

Office of Children's Mental Health: Offers back to school guidance to reduce student stress

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"Back to school is an exciting time for many students, but also an anxious time," said Linda Hall, Director of the Wisconsin Office of Children's Health (OCMH). "We can all help lessen student anxiety and prepare youth for the demands of the school year."

While the last two school years have been difficult, Hall points to a variety of initiatives and resources that are available to help schools and families put positive mental health practices into place.

"Recently, there's been a lot of attention paid, and investments made in, children's mental health – and rightfully so", said Hall. "I'm energized by the steps that state and federal leaders have taken, as well as all the effort that educators and practitioners have put into addressing youth mental health."

Schools are doing more than ever to address student mental health and wellness, thanks to increased awareness and pandemic funding. Key investments in school mental health include Governor Evers' Get Kids Ahead Initiative, federal pandemic relief funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Policymakers have allocated a number of funding streams to address youth mental health in schools and medical settings, as well as the behavioral health workforce. For further details, see Student Mental Health, In Brief.

Hall points out that the initiatives and resources available to Wisconsin schools echo the findings and recommendations of a recent study that graduate students at UW-

Madison's La Follette School of Public Policy conducted for OCMH. Report recommendations include:

Ensure stable and consistent state funding for school mental health and wellness;
Provide time and training for school staff to implement mental health programming throughout their school; and
Connect schools to available resources, highlighting immediate steps that educators can take to cultivate wellness in their schools.
A number of high-quality mental health programs and implementation resources are available to schools:

Comprehensive School Mental Health Framework

Resiliency

Screening tools

Trauma sensitive schools

Wisconsin Safe & Healthy Schools Center

Parents can also play a large role in instilling wellness habits at home. Evidence shows these practices improve mental health:

Sufficient sleep every night

Daily physical exercise

Healthy diet

Time outdoors, especially in nature

Open conversations about mental health

"As we emerge from the pandemic and enter a new school year, we are committed to helping Wisconsin's children be as healthy as possible", said Hall. "Our hope is that all students learn wellness strategies, build resilience, and strengthen their mental health."

School districts are encouraged to utilize the above resources; collaborate with local partners and their regional Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA); and reach out to OCMH with any questions.

For more resources on student mental health, see the OCMH School Mental Health Resource page.