kansas Career Advising Model: https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/CSAS%20Home/Plan_Of_Study/Kansas%20Career%20Advising%20Model.pdf?ver=2019-01-04-124858-667
- Mental Health Screening Resources: https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/mental_health_screening_guide_web.pdf
- School Mental Health Quality Assessment: <https://www.theshapessystem.com/>
- Youth Mental Health First Aid: <https://www.wishschools.org/resources/youthmental-health-first-aid.cfm>
- Youth Risk Behavior Survey: <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/yrebs>

About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) is housed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. WEC's team of evaluators supports youth-serving organizations and initiatives through culturally responsive and rigorous program evaluation. Learn more at <http://www.wec.wceruw.org>

Andréa Donegan is the school counseling consultant on the Student Services, Prevention and Wellness team at the Department of Public Instruction, focusing on the intersection of career readiness, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and comprehensive school mental health.