



# Working to Address Idaho's Youth Behavioral Health Crisis

By Jackie Yarbrough / Senior Program Officer

There is a youth behavioral health crisis that has many Idaho children and families struggling – even dying – because there is not an effective system in place to meet their behavioral health needs. Mental Health America data shows Idaho ranked 50th among states for youth behavioral health, and historically the Gem State has ranked near the bottom. Youth mental health conditions include depression, anxiety and behavioral disorders, and they are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents.

The situation is getting worse as more students say they lack a sense of belonging and feel social isolation. U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy declared a national loneliness and social isolation epidemic over the summer, pointing out those factors significantly impact mental health. As these mental health conditions increase, it is worth noting that they can reduce a person's life expectancy by 10 years. This amplifies the costly results of the crisis.

High stress, a lack of sense of belonging, and social isolation are leading to suicidal ideation in Idaho's youth. Per America's Health Rankings, Idaho's suicide rate (ages 15-19) is 46% higher than the national average. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 52.5% of Idaho youth (ages 12-17) who have depression did not receive any care for their conditions within the past year. That statistic isn't surprising, considering all 44 Idaho counties have a shortage of behavioral health providers. This shortage is exacerbated in rural counties and communities where there can

be a six- to nine-month waiting list or no access to care altogether. The burden of paperwork and flawed systems also are deterrents to receiving necessary and vital care.

The Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health (the Foundation) is dedicated to addressing the root causes that impact health in our state, which is why we are working with Idaho schools, school districts and other educational entities to improve youth behavioral health. In fact, that crisis extends beyond our schools. The Foundation's work in Idaho communities and in healthcare also revealed behavioral health as a huge concern. One of our values is listening to community leaders, partners, and peers, and we're hearing the same thing: this crisis is serious and things need to happen to improve the lives of Idaho students and families.

One thing is certain: addressing youth behavioral health issues doesn't fall on any singular entity. It is everyone's responsibility.

## OUR WORK IN EDUCATION

The Foundation is continuing its work to address youth behavioral health needs in the education sector. Our Healthy Minds Partnership technical assistance awards help districts offer school-located behavioral health counseling, which connects kids to this important service. However, the lack of licensed clinical social workers and counselors across our state is one of the reasons we award scholarships and stipends to students pursuing this degree at Idaho State University.

The lack of behavioral health providers also led to the Foundation commissioning a research paper exploring the issues that contribute to Idaho's youth behavioral health crisis. One of the key findings from the paper was the need to significantly increase funding for schools to implement evidence-based prevention resources and support coordination of services for students.

We're already helping schools and districts implement evidenced-based behavioral health frameworks such as PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) and programs that create supportive environments and culture that data shows are proven to help positively support student mental health. Sources of Strength is an example. Our goal is to reduce the number of children who need access to behavioral health services.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA

Data is an important tool in fighting the behavioral health crisis. Idaho schools and districts currently don't have an effective way of finding out what issues are causing the pain and suffering among students and their families. The Idaho State Legislature opted out of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) in 2022, leaving districts to manage these critical issues with limited resources and little to no expertise. There was no longer a way for schools to collect data that can help inform key stakeholders about what things they need to focus on to improve the lives of students and families.

This lack of current data is deeply concerning to Idaho schools and Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield. She formed a workgroup soon after taking office in 2023 to explore solutions to address the youth behavioral health crisis. Foundation Senior Program Officer Jackie Yarbrough was invited to join the workgroup. Yarbrough, who leads our work in education, introduced Dr. Megan Smith and Communities for Youth to the workgroup because of a successful behavioral health survey collaboration with a rural school district. This ultimately led to the creation of the Idaho Youth Well-Being Assessment, which is a tool that schools and districts can use to better serve students and families. The assessment was created by Idahoans for use in Idaho schools.

The Foundation agreed to fund the assessment for the 2024-25 school year because of the urgency of giving Idaho schools and districts an approved tool to help improve their students' mental health. Superintendent Critchfield has stated she plans to submit the assessment as a part of her department's annual budget moving forward.

"The lives and well-being of Idaho youth are threatened by this mental health crisis," Yarbrough said. "This is an investment in our students and families because it provides schools and districts with the up-to-date information they need to better serve students' behavioral health needs."

## THE ASSESSMENT

The Idaho Youth Well-Being Assessment was made available to all Idaho public schools and charter schools in the fall of 2024. The survey is designed for sixth through 12th-grade students whose parents have opted in for their youth to participate, a requirement under Idaho law. Several districts are working through the process to adopt and complete the assessment, while others are seeking more information about it.

**How does a district get started? The implementation process often looks like this:**

- The school board can review and discuss the Idaho Youth Well-Being Assessment at a board meeting. The full assessment can be viewed at <https://www.sde.idaho.gov/student-engagement/iywa/files/Youth-Well-being-Assessment-Questions.pdf>
- After review and discussion, the board provides approval to conduct the assessment, which is free.
- The district or school contacts parents/guardians and asks for permission for their children to participate in the assessment.
- The approved students take the assessment during school hours like any other standardized test, except individual answers are anonymous as no student-identifying data is collected.

- The results are analyzed by Dr. Smith and the Communities for Youth team and shared with school leadership. The value of current data provides Idaho schools and districts the most accurate information possible to make data-driven decisions that identify the best behavioral health solutions for students, families, and the community.
- The analysis of the data can help determine if the current behavioral health interventions are effective or if a change in approach is recommended.

The goal is to have at least 65% of the students to participate for the data to be statistically meaningful.

School districts interested in opting in for the Idaho Youth Well-Being Assessment can learn more by visiting [www.sde.idaho.gov/student-engagement/iywa/index.html](http://www.sde.idaho.gov/student-engagement/iywa/index.html). There is no cost to the school district, and the value of the results can be priceless in helping students and families overcome the behavioral health crisis.

The Foundation will continue to invest in evidence-based solutions that improve youth behavioral health in schools and communities. Future funding will be prioritized to support districts that complete the assessment and choose to implement programming to better support youth behavioral health needs.

## LEARN MORE

***School board members can help improve youth behavioral health in their districts by supporting evidence-based frameworks and programs. Encouraging schools and districts to opt-in to the Idaho Youth Well-Being Assessment will help them understand how they can best help their students and families thrive.***



**We engage and collaborate**  
with schools and community  
organizations to ensure  
Idaho youth thrive.