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All students belong in Wisconsin's public schools

A guest editorial for publication by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly on improving youth mental health

As summer winds down and Wisconsin families, educators and staff head back to school in the coming days, I am reminded of the amazing opportunities our public schools provide.

Our public schools are places where every student, regardless of their background, abilities, or needs, should have equal access to education and opportunity. Classrooms in Wisconsin are often the most diverse communities in our state. It is critical we understand and work to meet the needs of **all** students. Our schools must be places where every child feels safe and included.

The unfortunate reality is that not every child *feels* like they belong.

[Survey data my agency released in July](#) gives us a snapshot of our kids' mental health. It tells us that our kids continue to struggle tremendously with the magnitude of their mental health challenges. Nearly six out of every 10 Wisconsin high school students told us they dealt with at least one mental health challenge within the past year. Put that into the full context for a minute — nearly 60 percent of Wisconsin high school students are telling us that at least some of the time, they feel anxious, depressed, or suicidal.

These kids carry with them an incredible burden, and this leads to not just social and emotional disruption, but also compromises their ability to succeed academically. Imagine yourself in their place. If you feel like you are struggling, it's hard to feel like you belong at school or in your community. Without that stability, it's extremely difficult to prioritize learning.

How can we expect our kids to be ready to learn when they are telling us that they need help, and do not feel like they belong?

Just one in five Wisconsin students who participated in our Youth Risk Behavior Survey last year said they received the help they needed, when they needed it. We, collectively, need to promote positive mental health and increase access to these valuable resources and services.

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We need an all-hands-on-deck approach to help our kids navigate the challenges they face. They cannot – and should not – do this alone. We need further investment into our kids. We need more trained student mental health practitioners in every school – rural, urban, suburban. It shouldn't matter what zip code you're in, or what resources your family has. Every child should get the mental health care they need.

Creating and growing a positive school culture is also extremely important to a child's sense of safety and belonging. We need to implement inclusive policies in our schools – policies that support our kids instead of isolating them.

School should be a place of freedom – a place where everyone feels like they belong, where they can learn, become critical thinkers, expand their skills and gain more confidence in themselves. A place where they have every opportunity to achieve and are set up for success.

We, as Wisconsinites, need to do better for our kids.

That is why, as we enter the new school year, I want to get a message across to every student in Wisconsin: you matter.

To every parent, grandparent, guardian: We know that your student matters to you. They matter to their teachers, to their community, and to this great state we call home. Let them know that, every day. Be a listener for your student. Ask open-ended questions about their thoughts, feelings, and concerns. Let them know they can trust you to help them.

If you listen and care about the “little things,” it's more likely they'll come to you when the “big things” are on their minds.

To our teachers and staff: We know that to prioritize kids' mental health needs, we need to help you prioritize your own. We will continue to support you not just because you do important work, but because you are important, too. We cannot say that enough.

Schools have a critical role in supporting our students' mental health and belonging. We need you as partners. Our call to action can no longer go unheard.

Every student in Wisconsin is welcome in our public schools, and it must remain that way. We owe it to our kids and to let them know that they belong. Public education is education for *everyone*.

Public education is good because it is a public good. It belongs to us all, and we all belong in public schools.

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NOTE: 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](#).