

Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Listening Tour Report



Listening Tour Report

Purpose

The following report is based on the feedback and information shared by principals, counselors and/or social workers during the Fall 2023 Behavioral Health Listening Tour conducted by Char-Em ISD staff. The purpose of this report is to capture common themes across the ISD in the areas of behavioral and mental health.

What are the Most Challenging Issues?

One of the key questions and points of discussion centered around the biggest challenges students and schools are facing as it pertains to mental health and wellness. The following surfaced in our interviews:

Anxiety & Depression

By far the most frequent issues mentioned by the people interviewed were anxiety and depression. Many youth experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression that are tied to academic pressures, social expectations, and concerns about the future. Family-related stressors, such as divorce, inconsistent housing, and poverty can impact the mental health of our youth. In addition, we are feeling the consequences of the impact of the pandemic on youth mental health. Anxiety and depression are often played out in some behaviors they are seeing in the classroom.

Trauma

Trauma is prevalent in our region's youth. This includes trauma from the pandemic, economic disparities, racism and bullying, intergenerational trauma, and family instability. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), a term used to describe potentially traumatic events occurring in childhood, have been linked to a range of negative outcomes, including academic difficulties, mental health issues, and behavioral challenges.

Vaping

Districts in our region are experiencing increasingly prevalent use of e-cigarettes or vapes among adolescents, including those in middle and high schools. The use of some of these devices is gaining popularity due to their discreet design and appealing flavors. Many e-cigarettes contain nicotine, which is highly addictive. The use of nicotine during adolescence can have detrimental effects on brain development, affecting attention, learning, and mood.



Self-Harm

Self-harm among youth in our schools is a serious and increasingly concerning issue. Self-harm refers to intentional self-inflicted harm or injury, and it can take various forms, including cutting, burning, biting, or other methods of causing oneself pain. Understanding the underlying reasons for and addressing self-harm in our youth is crucial for promoting mental health and providing appropriate support.

Poor Attendance

There is a recognized link between poor attendance and mental health. A variety of factors contribute to this such as anxiety, depression, bullying, family issues, and lack of engagement and connection in school. A correlated issue that schools have reported at an increasing level, especially since the pandemic, is school avoidance, also known as school refusal or aversion. This is a behavior where a student consistently avoids attending school or experiences significant anxiety related to attending school. It is imperative that the underlying cause of poor attendance is addressed, especially when considering the link to mental health.

Disruptive Behaviors

Student behavior was a huge point of discussion at these meetings. The types of behavior schools are seeing are oppositional and defiant behavior, lack of motivation, lack of engagement, refusal to follow instructions, disrespect and dysregulation. A significant concern centered around the need for effective strategies for dealing with disruptive behaviors.

Parenting

Concerns were raised about whether every parent has access to or has the tools to ensure their parenting styles support the social and emotional needs of their children. Parenting styles and practices play a crucial role in shaping a child's emotional, cognitive, and social development. The foundations of mental health are rooted in caregivers' abilities to meet children's emotional needs, such as providing love, support, and validation. In instances where children experience emotional neglect, they may develop low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, and struggle with forming healthy relationships.

Lack of Focus

Students lacking the ability to focus and the prevalence of students with ADD and ADHD were mentioned. It is crucial to differentiate between occasional lack of focus, which can be typical for many students, and ADHD, which is a clinical diagnosis requiring a comprehensive evaluation. Lack of focus can be caused by a variety of factors, including fatigue, stress, anxiety, boredom, learning difficulties, or environmental distractions.

Limited Preschool

Although preschool options exist for 4-year-old children in each school district in the ISD (some are at no cost, and others are tuition based), there is a lack of programs for 3-year-old children and a lack of private preschool options. In addition, there is a small number of children on preschool waitlists and the waitlists for child care are significant. This issue is not uncommon in rural areas such as ours. It is important to note that preschool plays a crucial role in providing a structured environment that fosters the development of social and emotional skills. It is also where children learn to regulate their emotions, express their needs, thoughts, and feelings, navigate conflict and enhance their communication skills. Without preschool, children may miss out on early socialization experiences that contribute to the development of essential social skills.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services

By far the biggest challenge in youth receiving mental health services and therapy is a lack of providers in our area. At the time of this writing, vacancies exist for school-based mental health providers. Aside from school-based providers who are housed in schools, there are waiting lists for therapists on a wide scale. Many students who could benefit from mental health services may also suffer from transportation issues in getting to therapy outside of school. Exacerbating these issues are the challenges school-based providers have in obtaining necessary permissions and consent forms required to provide therapy.

