

YOUTH MENTAL WELLNESS CHAMPION RECOMMENDATIONS

Actionable issues identified by the 2025-26 Champion Cohort

Wisconsin Office of
Children's Mental Health

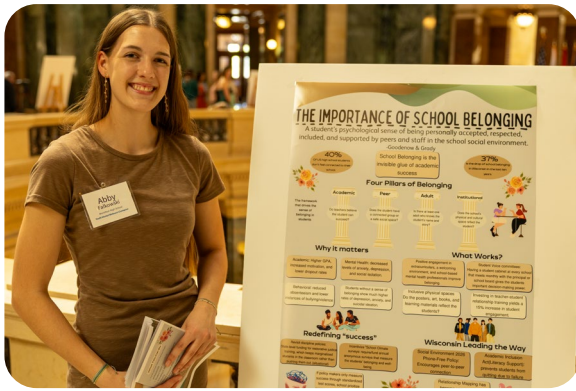


Youth Mental
Wellness Champions

INTRODUCTION: Throughout the 2025-26 school year, 13 Wisconsin high school students dedicated their time, thinking, and energy to the Youth Mental Wellness Champions Cohort. To conclude their virtual learning — that spanned the school year — each Champion prepared a poster on a topic and presented it at the Wisconsin State Capitol. Below is a summary of each presentation, which highlights the student, their topic, and tangible recommendations for communities and decision-makers.



2025-26 Youth Mental Wellness
Champion Cohort



ABBY FALKOWSKI, Marathon High School presented a poster on the importance of school belonging. Identifying belonging as “the invisible glue of academic success,” Abby noted that students without a sense of belonging show much higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ To deepen school belonging, Abby recommends student voice committees, inclusive physical spaces, strengthened teacher-student relationships, engagement in extracurricular activities, and more funding to school-based mental health professionals.



ALIVIA MILLER, Chippewa Falls Senior High School identified the need for Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities in Wisconsin. For young people under the age of 21 who need long term mental health care, the only option is to be sent out-of-state. She noted that between 2019 and 2023, 517 young people from Wisconsin were placed in out-of-state care due to the lack of a local Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF).

RECOMMENDATION ▶ A recent legislative action will create a certification process for PRTF to begin operating in Wisconsin, aligning with Alivia’s recommendation of providing more local support for young people.



CADENCE VAN BEEK, Melrose-Mindoro High School focused on “988 and why it’s great!” In 2025, just 81 counselors handled over 98,000 calls to 988 in Wisconsin!

RECOMMENDATION ▶ Recognizing COVID-era funding will not sustain the crucial lifeline, Cadence recommends Wisconsin implement a small telecommunications fee, similar to what is used for 911, to create a stable funding source that will strengthen and sustain 988 services in the state.

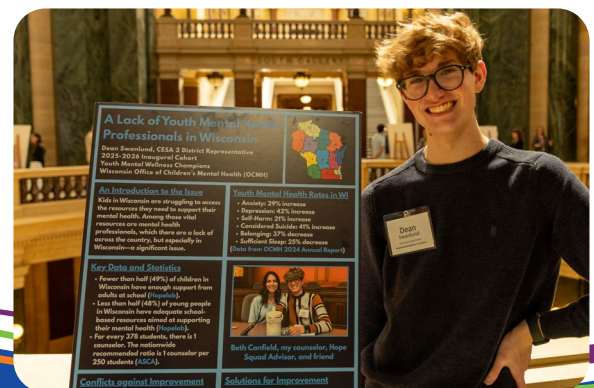
CECELIA STREET, Menasha High School highlighted the reality of mental health struggles behind the uniforms of military service members. Of service members who screened positive for a mental health condition, 43% did not seek care.

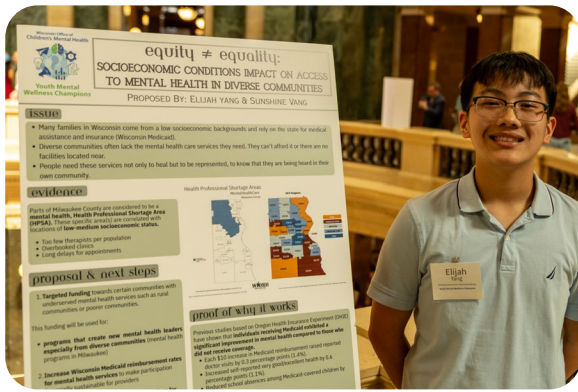
RECOMMENDATION ▶ Cecelia encourages more help seeking. Her message reinforced that asking for help is a sign of strength and provided resources including www.MilitaryOneSource.mil.



DEAN SWANLUND, McFarland High School drew attention to the lack of school mental health professionals in Wisconsin. For every 378 students in Wisconsin, there is only 1 counselor. The nationwide recommended ratio is 1 counselor per 250 students.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ Dean recommends bipartisan efforts to continuously support adequate funding for all mental health professionals at entry-level and tenured positions each year.





