

Project Title: Mental Health

Project Partner: West Branch Community School District

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ISSUE STATEMENT:

The West Branch Community School District asked us to make mental health resources more accessible to students and to expand the conversation of mental health to include parents. In Iowa, 17% of youth aged twelve to seventeen had at least one major depressive episode in the last year; 14% of Iowa youth were grappling with severe major depression.ⁱ

LITERATURE REVIEW

Through a study conducted by Harvard University called “The Critical Link Between Parent and Teen Mental Health,” researchers studied how caregivers suffering from depression and anxiety affected the health of their children in our post-pandemic world. In this study, “40% of teens reported that they wanted their parents to reach out more to ask how [they’re] really doing and to really listenⁱⁱ.” Empathetic listening skills could be a significant barrier in creating this greater, open dynamic between parents and their children. Parents need guidance to change the way in which they interact with their children regarding mental health, especially if they are “more likely to reach out to their friends (56%) than their parents (32%) for emotional support.”ⁱⁱ The stigma surrounding mental health can begin to be broken down by bridging the gap between teens and their parents through open communication and guiding parents through resources and information that will not only help their child but them as well. This can be a very valuable change in communication patterns for the parents of the West Branch School District. By helping bridge the gap between children and parents, the school board can facilitate open dialogue through training and informational sessions.

With most of the time spent during a school week in school environments, teachers and guidance counselors have a unique position to be actively involved in providing mental health care and recognizing when students may be experiencing a crisis. The Oxford University article “Increasing Access to School-Based Mental Health Services for Youth Subsequent to the COVID-19 Pandemic” describes the importance of continuing to fund this necessary resource within schools. With a reported 52% of public schools struggling to effectively provide mental health services to students,ⁱⁱⁱ there is a need now more than ever to continue to provide these services. In a ten-year collection of data conducted by the CDC high school students across the United States, “experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (30% in 2013 to 40% in 2023), as well as a notable rise in the percentage of high school students who seriously

considered attempting suicide, increasing from 17% in 2013 to 20% in 2023^{iv}.” Authors Brown and Carrington feel that school administration should implement increased and widespread professional development training, increase mental health services in schools, and pursue partnerships with local university students studying social work. Utilizing local resources is the key to furthering mental health support in the West Branch school district. With a prestigious university just a few miles away, the University of Iowa can provide students with tools and practical resources for mental health, as well as studies to foster growth among faculty and parents alike.

After surveying 362 members of American School Counselor Association, *The New York Times* identified eight key ways schools can better support students' mental health as they transition back to in-person learning.^v One tool was to expand support for parents and teachers so that they can better support their kids. According to author Carrie Miller, parents are more likely to help make school a more supportive place for their kids if they are being given support as well. The last, and seemingly obvious suggestion, is to hire more staff. They describe students' mental health as “America’s silent epidemic” and said that it called for an increase of counselors, social workers, and psychologists in public schools. West Branch is limited in the number of students that they can support due to the shortage of mental health professionals in the school. There needs to be an abundance of resources and support systems that students can turn to if they are struggling.

BACKGROUND

There has been a rise in mental health challenges, especially among children 12-17. Nearly 17% of Iowa youth have experienced a major depressive episode in 2022.^{vi} Feelings of sadness and hopelessness rise as kids get older — from 27% of sixth graders to 36% of eleventh graders — and suicidal thoughts increase from 17% to 24% in the same demographic.^{vii} While some areas, like Johnson County, report slightly better mental health outcomes, the overall trend is still present.

At the same time, there is a major shortage of mental health professionals. According to a report of the Iowa Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 2025, Iowa only has eight child and adolescent psychologists per 100,000 residents younger than 18.^{viii} According to the National Association of School Psychologists, the recommended ratio of school psychologists to students is 1 per 500.^{ix} Further, there is an uneven distribution of services among Iowa public schools such as confidential mental health screenings. The number of students needing support outweighs the licensed professionals available in Iowa. This leads to students being overlooked and a continuing decline in mental health rates.

