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Supporting kids' mental health is within our grasp

An editorial by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly during Mental Health Awareness Month

When people ask me what a major barrier is facing individual Wisconsin students today, I don't have to think hard to come up with an answer: Support for their mental health.

On a visit last year to a school in southwest Wisconsin, several students told me their school is doing the best it can to support their mental health needs, but there just was not enough staff to go around. As a result, students who needed help couldn't get immediate access to support unless it was an emergency. Students also spoke about their friends and their own need for supportive mental health services. There wasn't a student in the room who wasn't paying rapt attention to their friends' stories, many nodding along.

It's common sense that if we support kids' health, including their mental health, they will be in a better position to succeed academically. I also want to say this bluntly – schools should only rarely have mental health emergencies to respond to. We can and must prevent these emergencies by investing in positive mental health.

At the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, and in school districts all around the state, educators know how much a student's positive mental health can set them up to thrive academically, socially, and societally. We see the impact every day.

Strong students make for a strong Wisconsin.

Students who feel accepted, have strong, positive relationships with classmates and teachers, and those who have the support of their families and communities, can thrive. It's our collective responsibility to make sure that, when something is wrong, we have systems in place to help our students emerge stronger than ever. Otherwise, we all pay the price.

Lately, I'm sure you've heard Wisconsin students are struggling with their mental health, and the numbers have been mounting for years. The pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges, and we see the downstream effects on things like attendance rates. School is much different in 2024 than it was decades ago, and so are the needs of our kids.

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But it doesn't have to be like this. We have the know-how and the resourcefulness to address students' mental health needs and improve youth mental health outcomes in Wisconsin.

Many Wisconsin communities are already investing in innovative strategies to promote student and staff wellbeing, and the DPI is doing what it can to support students' mental health. In collaboration with other experts, the department developed [the Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework](#), which is helping guide schools in developing comprehensive school mental health systems.

It's simple – our students and our schools need more from us.

Kids are experiencing record highs of anxiety and depression. [The data shows it](#). The kids themselves have told us that they need help, and they need more school resources. Schools are doing what they can with the financial constraints they have. This past biennial budget provided an estimated \$31 per student allocation to school districts and independent charter schools. No, that is not a typo – 31 bucks a student.

This is not a “want.” Our schools *need* investment in comprehensive mental health systems. They need it so learners can thrive both academically and personally, in school and when at home or out in the community.

You can't fix problems by ignoring them, doing nothing, or trying to wish them away. Our students know this. Our educators know this. At heart, Wisconsinites, inspired by the values of fairness and progress, know we can do better.

Every person in every school community must be equipped with the knowledge and resources to support students' positive mental health. That means not just school professionals, but parents, community members, family and friends, and even students themselves.

We all have a pivotal role in understanding the importance of positive mental health, and knowing what we can do to support kids. We need to move from crisis mode to prevention mode, creating the positive change our learners and our state deserve.

The upcoming biennial budget process presents a crucial opportunity for our state to get it right. I will continue advocating for more state support to address the urgent needs of our kids, and I encourage you to join me.

Wisconsin's most important resource is the potential of its children. When we support healthy child development and promote positive mental health, we invest in their ability to contribute fully to our communities.

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Dr. Underly is Wisconsin's elected statewide K-12 education leader. She took office in 2021 and has more than 25 years of experience as a local superintendent, principal, and teacher. An official photo for publication of State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly [is available on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's website](#). This guest editorial [is available online on the DPI's news release webpage](#).