Staff Wellness

When discussing behavioral health of students, staff wellness repeatedly surfaced. It was reported that educators are feeling high levels of stress and burnout, which can negatively impact their interactions with students and their ability to create a positive learning environment. Staff wellness in schools is closely connected to student behavior and overall school climate. A positive school climate is associated with reduced instances of bullying, violence, and disruptive behavior among students.

Toxic Relationships

Another common theme that surfaced was toxic relationships/friendships. They can have a detrimental impact on the mental health of students, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. They also contribute to unnecessary distractions during the school day. The patterns established in toxic relationships during adolescence can influence future relationship dynamics.

Negative Impacts of Technology Addiction of Caregivers and Youth

Excessive screen use by students was also noted as a significant concern. It's important to recognize that phone and screen use can be modeled after the behaviors of adults in young people's lives. Excessive screen time, especially for young children, may interfere with attachment and bonding with caregivers, and limit opportunities for real-world interactions and language-rich experiences. Screen use, particularly before bedtime, can interfere with sleep patterns. In schools, excessive screen time may lead to distractions from homework, educational activities and participation in extracurricular activities. Excessive use of social media by youth was also noted. Instances of cyberbullying, comparisons to peers, and the pressure to conform to unrealistic standards are contributing to anxiety and low self-esteem.

If your district is experiencing behavioral health challenges that are not represented above, please let us know. Contact Alicia Schlehber, Behavioral Health Coordinator at schlehubera@charemid.org.

What are Some Ideas to Replicate?

In our investigation, we identified several things that are going well in schools in the areas of mental health and social and emotional wellness. Below are snippets of some.

Focus on Relationships with Kids

When students feel a connection with their teachers and other school staff, it contributes to a sense of belonging and support, and positively impacts mental health. One school shared that they conduct frequent daily check in/check outs on Google forms. Another prioritizes relationship building during the first six weeks of school.

Parent Engagement

Involving parents in wellness committees or workshops increases their engagement in school activities and initiatives. This strengthens the partnership between parents and the school, creating a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of students. When parents are involved in wellness programs, they are more likely to support and reinforce behavioral changes at home. Consistent messaging from both school and home environments enhances the effectiveness of wellness initiatives. One local school even provides stipends to parents to attend events or workshops.



Student-Led Activities

Student-led activities in schools play a crucial role in fostering a positive school climate by empowering students, improving self-esteem, promoting inclusivity, and creating a sense of belonging. A couple of schools have student-led activities such as “Fun Fridays,” jam sessions, chess club and other non-academic related activities. Students play a crucial role in peer engagement when they are a key part of the process of developing activities that can contribute to better behavioral wellness.

Restorative Practices

Restorative practices (specifically restorative circles) are required to be considered prior to suspending students. Restorative practices align with the principles of social and emotional learning, and promote skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and interpersonal relationships. By addressing the underlying causes of conflicts, restorative practices can help prevent the recurrence of similar issues, contributing to a more positive and harmonious school climate. Alternatives to out-of-school suspension options help maintain educational engagement, provide more individualized support, and allow for gradual reintegration, accountability and reflection. Concerns around traditional suspension center around some students not perceiving out-of-school suspension as a negative consequence.

Creative and Engaging Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS) Related Activities

Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems, or “PBIS,” is an approach used in schools to promote positive behavior and prevent or address challenging behavior in students. PBIS emphasizes the establishment of a positive and supportive school climate by developing clear expectations for behavior, teaching and reinforcing appropriate behavior, creating positive and motivating student activities and implementing strategies to address behavioral challenges.

