

Student mental health needs are among the things that keep school staff awake at night. That is what the WEA Member Benefits Foundation heard in 2020. They decided to establish a statewide pilot effort where philanthropic funders supported school-based mental health programs in Wisconsin school districts.

### The problem

"Although there was interest among philanthropic organizations to financially support school mental health, there wasn't a clear funding path," said Steve Goldberg, Executive Director – WEA Member Benefits Foundation. "The need for mental health services in our schools is compelling so we wanted to help establish a pathway to help private funders support those services."

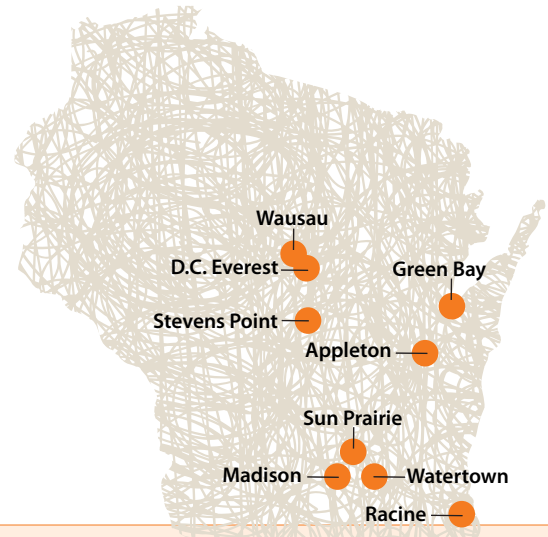
### The solution

In 2021 WEA Member Benefits Foundation established a statewide pilot effort that provided unrestricted challenge grants for school-based mental health programs in four school districts. The school districts were: Appleton, Sun Prairie, Racine, and Watertown. Since then, five school districts have been added: Madison, Wausau, D.C. Everest, Green Bay, and Stevens Point.

"The school districts were thrilled to receive unrestricted funding," Goldberg said. "That just doesn't happen in their world, and it allowed them to do what they needed to in order to address their student mental health needs." Additionally, WEA assisted districts in how to approach local funders.

The original pilot school districts had different approaches in their programs:

- **Sun Prairie** – expanded cognitive behavioral screening, introduced student wellness clinician services at secondary schools, established a racial trauma group for students of color, and implemented staff restorative justice training.
- **Appleton** – expanded student assessments to elementary grades, supported students returning from mental health hospitalizations, introduced art therapy at the alternative high school, and broadened community-based therapists availability at two elementary schools.



*WEA Member Benefits Foundation works with nine school districts in their philanthropic school-based mental health initiative.*

- **Watertown** – Social Emotional Learning coaches in every district building, provided online resources, and established a full-time mental health navigator.
- **Racine** – added more onsite therapy staff and offset health insurance coverage deductibles and co-pays for low income families.

### The results

The results have been impressive:

- A total of \$1,126,000 has been secured to support school-based mental health initiatives. That includes WEA's \$240,000 in challenge grant funding to school districts and an additional \$886,600 in philanthropic funds raised locally.
- Reaching 100,000 students in the nine school districts piloting the program.

### What's next

Scaling up the program is what Goldberg says is next. "There are 421 school districts in Wisconsin, and we have nine involved. So there is more work to be done." Making those steps forward, WEA Member Benefits Foundation plans to add four to five more school districts in both 2024 and 2025.