EVOLUTION OF THE ISSUE

In 2017, the Iowa state legislature passed Senate File 2113,^x a mandate that required all Iowa Public School Teachers to go through suicide prevention training, adverse childhood experiences

identification, and toxic stress response strategies. This was the first statewide mandate linking mental health training and public schools in Iowa. Since then, mental health initiatives in Iowa schools have improved. In 2018, Iowa joined the National Network of Child Psychiatry Access Programs (NNCPAP). Iowa has received \$2.25 million in grant money from the NNCPAP, which has gone to implement school-based mental health support.^{xi} In 2021, the Iowa Code was changed to permit the establishment of provider-patient relationships for services provided through telehealth in school settings.^{xii} This has proven to be a useful tool for West Branch. In 2023, Senate File 496 was passed in the Iowa Legislature, requiring students to receive permission from their parents before taking surveys not required by law designed to assess the students' mental, emotional, or physical health.^{xiii} This ended the practice of every student in Iowa taking the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey twice a year since 1991. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey was a way for school administrators to gauge the mental health climate of schools and collect reliable data, but that is no longer practicable. The National Youth Risk and Behavior Survey found that in 2023, 40% of high school students felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two consecutive weeks that they stopped doing their usual activities.^{xiv} This is reflected in West Branch Schools. From speaking with the principal and counselor, we know West Branch needs new and ongoing to school-specific data as well as increased resources to address these issues.

INVENTORY OF ACTIVITIES

The West Branch Board of Education has publicly given support to the funding of important programs centered around mental health. Some of these programs already provide support, including in-school counseling services (including telehealth), integration of suicide prevention into curriculum, and increased staff training on mental health. Overall, the district hopes to further support mental health programs and boost the mental health workforce in their schools.^{xv} In the surrounding community of Iowa City, just twenty minutes away from West Branch, the University of Iowa offers a variety of counseling services to local communities and the entire state of Iowa for K-12 students. These services include individual counseling, group counseling, child psychiatry, specialty evaluations, and post-crisis therapy. Some of these services, specifically services provided by student clinicians, are even offered for free. Students in West Branch can access these services and receive mental health support either online or with a short drive to Iowa City.^{xvi}

BEST PRACTICES

1. Chicago Public Schools Services Resource Guide

- a. The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system provides a comprehensive overview of the mental health programs, services, and partnerships available to students, families, and school staff across the district. The guide helps schools identify appropriate support by outlining tiered interventions, from universal prevention

efforts to targeted and intensive services for students with higher needs. It highlights crisis response procedures, community-based mental health partnerships, counseling options, and resources for social-emotional learning. By organizing these tools in one accessible place, CPS makes it easier for educators and families to connect students with timely, culturally responsive, and effective mental health support.

2. Iowa City Community School District Brochures

- a. The Iowa City Community School District (ICCSd) uses brochures as informational materials for parents, providing resources on the services the school provides, local mental health resources, and how mental health is being implemented in the school. These brochures can also provide their children with warning signs to look out for in times of crisis, as well as the best ways to support them through open dialogue. The only costs for implementation are printing costs.

3. Surveying Students on Mental Health

- a. ICCSD has implemented methods for getting parent permission for students to take surveys about their mental health. Iowa City Community School District uses the program Infinite Campus for school registration. During the registration process, there is a permission check box where parents can approve their child to participate in the “High Reliability Schools Panorama Survey.” The wording of these questions is in appendix 4. ICCSD first asked parents to opt-in via email but received low response rates. Since shifting to including this question in administration, most parents' consent for their child to be surveyed. The school climate survey is administered through Panorama Education. ICCSD administers this survey two or three times a year during advisory or homeroom classes. To get the highest response rates possible, they keep the survey open for three weeks and remind students of the survey after the first week and a half.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Recommendation 1A

The increasing cost of healthcare insurance creates a barrier for students that may want to access therapy. By helping currently uninsured students enroll in either Medicaid or Hawki – a program providing health coverage to uninsured Iowa children under age 19 of working families – they could gain access to mental health resources. A good proxy for estimating how many students qualify for one of these programs is the number who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program, which is 14.8% of West Branch students. This is a good proxy because Medicaid and free and reduced lunch are calculated using household income relative to the Federal Poverty Level.