Some local schools provided many examples of activities they plan for students that support PBIS efforts and a healthy school climate. These include: Mindfulness Mondays, book studies of “7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens,” and daily or weekly social and emotional learning (SEL) or wellness lessons integrated into the school day. For instance, one school has students participate in school-wide skits to demonstrate inappropriate behavior/appropriate behavior. Another school has a wide variety of PBIS activities such as a “Caring Catcher Program,” lunch with a police officer, and school bus behavior charts and fidget kits. Other districts recognize students who demonstrate kind and positive behaviors, such as a “Rambler Cup/Yard Sign” celebration of students of the week or month, and prizes for positive behavior.

Calming-Focused Activities

One school carves out time for students to read feel-good books (such as “Chicken Soup for the Soul”) that are uplifting and motivational. Another school is in the process of creating a “mini-workout area” for young students to help with regulating behavior, calming down and burning excessive energy. Many schools have calming/mindfulness/Zen rooms for students to access when needed. A yoga club and an “unplugged club,” where students are taught and participate in activities such as crochet, are other ideas in local districts.

Group-Oriented Activities and Mentoring

There are some group-oriented behavioral, social and emotional wellness activities that schools are doing that are yielding positive results. These include mentorship programs where high schoolers are matched up with younger students providing role modeling and leadership skill development. Another school has an 8th grade girls’ group to work on conflict resolution. Some schools hold Native American Talking Circles for their Title VI students in conjunction with the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians.

Collaborations with Community Members and Organizations

One district has forged a partnership with Dr. Sloane, a pediatrician certified in trauma, to work directly with students who have a history of trauma. This partnership has been indispensable to this school, the community and their families. They have seen tangible results in behaviors and parent engagement. Other districts have worked closely with community organizations such as Camp Daggett and Big Brothers Big Sisters to provide service and support to students.

No Homework Policy

While there may be differing opinions on this topic, some schools are adopting no homework policies. Students from different socioeconomic backgrounds may not have equal access to resources or support at home, impacting their ability to complete homework assignments. Eliminating homework can help reduce inequality in educational outcomes. One of the primary arguments in favor of a no homework policy is that it can reduce stress levels for students. Excessive homework loads can contribute to sleep deprivation, anxiety, and other stress-related issues. Eliminating homework can give students more time for relaxation and extracurricular activities.

Staff Wellness and Support

One school has designated a room for staff wellness that provides a calming space for reading, decompression and breaks. Others provide an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which allows for a series of “free” therapy sessions. Another school plans mindfulness programs for their staff, while another has staff recognition programs in place. In an effort to support the professional development needs of teachers around behavior in the classroom, another school has done a staff book study of “The Behavior Code” by Jessica Minahan.

Caring Canines

Several schools in the Char-Em ISD service area have therapy dogs or “caring canines.” There are countless reasons why therapy dogs in a school setting are beneficial. They provide unmatched emotional support, help students reduce stress and anxiety, and improve the mood of students. Plus, therapy dogs can be incorporated into social and emotional learning, student behavior plans and PBIS programs. A therapy dog is not only helpful for students, but also staff wellness.

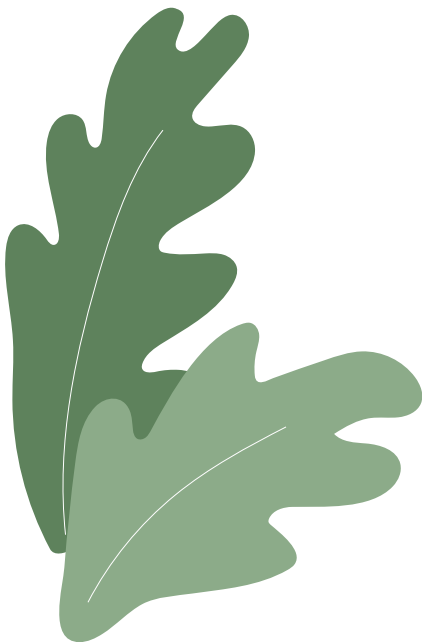
If there are any activities or programs you are doing in your district that you would like to share, please contact Alicia Schlehuber, Behavioral Health Coordinator at schlehubera@charemsid.org.

How can Char-Em ISD help?

