

## **Opinion: How Stamford is responding to the youth mental health crisis**

By **Mike Fernandes** December 5, 2025

Earlier this year, Stamford Health published its annual Community Health Needs Assessment, which confirmed what educators see every day: too many students are struggling with their mental health, and it's affecting their ability to learn and thrive. The assessment found that rates of anxiety, depression, and substance use are rising among local youth, mirroring statewide and national trends. In Stamford, nearly a quarter of students in grades 7–12 reported feeling anxious, 20% showed symptoms of depression, and about one in 10 reported having suicidal thoughts.

Stamford Public Schools has long prioritized giving students, educators, and families the tools they need to support youth mental health. Our district was among the first in the state to embed social-emotional learning programs in elementary schools. We also were early adopters of the DESSA, a universal screening tool the State of Connecticut provided to public schools at no cost to help educators assess students' social and emotional competencies and identify students who may need support.

As the fifth-largest district in the state, Stamford Public Schools employs more than 120 counselors, social workers, and school psychologists who are experts in youth mental health. But the majority of our 1,800-plus school-based staff were never trained to manage the kind of youth mental health crisis that exists today. That's why in 2023 we initiated a district-wide mental health audit to identify strengths and gaps in school services and how we could better support school staff on the front lines of this crisis.

One key outcome has been the expansion of professional development (PD) opportunities related to social emotional learning and youth mental health. On Election Day, we offered our first full-day, district-wide PD with half the day dedicated to mental health and social-emotional learning.

Staff learned evidence-based strategies for managing youth mental health, collaborated with local and national experts, and even had opportunities to participate in self-care sessions. The goal of this PD day was two-fold: to equip educators with practical tools to support students and to support them in modeling balance, resilience and wellness.

Reflecting on the day, I was happy to see the positive feedback received in many of the post-workshop surveys. Some teachers said that they left the sessions feeling better equipped to notice warning signs of suicide, as well as with a deeper understanding of how

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much trauma our students face and how we can support them in real time. Some felt they gained tools and strategies that they could bring back to the classroom and use right away, while others appreciated the well-being sessions, saying it reminded them that caring for themselves is an important part of caring for their students.

Stamford Public Schools is also proud to be a member of the Stamford Youth Mental Health Alliance (SYMHA), a city-wide network of more than 35 organizations working together to improve access to mental health services for children and adolescents. By working collaboratively with our partners in the SYMHA, we are helping to build a more coordinated system of prevention, intervention, and support for young people and their families.

We know that this crisis can seem overwhelming to our students and their educators. Sustained progress will require continued partnership among schools, families and community organizations, but we are not standing still.

By acting together, we are building a future where both students and their teachers feel seen and supported, and all young people can thrive.

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