We recommend distributing an informational document outlining the qualifications for Medicaid, services that Medicaid covers, and specific providers that take Medicaid near the West Branch area [Appendix 1]. The goal of this document is to:

- Give West Branch a standard resource to hand out to students on the waitlist for Green Counseling or seeking outside support
- Consolidate all essential information for students to secure insurance-covered therapy sessions

This should be linked to the guidance counselor's website and given to kids that are on the waitlist for Green Counseling Services. It would be best distributed to parents on back-to-school nights. Parents can be given a physical copy if they attend in-person, and a virtual copy can be posted on Facebook for those who cannot attend.

The first section walks through the income eligibility requirements of being on Medicaid and Hawki. This section also provides a form to determine if they are eligible if they are unsure. A QR code to this form is provided on the document. The second section provides a list of the mental health services that Medicaid covers. There is also a QR code to sign up for telehealth services that are covered by Medicaid. The third section gives a list of counselors, psychiatrists, and registered nurses that provide counseling to children and adolescents. All the professionals listed are in the Iowa City or Cedar Rapids area and accept Medicaid as well as private insurance. The only budgetary implications would be printing costs for physical copies and none for when it's posted online.

Policy Recommendation 1B

We recommend that West Branch distribute a comprehensive list of resources the University of Iowa can provide to students through an informational flyer, available virtually or in print [Appendix 2]. The goal of this flyer is to provide West Branch school district staff and parents with free resources offered by the University of Iowa.

This will include the Rural Psychology Collaborative's telepsychology training clinic, which offers free, short-term (5-10 sessions) counseling to Iowans with limited access to mental health care. TPTC offers a range of services including individual and group counseling, psychoeducation workshops, career-related support, and referrals to longer-term care when needed.

The Scanlan Center for School Mental Health (SCSMH) provides both virtual and in-person individual counseling services for K–12 students and school staff. The SCSMH Clinic aims to support clients who face barriers to accessing mental health resources. Its services are especially helpful for people living in rural Iowa who may not have access to local providers or who face other obstacles to care, such as financial or transportation challenges. The clinic can receive referrals for K–12 students, parents, or students who are 18 or older. Available services range from individual therapy to group counseling and eating disorder evaluations.

Finally, in the Post-Crisis PAUSE (Perceive, Ask, Understand, Strategize, Evaluate), room through SCSMH, students and staff connect with trained mental health professionals, understand

common reactions to crisis and trauma, learn strategies to navigate an event, and learn to cope. With on-site individual and group support, the crisis team can support individuals and groups following a crisis event, as well as follow-up telehealth check-ins for students or staff who need more support. The services are designed to supplement, not replace, immediate crisis response. SCSMH steps in afterward to help communities process trauma, deal with grief/loss, and begin recovery in a more structured way.

Policy Recommendation 2

We recommend disseminating an informative brochure for parents and students that is focused on increasing mental health awareness and highlighting resources that are available throughout the district. This document will include common signs and symptoms of mental health struggles, self-care and coping tips, available resources for students, and positive and powerful messages to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health.

The goal of this brochure is to:

- Provide the district with easily accessible and accurate information for parents who want to be more knowledgeable about mental health
- Help reduce stigma and create understanding among parents
- Create a resource for parents about mental health

A copy of the brochure is included in this document [Appendix 3]. Cost for this recommendation lies only in printing the brochure, though it could also be uploaded online and eliminate these costs.

We recommend that this brochure be distributed at back-to-school nights, freshman orientation, and other events with large parent attendance. It is also an excellent resource for one-on-one conversations with parents.