The ISD has made behavioral health a priority and is committed to supporting districts as they work to support the whole child. When asked how we can help, principals and counselors reported the following:

Training

Many districts mentioned offering more training options, even if virtual. However, a huge barrier is the limited amount of PD days on their work calendars. Areas of focus requested include: de-escalation strategies, training specific to paraprofessionals, more training with Kelly Rogers, Char-Em ISD Special Education Coordinator, bring Dr. Jessica Minahan back for teacher-focused training, trauma-related training, behavior strategies, tier 2 anxiety training, and mental health literacy for teachers.



Parenting Classes

Several districts mentioned a need for parenting classes, including educating parents on mental health. A common theme that surfaced was helping parents and caregivers understand the difference between normal stress and anxiety. Many felt that parents need more tools to help their children build their social and emotional toolbox. This could also include emotional intelligence for adults.

Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) Education and Support

We found that a handful of the districts in Char-Em ISD are utilizing the SSIS assessment to identify the behavioral health, social and emotional needs of their students. However, not all districts are participating. Although it was offered to all districts, there was a wide variety of reasons as to why they chose not to participate. The choice to not participate was attributed to the need for more knowledge about the assessment, information on how to review the data and respond accordingly, and wanting to understand the importance of adding another assessment to their assessment schedules.

More Behavior Resources

Many teachers are overwhelmed with how to handle various behaviors that appear in the classroom. It consistently came up in conversations that teachers would find concrete implementable strategies invaluable, as opposed to simply the reason behind the behaviors. Another concept that surfaced was perhaps hosting a Char-Em ISD-wide book study on “The Behavior Code,” by Dr. Jessica Minahan.

Address the Lack of Mental Health Providers

There are some vacancies for school-based licensed professional counselors and/or licensed social workers that have been unfilled for some time. Districts requested that the ISD help with recruitment efforts. Another person suggested the idea of hiring a virtual or mobile therapist who can visit various sites based on need.

Create a “Culture of Care”

The need for schools to create a “culture of care” and wellness was also raised. It is hard to do that when the academic requirements and expectations of teachers are difficult to meet when there are so many students suffering, especially post-pandemic. One way is for districts to place a priority on emotional wellness of students and staff. For instance, provide additional PD days for teachers so that they can receive training around these issues.

This list is not exhaustive. If there is another way the Char Em ISD can be of help to your students, staff or families, please let us know.

Next Steps

Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District is committed to supporting local school districts as they respond to student behavioral and mental health needs. We are enthused to work collaboratively with school-based teams, community partners and mental health professionals to implement behavioral health interventions and provide training, guidance, and coordination to the ISD's 11 public school districts and two charter academies.

Based on the feedback we received, below are the initial next steps (in no particular order):

- Utilize the findings from Listening Tour as a starting point to determine priorities.
- Develop and implement a supplemental needs assessment for school counselors.
- Continually develop additional tools to evaluate what is occurring around mental health in our region.
- Collaborate with the Char Em ISD Early Childhood and Great Start Collaborative departments, North Country Community Mental Health, Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians Behavioral Health and other community partners to develop, deliver and host parenting classes or a parent engagement strategies related to social and emotional wellness and mental health.
- Determine best practices for utilizing Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) data in order to meet the social, emotional and mental health needs of students. Provide communication plan and partner with Resonant Education to better educate district staff, parents and students on all things SSIS. Develop plan to circle back to districts and assist with implementing SSIS in their districts.
- Work with our professional learning, special education and other necessary departments and districts on developing and implementing suggested training in the areas of behavior, de-escalation strategies, mental health literacy and trauma. This would also include researching best practices or providing more concrete resources for student behavior.
- Create a campaign effort to establish a culture of care, reduce the stigma around mental health, and lift up the importance of staff wellness. This could include helping districts prioritize mental health in their wellness policies and/or creation of wellness committees.
- Establish an ISD-wide mental health advisory team made up of teachers, school mental health providers, counselors, caregivers, community partners and students.
- Leverage existing partnerships with colleagues, other ISDs, the Michigan Department of Education School Mental Health Division, and other community partners.

If there is anything in this report you have questions about or would like to see, please contact Alicia Schlehber, Behavioral Health Coordinator at schlehubera@charemisd.org.