ELIJAH YANG, Milwaukee Hmong American Peace Academy presented on how socioeconomic conditions impact access to mental health services. Parts of Milwaukee County are a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA), and these specific areas directly correspond to low-to-medium socioeconomic locales.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ To address the disparities, Elijah recommends programming and financial incentives to encourage new mental health leaders, especially from diverse communities. This could include student loan repayment programs or tax credits for professionals working in shortage areas.



EL CHRISTENSON, Hudson Senior High School addressed the innovative topic of Mental Wellness Centered School Design. Research consistently shows that access to nature, large classroom windows, and open campuses reduce stress, anxiety, disorderly conduct, and crime, all while improving academic performance.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ To apply the research on intentional school design, El recommends infrastructure funding for schools. She also recommends schools undertake minimal cost solutions for classrooms, such as lighter wall paint to reflect natural light, removing visual clutter, and incorporating plants into classrooms.

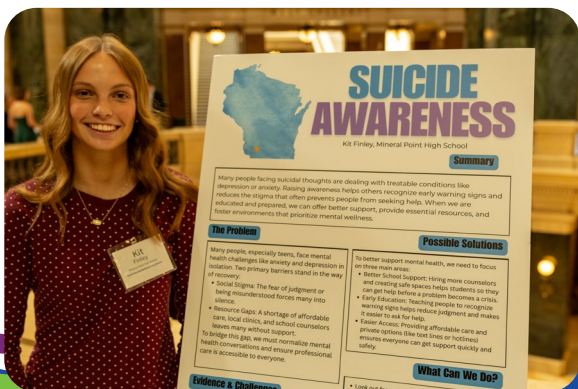


GAVIN MERRIAM, Wausau East High School highlighted the negative impact of overachievement. Hypercompetitive academic environments encourage students to compare grades and extracurricular achievements, leading to students feeling the need to be perfect. He noted that approximately 66% of teens face perfectionist tendencies.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ Gavin recommends increasing state funding for school mental health resources to make it easier for students to access support from within the school environment.

KIT FINLEY, Mineral Point High School leveraged her experience as a Sources of Strength Peer Leader to address suicide awareness. The fear of being misunderstood or judged often forces people who are struggling to stay silent and not seek mental health care.

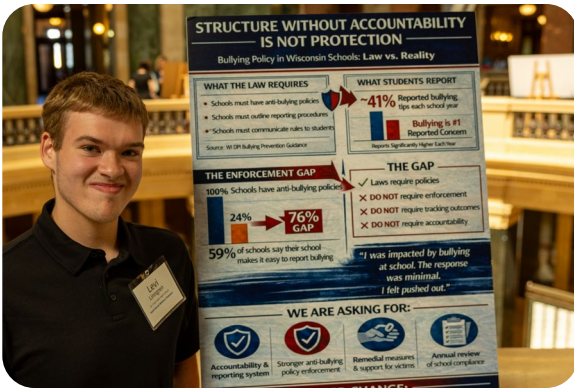
RECOMMENDATION ▶ Kit encourages people learn the warning signs of suicidal ideation and speak openly about mental health to reduce stigma and encourage one another to ask for help.



KENAI VOLKMAN, Marshfield encouraged "Mind Over Media" in her poster presentation. Recognizing that each day teens spend four or more hours on screens (outside of schoolwork), Kenai encouraged teaching about digital wellness and encouraging phone-free times at night.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ Kenai recommends adults lead by example to practice phone-free times, as well as not underestimating the harmful effects of excessive social media and screen use.





LEVI LINNGREN, St. Croix Falls High School identified of the policy challenges in bullying prevention that currently exist in Wisconsin schools. State law requires schools to have anti-bullying policies but there is no reporting system or requirement for schools to enforce anti-bullying policies. Wisconsin is ranked 8th in the nation for the most bullied students.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ Levi recommends action at the state level to create a reporting system mandatory for schools and external annual reviews of school compliance with anti-bullying policies.



LYDIA CHESLOCK, Pulaski Community High School explored how leadership programs benefit young people. Mentoring activities, self-advocacy, and community service are all common elements of peer-to-peer leadership programs. Data shows that mentored youth have improved social emotional skills, better academic achievement, and are more likely to attend college.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ Lydia recommends continued leadership programming for young people like peer-to-peer mental wellness programs and the OCMH Youth Mental Wellness Champions program which allow for meaningful, formative experiences for developing leaders.



OSO FISH, Superior High School highlighted the veteran mental health crisis, noting that since 2001, more veterans have died by suicide than in active combat.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ To address the higher risk of suicide for military veterans, Oso recommends increased funding for Veteran-to-Veteran peer support services and mandated mental health check-ins for every service member during their first year back to civilian life.

The Office of Children's Mental Health hosts a new cohort of Youth Mental Wellness Champions each academic year. To learn more and apply for the next cohort, please visit our [Youth Mental Wellness Champions](https://children.wi.gov/Pages/LivedExperience/Champions.aspx) webpage at <https://children.wi.gov/Pages/LivedExperience/Champions.aspx>