



# Improving Mental Health Supports in Maine Schools

## RECOMMENDATIONS OF MYAN'S STATEWIDE YOUTH POLICY BOARD

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

We started this project in fall 2018 focusing on problems affecting young people in Maine. Initially, we chose to research and analyze Maine's Gatekeeper Training, which eventually led us to study the overall topic of mental health and wellness of students in Maine's schools.

Youth mental health and wellness impacts most students lives, either directly or indirectly, and is consequently one of the biggest issues facing schools. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15-24 in Maine. And bullying in school is often tied to mental health challenges. We chose this topic because of the wide-reaching implications of mental health on schooling, as well as our own experiences navigating mental health challenges.

"We want students to want to be in school. If they're hurting, sick, unwell they can't do that. If you have poor mental health you may

miss school, and this might not be accepted as an excused absence, because mental health isn't often recognized."

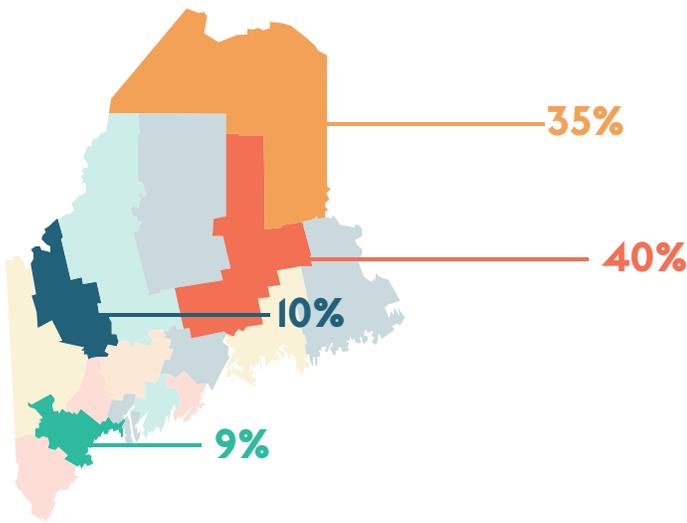
—SYPB Member

Over the past two years we completed multiple rounds of research, including the following: analyzing MIYHS youth mental health statistics; leading focus groups at our schools; conducting thematic analysis of focus groups to identify 11 recommendations for change; filming a video explaining these recommendations; presenting the initial recommendations to youth at MYAN's 2019 Youth Leadership Conference; and completing a final survey to narrow our recommendations to the key ideas for change in Maine's schools.

### ABOUT THE SURVEY

125 people completed the survey. A majority of respondents were in high school, though a small number of middle school students submitted survey responses. Over 60% were in their junior or senior years of high school.

Students in every Maine county completed the survey. The four largest response groups were from these counties:

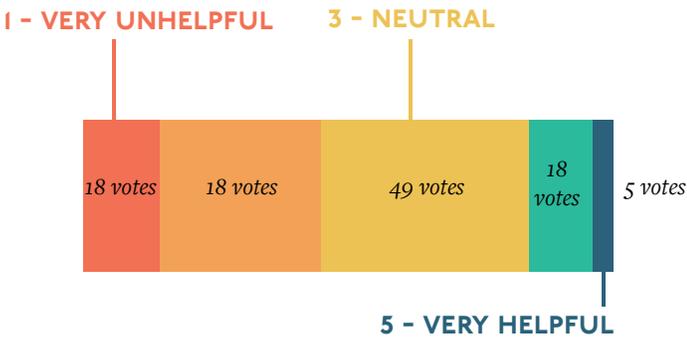


**Penobscot (40%), Aroostook (35%), Franklin (10%), and Cumberland (9%)**

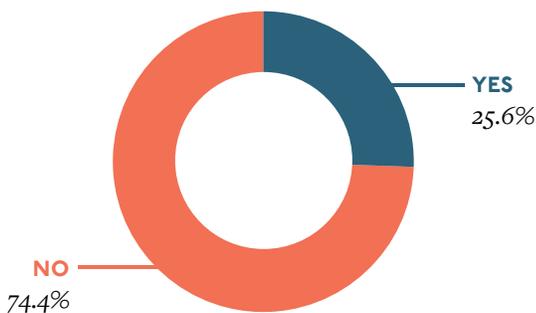
### Survey Responses

**Do you think school faculty are helpful when it comes to mental health?**

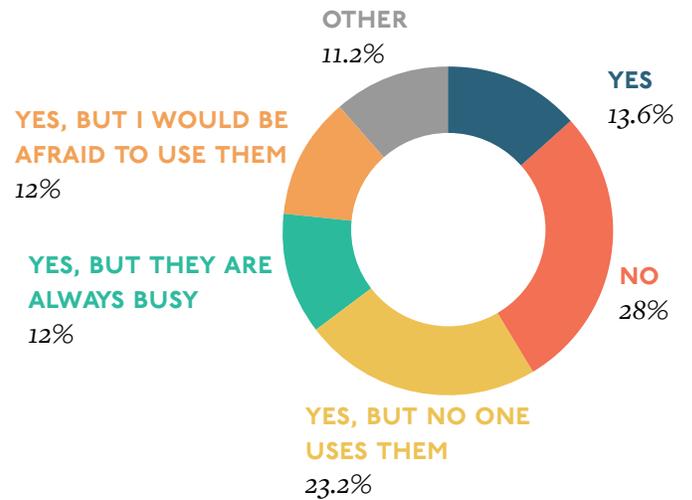
[likert scale response; average response: 2.6]