Policy Recommendation 3

We recommend for West Branch School district to administer a survey to measure students' sense of belonging and connectedness in school to gain insight into their wellbeing. We recommend adapting questions from the Panorama Student Survey, more information found [here](#). Feelings of belonging and connectedness are correlated with student mental health and increasing a student's sense of belonging and connectedness at school will increase their mental health outcomes. We suggest that West Branch follows the model set in place by the Iowa City Community School District.

To work within the boundaries of Iowa's recent law, ICCSD asks for parental consent each year during the school registration process by allowing the parents to check a box alongside other parental consent question [Appendix 4]. By law, parents require access to the questions in all surveys, so West Branch should list them on their website. Additionally, parents should be reminded of the survey prior to their students taking it.

Students who gain parental consent should fill out this survey twice a year, in the fall and spring. Iowa City keeps the survey open for three weeks in October and for three weeks following spring

break for the students to have enough time to complete the survey. Students who do not complete the survey after the first week and a half can be reminded. Iowa City Schools found these times to be the best, completing the survey in the middle of the semester means the students have had enough time to settle into their routines.

We know that West Branch School District typically utilizes Google Forms, so that is how we deliver our sample survey. However, we suggest using Panorama Education surveys instead. Each question on the Forms survey can be asked via Panorama Surveys. Data can be compared at various levels, based on factors like grade level and demographics, down to the individual student. Panorama offers a built-in option to compare survey data over time and compare data to national trends. Since WBCSD already utilizes Panorama, the survey function may already be included in their current subscription plan.

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- ⁱ Quorum. “NAMI’s Advocacy Headquarters.” *Nami.quorum.us*, 2021, nami.quorum.us/mhpolicystats/.
- ⁱⁱ Weissbourd, Richard, Milena Batanova, Mary Laski, Joseph McIntyre, Eric Torres, and Nick Balisciano, with Shanae Irving, Sawsan Eskander, and Kiran Bhai. *Caring for the Caregivers: The Critical Link Between Parent and Teen Mental Health*. June 2023. Making Caring Common, Harvard Graduate School of Education, www.mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/caring-for-the-caregivers.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Brown, Charles, and N’Daisha K. Carrington. “Increasing Access to School-Based Mental Health Services for Youth Subsequent to the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Health Affairs Scholar*, vol. 3, no. 4, 5 Apr. 2025, qxaf073, Oxford University Press on behalf of Project HOPE, <https://improvedoi.org/10.1093/haschl/qxaf073>. *PMCimprove*, PMC12013806, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12013806/>.
- ^{iv} Brown, Charles, and N’Daisha K. Carrington. “Increasing Access to School-Based Mental Health Services for Youth Subsequent to the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Health Affairs Scholar*, vol. 3, no. 4, 5 Apr. 2025, qxaf073, Oxford University Press on behalf of Project HOPE, <https://improvedoi.org/10.1093/haschl/qxaf073>. *PMCimprove*, PMC12013806, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12013806/>.
- ^v Miller, Claire Cain. “School Counselors on How to Help Students Recover from Pandemic Stress.” *The New York Times*, 29 May 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/05/29/upshot/student-stress-counselors-pandemic.html.
- ^{vi} *Access to Mental and Behavioral Health Care for Students in K-12 Schools*. www.usccr.gov/files/2025-04/ia-sac-report_access-to-mental-and-behavioral-health-in-k-12-schools.pdf. Accessed 10 Nov. 2025.
- ^{vii} 2021 Iowa Youth Survey
http://publications.iowa.gov/46682/1/2021_IYS_MHReport_Final_03_01_2022_0.pdf
- ^{viii} *Access to Mental and Behavioral Health Care for Students in K-12 Schools*. www.usccr.gov/files/2025-04/ia-sac-report_access-to-mental-and-behavioral-health-in-k-12-schools.pdf. Accessed 10 Nov. 2025.
- ^{ix} *School Psychologist Compacts: What You Should Know - the Council of State Governments*. 4 Jan. 2023, www.csg.org/2023/01/04/school-psychologist-compacts-what-you-need-to-know/.
- ^x Iowa General Assembly *Senate File 2113*,
<http://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/LGE/87/SF2113.pdf>
- ^{xi} National network of Child Psychiatry Programs Iowa <https://www.nncpap.org/iowa>
- ^{xii} Iowa General Assembly, Iowa Code Section 280A.3
<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/law/iowaCode/sections?codeChapter=280A&year=2021#:~:text=RTF,%C2%A7280A.,telehealth%20in%20a%20school%20setting>
- ^{xiii} Iowa General Assembly *Senate File 496*,
<http://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/LGE/90/SF496.pdf>
- ^{xiv} Center for Disease Control 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results, September 29, 2024
<https://www.cdc.gov/yrbs/results/2023-yrbs-results.html>
- ^{xv} Saleminck, Joanne. “Mental Health, Funding Top BOE Concerns.” *West Branch Times*, 7 Aug. 2024, <https://westbranchtimes.com/article.php?id=20984>

