

Second Step® Insights

Connectedness Holds the Key to Student Well-Being: Insights from the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey

April 17, 2024 | By: The Second Step® Team



This article is a recap of an interview with Kathleen Ethier, director at the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH), on our [Grow Kinder®](#) podcast.

The nation's largest survey on teen mental health raised alarms for parents and educators. The results showed America's high schoolers continue to struggle with mental health, now more than ever. Yet, amid the concerning findings, researchers also discovered solutions and hope. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC)'s most recent [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) (YRBS) revealed that a sense of connectedness at school may be the most powerful influence on students' social and emotional well-being.

What can educators and parents do to foster connectedness? We sat down with Kathleen Ethier, director at the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH), which conducts the YRBS, to understand the research and ways to build connectedness at school and at home.

Why the YRBS matters

The YRBS is the largest nationally representative survey of high school students in the country. In addition to the nationwide data, the YRBS also includes surveys from 47 states and up to 30 large urban school districts. Unlike other initiatives at the CDC, DASH centers strictly on the school's role in keeping children and adolescents healthy, both physically and mentally.

Understanding the data

In 2017 and 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the YRBS showed declines in student mental health. The data highlighted increases in students' persistent sadness and hopelessness, indicators of depressive symptoms, as well as increases in suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Kathleen's team set out to identify what schools needed from the CDC to aid prevention and mental health promotion. "Lots of people work on providing mental health services in schools," Kathleen explains, "but what was our role in helping schools work on prevention? And how do we promote protective factors that positively impact students' social and emotional health?"

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, schools closed, and as educators across the country feared, children's mental health declined further.

The latest survey results

As expected, the 2021 YRBS data revealed continued decline of student mental health. But, while the team had expected overall increases in persistent sadness and hopelessness among all students, they noticed a greater disparity between boys and girls. "We saw a much more dramatic increase for girls. And that alarmed us," Kathleen said. A closer look revealed girls were experiencing greater increases in substance abuse, more instances of violence and increases in suicidal behaviors.

The YRBS showed similar disparities between straight and LGBTQ students. Additionally, the research indicated girls, students of color and students identifying as LGBTQ are less likely to feel close to other people at school than white students, male students and straight students. "Our job now," Kathleen says, "is to try to create school environments that support those groups of youth and to figure out what we can do to reverse those trends."

Action plan for connectedness

"The more students feel that others in their school care about them, care about their well-being, and care about their success, the better they do," Kathleen points out. "Not just while they're in school. Research shows school connectedness is a protective factor for kids that has long-term impacts into their 20s and late 30s."

The CDC has seen the greatest impact from strategies that focus on:

- Classroom management—providing professional development for teachers
- Youth development programs—service-learning programs and mentoring programs that have their roots in social-emotional skills
- Activities focused on LGBTQ inclusivity—having student-led clubs and anti-harassment policies to keep schools safer for LGBTQ students
- Training for educators about the importance of inclusivity

The outcome

Kathleen is encouraged by evaluations of the CDC's latest efforts. The evaluations show that not only are their strategies benefiting vulnerable students, but when schools create an environment that supports vulnerable students, schools create an environment that is safer and more supportive for all students.

Partnering for the future

"We could not do our work without the important work of our nongovernmental partners," Kathleen points out. "As part of government, we can fund school districts to do this work, but our reach is limited. We can, however, make the national picture evident about why this is important. It's going to take all of us working together to amplify what we know are the most important benefits for young people."

Listen to the full interview with Kathleen Ethier on our [Grow Kinder®](#) podcast.

Visit [DASH](#) to learn more about the Youth Risk Behavior Surveys.

Learn about [Second Step®](#) High School, Committee for Children's new social-emotional learning program for teenagers.

Get Help

[Help & Support](#)

[Purchasing Options](#)

[Shipping & Returns](#)

[Copyright Permissions](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Preference Center](#)

Stay Connected



[Facebook](#)



[YouTube](#)



[Instagram](#)

© 2012–2024 Committee for Children

Second Step is a registered trademark of Committee for Children.

[About Us](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Cookie Preferences](#) [Terms of Use](#) [License Agreements](#) [Site Map](#)

SecondStep.org uses Contentful