**Do you think there are enough mental health professionals and resources in schools?**



**Do students know what the mental health resources are in schools and how to access them?**

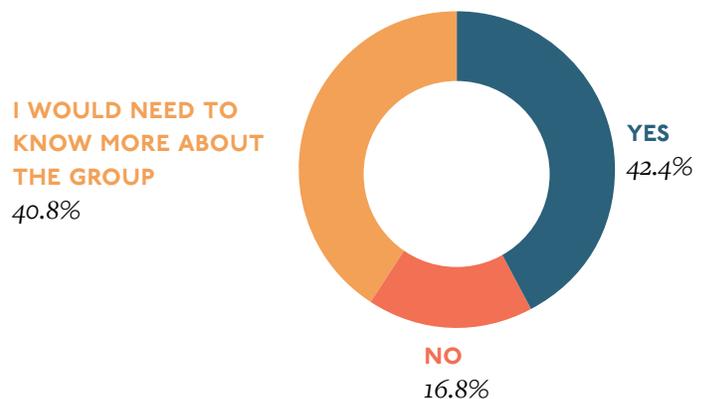


**Examples of “other” responses:**

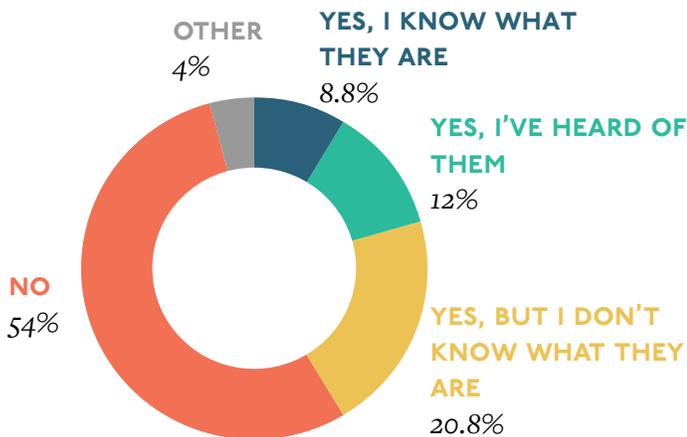
“Lots do, but I find that students who could really benefit from them feel as though they are not confidential or private enough.”

“Not everyone does. Stigma around mental illness also might prevent those who do know from reaching out.”

**Would you be open to meeting with a small group of students and faculty to discuss suicide prevention?**



## Are you aware of your school's mental health and suicide policies?



### Examples of “other” responses:

“I didn’t know there were even “policies” to begin with?”

“We have suicide and mental health policies??”

“Where I go to school, every year each someone commits suicide, yet we are never allowed to talk about it.”

Survey takers offered feedback in response to two different open-ended questions. These questions were designed to extend youth feedback about the types of resources and support they would like to see in their schools. Below we share the top themes that emerged in the responses to each question.

### Question 1: What do you wish faculty knew about mental health?

- Students feel overworked at school, causing significant stress.  
“How (in my case and many others) a very large amount of school work affects mental health in a very negative way and is a big cause for depressive episodes.”
- Students believe teachers don’t know how to notice the signs and symptoms of a mental health crisis.
- Students want faculty to learn more information about mental health.

“It would be helpful if certain teachers were more informed on how to handle things such as panic or anxiety attacks as well as other types of mental breakdowns that students may have. It would also be nice if substitutes were also required to read 504s to ensure that if a student has one and has certain requirements that the sub is aware of them and that way incidents do not occur.”

- Some teachers are perceived as not caring about mental health issues.  
“You can’t just “tough it out.”
- Students want teachers to know that everyone experiences mental health differently: **stop looking for one-size-fits-all solutions.**
- Students ask for more proactivity from teachers: **create opportunities for mental health check-ins**

“Them speaking openly about their mental health makes us feel a lot more comfortable if we wanted to talk with them. Be open about your struggles!”

- Teachers should initiate mental health check-ins.
- Mental health is a significant issue and it’s not being acknowledged in many schools.

### Question 2: What type of additional resources would be best in your school?

- Social workers.
- Student groups (both support and advocacy groups).
- Guidance counselors that are trained in mental health.
- Anonymous text-lines and hotlines (accessible - don’t always have to ask for them).

“I feel like the best resource if you could call it that would simply be an environment in which mental health is recognized and normal.”

- A need for privacy when pursuing mental health support.
- Students may not necessarily need more resources, just ones that are more accessible.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This round of research reaffirmed three of our recommendations for improving youth mental health in Maine's schools. We recommend the following:

- Increased mental health education for faculty
- Increased access to resources and mental health professionals in schools
- Have open dialogues between students and teachers about mental health

We acknowledge that the first two recommendations require action from Maine Department of Education and local school leaders. We encourage adult decision makers to take action in accordance with these research findings and recommendations.

Our final recommendation, "Have open dialogues between students and teachers about mental health," presents an ideal opportunity for youth-adult partnerships in schools. These sessions are intended to provide a space for students to voice their experiences with mental health services in the school and to work with teachers to imagine better alternatives. Due to COVID-19 we were unable to facilitate these dialogue sessions. However, we recommend the following be pursued to maximize the impact of student-faculty dialogues.

1. Dialogue sessions should be co-created and co-facilitated between young people and teachers or administrators with whom young people feel supported and comfortable.
2. Dialogue sessions should start with smaller groups for initial sessions and draw from intact friend groups to create a safe space for young people to share their experiences and challenges with the school.
3. All sessions should start with community building activities so that the group can become more comfortable talking with one another about such a difficult topic.
4. Students need to be incentivized to attend - either with food, community service hours, certificates, stipends, etc.
5. Sessions should lead to measurable action (ex. change in school policies, additional dialogue sessions, increased resources, etc.)

This research, and its recommendations, was conducted and compiled by members of the MYAN Statewide Youth Policy Board between 2018 and 2020.

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