^{xvi} Scanlan Center for School Mental Health. “Clinical Services.” *The University of Iowa*, <https://scsmh.education.uiowa.edu/clinical-services>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2025.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 Accessing Mental Health Services with Medicaid & Hawki

APPENDIX 2 Wellness Guide

APPENDIX 3 School Supports brochure

APPENDIX 4 Parental Consent Question from ICCSD

Appendix 1 Accessing Mental Health Services with Medicaid & Hawki

ACCESSING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES WITH MEDICAID & HAWKI

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS & FAMILIES IN THE WEST BRANCH COMMUNITY

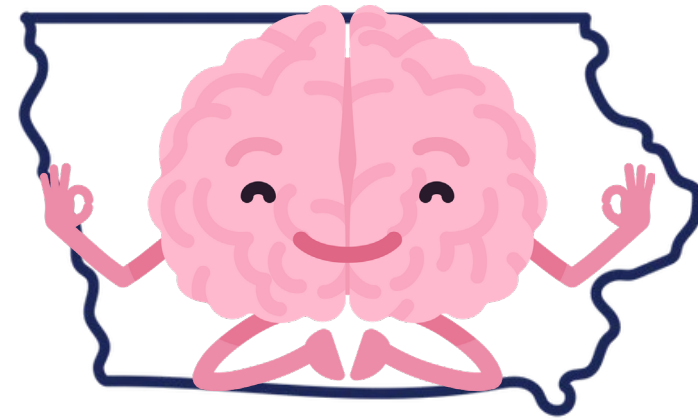
Do You Qualify for Medicaid or Hawki?

In Iowa, children qualify for Medicaid or Hawki (Iowa's Children Health Insurance Program) if they are within 133% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)

This income range fully includes students eligible for:

- Free Lunch ($\leq 130\%$ FPL)
- Reduced lunch ($\leq 185\%$ FPL)
 - (Most children qualifying for school meal support will also qualify for Medicaid/Hawki)

In West Branch, 14.8% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, meaning many are likely also eligible for Medicaid covered mental health services.



CHECK YOUR ELIGIBILITY

Families can Easily determine eligibility online through Iowa HHS:

HSSERVICES.IOWA.GOV/APS/PSSP/SSP.PORTAL



WHAT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES DO MEDICAID & HAWKI COVER?

Outpatient Services

- Individual or Group counseling
- Psychiatric evaluations
- Medication management

Inpatient Services

- Coverage for mental health and substance use related treatment

Crisis Services

- Immediate assistance for urgent mental health needs
- Emergency referrals and follow up care

Substance Use Treatment

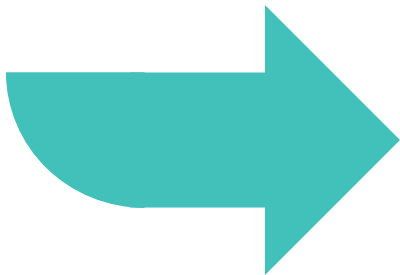
- Preventing, counseling, and recovery support
- Alcohol, tobacco, and drug related treatment services

