

EXTRACURRICULARS & YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH



WISCONSIN OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

WHY THIS MATTERS

JULY 2025

Kids who participate in extracurricular activities such as lessons, sports, afterschool clubs, or community service tend to have better mental health. Extracurriculars are organized activities that teach important life skills like teamwork, interpersonal communication, and stress management, which in turn bolster kids' well-being and improve their lifetime outcomes. Extracurriculars - organized through school or a community based organization - also increase belonging, an essential ingredient for mental well-being.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Research confirms extracurriculars are good for children and their communities. Volunteering and community service in particular improve mental health, strengthen social connectedness, and build belonging.¹

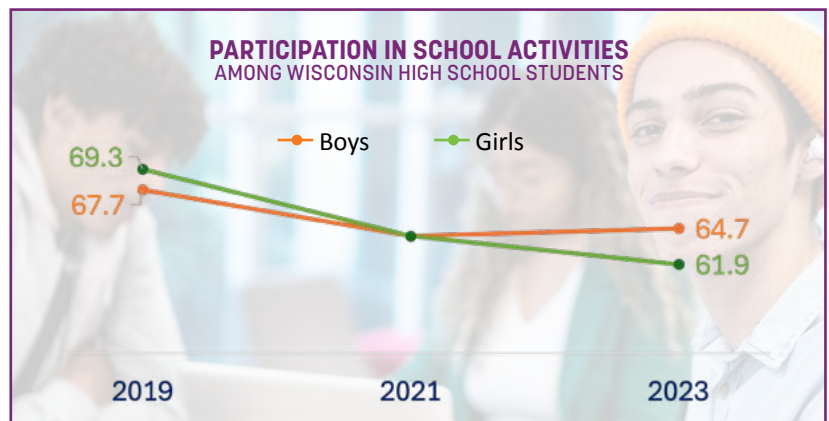
When kids participate in organized activities, they have better self-esteem, resiliency, grades, and are more engaged in school. They are also less likely to engage in risky behaviors, which leads to more success in adulthood.²

It's estimated that up to 70% of students are involved with extracurriculars - either sports, lessons, or clubs. According to U.S. Census data, boys (44%) participate in sports more than girls (34%), but girls (37%) are more likely to take lessons than boys (27%) and more likely to join clubs.³ Children from low-income families participate less in extracurriculars than children in higher income families, mostly due to financial barriers.

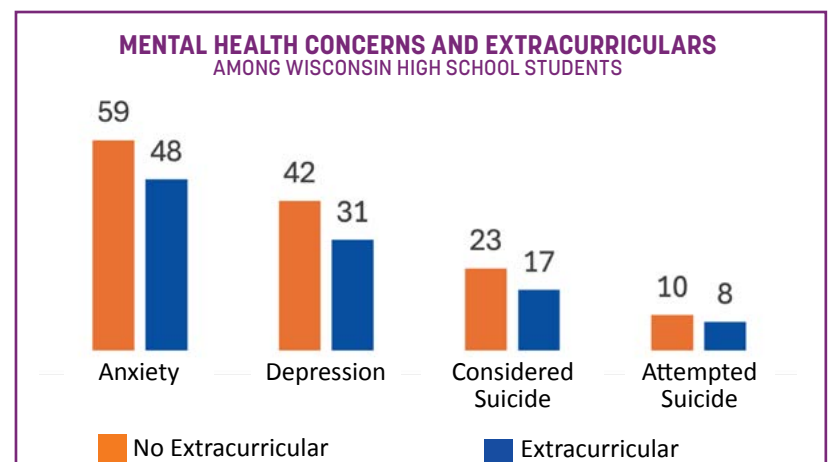
The Afterschool Alliance found that 59% of after-school programs are now serving the same number of or more students than they did in 2019, prior to the pandemic. More than half of the programs have waiting lists indicating the demand from families is higher than spots available.

Nearly nine in 10 bipartisan voters said afterschool programs are "an absolute necessity for communities" and 80% said they wanted policymakers to allocate more money to these programs.⁴

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?⁵



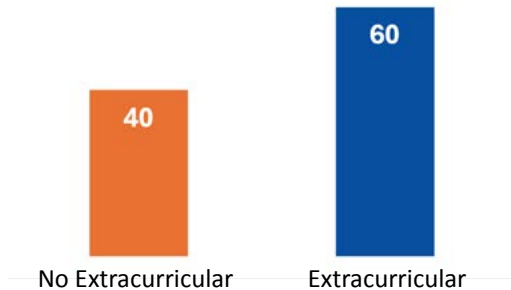
Participation in school activities is declining for Wisconsin teens. Currently, six in ten high school students participate in a school activity.



Students who participate in one hour or more of extracurricular activities are less likely to report anxiety or depression and less likely to have considered or attempted suicide.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WI (continued)

FEEL I BELONG AT SCHOOL AMONG WISCONSIN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS



Students who participate in extracurriculars are also much more likely to feel they belong at their school.

WHAT HELPS >> VOLUNTEERING

Research shows that volunteering can boost meaningful connections, provide a shared sense of purpose, and reduce loneliness, all of which improve mental well-being. Finding a sense of purpose is especially important for young adults, the majority (58%) of whom say their lives have little or no purpose or meaning.⁶

Volunteering is an important investment as it increases social engagement for both the volunteer and the recipient, providing twice the benefit.



SOURCES:

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2025. *The Future of Youth Development: Building Systems and Strengthening Programs*.

² Darling, 2017 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00222216.2005.11950040>

³ U.S. Census, 2022 <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/07/chil-dren-continue-to-be-involved-in-extracurricular-activities.html>

⁴ Afterschool Alliance, <https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Voters-Say-Afterschool-Programs-Are-A-Necessity-2025.pdf>

⁵ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Summary Report.

⁶ Harvard Graduate School of Education. 2023. On Edge: Understanding and Preventing Young Adults' Mental Health Challenges.

WHAT WE CAN DO

➔ PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

- Encourage your child to participate in an organized activity but don't overschedule them.
- Support your child by letting them choose an activity that sparks their own interest.
- Emphasize participation over competition when discussing extracurriculars.
- Help your child balance schoolwork and extracurricular activities by prioritizing sleep, healthy eating, and unstructured time with friends and family.

➔ SCHOOLS

- Build schedules that de-emphasize achievement culture and allow students to maintain a healthy balance between school, extracurriculars, family and friends.
- Provide a wide variety of extracurricular options in line with student interests and develop a process for students to create new clubs.
- Partner with community-based organizations providing extracurricular opportunities.
- Encourage student-led activities to build youth voice and leadership skills.
- Promote [service learning](#) in school, and connect staff with service learning [practitioners](#), [tools](#), and [resources](#).

➔ MEDICAL PROVIDERS

- Ask kids at every visit what activities they enjoy and participate in.
- Educate families on the health impacts of structured and unstructured play, and provide a [prescription to play](#) for younger children.
- Discuss how to balance school, extracurriculars, and relationships with older children.

➔ POLICYMAKERS

- Establish a dedicated afterschool funding stream for Wisconsin.
- Support increased access and availability of afterschool programs, which [improve school performance](#), [local economies](#), and [communities](#).

➔ COMMUNITIES & COMMUNITY PROVIDERS

- Prioritize training of staff and coaches on youth mental health, and follow high-quality Positive Youth Development practices that build belonging.
- Leverage [Wisconsin Out of School Time Alliance](#) training and resources on [emotional wellness and mental health](#).
- Forge partnerships between schools and community-based organizations.
- Serve as a catalyst for intergenerational service/volunteering.