



Responding to the youth mental health crisis

Students are dealing with tremendous pressures — but that's not new. Many were already dealing with inadequate access to mental health-care and the impact of economic inequality and racism before the current pandemic.

The isolation and hardships caused by COVID-19 have worsened student mental health in Los Angeles, turning an ongoing crisis into an emergency.

Students lost family members and loved ones. They missed the structure of school, their friends and their support system, including access to counseling and mental health treatment.

Many fell behind in their studies, which possibly resulted in damage to college and career prospects. Some needed to assume greater responsibilities in the home and many experienced changes in financial resources. We must redouble our efforts to support them.

Student mental health issues were under-addressed before the pandemic. It is going to take a major investment from federal, state and local governments, school-based healthcare centers, and the community to ensure students get the support they need.

The need is urgent

According to the 2021 report, "Every Young Heart and Mind: Schools as Centers of Wellness," 1 in 6 high school students in California has considered suicide in the past year, and 1 in 3 reported feeling chronically sad. LGBTQ students and low-income Black and Latinx

students experienced higher rates of depression and suicide ideation and were less likely to receive services intended to help them, the report said. Only 48 percent of high school students feel connected to their school and 1 in 5 reports being harassed or bullied.¹

In California, 3 out of 4 children with mental health needs do not receive treatment, despite having health-care coverage. Of those receiving care, up to 80% receive it in a school setting. In a past screening of 572 Los Angeles Unified students, 88% reported experiencing three or more traumatic events in their lifetime, 55% of whom showed symptoms of PTSD, depression, or anxiety.²

The bottom line

Nationally, 21% of youth aged 13 to 18 have a mental illness that causes significant impairment in their daily life, 50% of all mental illnesses begin by age 14, and 75% by age 24.³

The bottom line: Undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues among students, including ADHD, behavior disorders, mood and anxiety disorders, autism spectrum disorders, substance use disorders and suicide — are an urgent public health issue among students.

1. "Every Young Heart and Mind," California Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission, 2021.

2. LAUSD School Mental Health <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/12120#spn-content>

3. Mental Health Facts, National Alliance on Mental Illness <https://www.nami.org/nami/media/nami-media/infographics/children-mh-facts-nami.pdf>

Engaging students, enlisting experts

The L.A. Trust Student Mental Health Initiative is a far-reaching, enterprise-wide effort developed to bring prevention and early intervention to students; increase mental health capacity among The L.A. Trust staff and its partners; expand student engagement; and convene concerned agencies to increase awareness and access to care. We're focused on:

Advocacy. The L.A. Trust advocates for mental health services on- and off-campus and promotes increased funding and policy change at the state, county and district level.

Education and engagement. We foster mental health education through our Student Advisory Boards (SABs), who conduct student health campaigns on campus and online to increase awareness and fight the stigma that keeps students from seeking support. Our SAB members apply proven curricula to their real-world experience and link their peers to mental health resources at their campus Wellness Centers.

Research and support. We support Student and Family Wellness Centers with best practices and research, including The L.A. Trust Data xChange, a first-in-the-nation database that links anonymized student health data with academic metrics to identify pain points and find solutions. Mental health data is now being integrated with physical and oral health data as well as academic data, giving us vital information without violating confidentiality.

Training and outreach. We conduct Youth Mental Health First Aid for SAB members, school staff and afterschool providers. We train students in Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR), a suicide-prevention program; in the How to Help A Friend module; and familiarize them with the student mental health

referral system. We also build mental health awareness through the county-sponsored Community Ambassador Network (CAN).

Youth Mental Health Collaborative

The keystone of The L.A. Trust Student Mental Health Initiative is the Youth Mental Health Collaborative, which brings representatives from public health, L.A. Unified, mental health providers and community organizations together to find common solutions to the silent epidemic of mental illness.

The Youth Mental Health Collaborative has two objectives — to improve student mental health access and services, and to incorporate youth voice into improving the system. The collaborative is funded by Ballmer Group and is designed to help training, engagement and referral systems work together in an integrated strategy.

Clear-eyed goals

The Initiative has defined, achievable goals:

- **Build mental health program infrastructure**
- **Increase Prevention and Early Intervention**
- **Reduce barriers to care by revising policies and protocols**
- **Increase utilization of mental health services and support-seeking behaviors**
- **Expand student engagement to additional Wellness Center campuses**
- **Increase school connectedness among students**
- **Expand awareness, education and engagement**
- **Report mental health metrics through The L.A. Trust Data xChange**
- **Create evaluation tools to track progress**