Habilitation Services

- Helps develop coping, social, and daily living skills

Telehealth

- Find virtual therapy fully covered by Medicaid



LOCAL PROVIDERS WHO ACCEPT MEDICAID

Virtual Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners / Mental Health Prescribers

- Darnelle Scott, APRN
- Tosin Aileru, APRN, PMHNP - BC
- Tricia Gabriel, PMHNP

Therapists Serving Iowa City & Cedar Rapids

- Sojourner Psychotherapy PLC (Iowa City)
- Dr. Ashley Nicole Tropet (Cedar Rapids)

OTHER ONLINE PROVIDER SEARCH TOOLS

- mymind.health
- psychologytoday.com/us



Appendix 2 Wellness Guide



WELLNESS GUIDE

THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

❖ HERE TO HELP

The University of Iowa has many resources that can help bridge the gap in mental health care for both parents and children. Below are a few of the many opportunities that members of West Branch can utilize:



Rural Psychology Collaborative's telepsychology training clinic, which offers free, short-term (5-10 sessions) counseling to Iowans with limited access to mental health care.



Your Life Iowa provides 24/7 support via both call and text services for anyone struggling with their mental health or other issues affecting their health, and can also serve as a resource guide for supporting their loved ones. Call (855) 581-8111 or Text (855) 895-8493.



Scanlan Center for School Mental Health, which uses virtual and in-person individual counseling services for K-12 students and school staff. Can refer to K-12 students, parents, or students 18+ for individual and group counseling.

Appendix 3 School Supports brochure

Support Builds Strength



Miranda Schwickerath

High School Counselor



mschwickerath@
west-branch.k12.ia.us

319.643.7216

Taking care to self-care

40% of teens report wanting **more meaningful outreach** from parents

High schoolers face academic pressure, social changes, and big decisions about their future, making it essential to take care of their mental health. When teens build healthy coping skills and feel supported at home, they're better able to manage stress, stay focused, and speak up when they need help. Parent involvement—listening, encouraging, and helping connect teens with resources—creates a safe, steady foundation that strengthens students' overall well-being and sets them up for long-term success.



Services we offer



Talking with me!



School Based Counseling



Connecting Families with Resources

Mental Health Resources



Common Signs



Losing interest in things they used to enjoy



Low Energy



Sleep too much or too little or seem sleepy throughout the day



Engage in risky or destructive behavior alone or with friends

Self-care tips



Keep a journal.



Get regular sleep.



Exercise and eat healthy.



Identify and challenge your negative thoughts.

Leaning on others



Find friends, family members, or a trusted adult you can talk to.



Get help from a professional if you need it.

Is it just stress or Anxiety?

Anxiety usually involves a persistent feeling of dread that doesn't go away, and that interferes with how you live your life. See a mental health professional for a diagnosis.

More information on children mental health:



Appendix 4 Parental Consent Question from ICCSD

Parental consent question for student survey used by Iowa City Community School District:

During the 2024-2025 school year, students may have the opportunity to participate in various survey. Survey can include social, academic, emotional, cultural, safety, and behavioral aspects of a student's experience. Student responses provide invaluable insights into their experiences and help us improve and adapt our school and district to their needs. (I give permission for my student to participate in all survey offered by their school. / I want to individually select which surveys my student will participate in.)

High Reliability Schools Panorama Survey (3rd - 12th Grade)

The High Reliability Schools Panorama Survey tool is designed for students to think about their own mindsets and approaches to learning. This tool is a computer-based questionnaire that asks students to reflect on their own social, emotional, behavioral and academic skills. Information from this tool will assist building leadership teams to enhance support for all students. We continue to prioritize these efforts in our buildings to better meet the needs of all our students.

My student may take the HRS Level 1 Panorama SEL Survey

My student may not take the HRS Level 1 Panorama SEL Survey