

## School Connectedness is the Focus of a Community Effort

A collaborative of youth-serving organizations in Eau Claire came together to collectively address youth health inequities. The broad goals of this initiative were to develop an annual youth health report card, initiate a collaboration model to provide sustainability to this work, and pilot data-led collaborative efforts. After a thorough analysis of some 50 community data indicators focusing on youth health, school connectedness was selected for more focused work.

## The importance of school connectedness

School connectedness occurs when students feel that adults and peers in their school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. Students who feel more connected to school are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (violence, sexual health, and substance use) and less likely to have emotional distress and thoughts of suicide. Kids who feel more connected and belong at their school are more likely to engage in positive health behaviors (physical activity, healthy eating), have better attendance, academic successes, and mental health.

## The problem

The local Eau Claire Youth Risk Behavior Survey data show 30% of middle school students and 41% of high school students do not feel connected in school. Digging deeper, collaborators identified the following groups feeling lower connectedness: females; students identifying as LGBTQIA+ or Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) as well as students transitioning between 8th and 9th grade; who received C, D, and F grades; that have a disability or chronic health condition, who utilize special education services, or students who are food insecure.

They also found a relationship between school connectedness and several factors: mental health concerns, suicidality, perceived school safety, vaping, having a teacher they can confide in, and extracurricular involvement. In addition to the quantitative data, partners collected qualitative data on youth experiences.

## Solutions

As just one part of the broader effort, the initiative provided mini-grants to nine local groups that serve youth experiencing disparities in school connectedness. "We wanted to get funds to organizations in our community that work with at-risk youth to help them feel more connected and supported at school and in our community," said Janessa VandenBerge, Project Manager and Public Health Specialist with the Eau Claire City-County Health Department. "The goal is to improve health outcomes of these youth by increasing connectedness."

Data collected in 2023 by the Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association indicated that 46% of middle school students and 54% of high school students did not feel connected to their communities. Mini-grant funding helped to provide academic support to the ECAHMAA *Building Bridges* after-school program for middle and high school first- and second-generation Hmong youth. The program also provides experiences, a safe space, and a sense of belonging to help empower Hmong youth by teaching safe lifestyles, promoting healthy relationships, constructing healthy bicultural identities, and increasing their sense of connectedness.

## Partners in the work

The collaborative brings together the following organizations: Boys & Girls Clubs of the Greater Chippewa Valley, City of Eau Claire, Eau Claire Area School District, Eau Claire City-County Health Department, Eau Claire County Department of Human Services, and the United Way of the Greater Chippewa Valley. It is funded by the Advancing Equity in Maternal and Child Health Grant through the Wisconsin Department of Health Services Division of Public Health.



Partners in the project's Data Subgroup took a deep dive into local data.