



KEY INITIATIVE

TEEN MENTAL WELLNESS: EMPOWERING MINDS

The Challenges

Behind the faces of students sitting quietly in a classroom are complex and debilitating struggles.

We may not always see the signs, or we may overlook them altogether. But the struggles facing young people are real.

Overwhelming anxiety and persistent feelings of sadness are affecting students' ability to learn, connect, and thrive, leaving too many feeling isolated and overwhelmed.

Today's high school students are carrying a heavy burden, and too many are carrying it alone.

- Nearly **60% of Wisconsin high school students** reported experiencing at least one mental health challenge in the past year.
- Over **50% of students** reported symptoms of anxiety.
- **One in three students** said they felt sad or hopeless nearly every day for two weeks straight.
- In Wisconsin, only **one in five** students who need mental health support actually receives it.

Behind these numbers are students trying to show up to class and keep up with expectations. These are our sons and daughters, our nieces and nephews, our neighbors and friends.

They are doing their best to hold it together.

But they're doing it without the support and guidance they need to succeed.

The Solutions

Our goal: Empowering Minds schools will elevate the mental wellness of 21,000 high school students by 2030.

We are using targeted milestones as a road map for measuring our success. Schools will implement each of the milestones in order, building upon the former to create a comprehensive plan.

The six milestones are based on Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction's School Mental Health Framework.



Needs assessment. A school examines its current state of mental wellness programs and resources and determines what it needs when discussing how to best serve their students.



Collaboration. This step is about building bridges with students, parents, community providers, and the school, listening to a variety of voices, and holding regular conversations about the mental wellness needs of students and staff.



Referral pathways. A school focuses on gaining understanding on how and when to triage students who need support into the right level of help.



Comprehensive resources. Once a school establishes resources and services, the focus shifts to promoting and supporting these resources, as well as overall mental wellness and early intervention information. This is also the time to examine how to care for students who need a higher level of support.



Sustainability. Establishing a comprehensive plan includes identifying strategies that allow for the work to continue year over year.



Evaluation. An important element of the process is to evaluate successes and ongoing challenges. The collection of both quantitative and qualitative data informs current and changing priorities.

The Results

Progress on Goal: 5,352 students

As of June 30, 2026.

25%



Goal: 21,000 students

As of June 2026, **six of the high schools** we are investing in have met our definition of meaningful systems level change by implementing at least two milestones. We are now counting **5,352 students** and have reached **25%** of our main goal.

Volunteers in Action: Teen Mental Wellness Kits

More than just supplies in a bag, each Teen Mental Wellness Kit represents a message to a young person: you are seen, you are supported, and you don't have to face this alone.

In 2025, you assembled **3,150 kits** for high schools and youth-serving organizations. These kits offered teens a variety of tools to support their mental well-being.

These kits put practical tools directly into the hands of teens, resources they can turn to when stress builds, anxiety rises, or they simply need a moment to reset and feel grounded.

2026-27 High Schools

We are partnering with 21 high schools in 2026-27:

Brookfield Central High School	Pewaukee High School
Cristo Rey Jesuit High School	Pius XI Catholic High School
Grafton High School	Ronald Reagan High School
Hamilton High School	Shorewood High School
Dr. Howard Fuller Collegiate Academy High School	St. Augustine Preparatory Academy
Marquette University High School	St. Thomas More High School
Messmer High School	Tenor Journal Square High School
Milwaukee Academy of Science High School	Vel R. Philips Juvenile Justice Center School
Milwaukee High School of the Arts	Waukesha South High School
	Waukesha West High School
	Wauwatosa East High School
	Wauwatosa West High School

2026-27 Community-Based Organization Investments

We are also investing in organizations that provide school-based or community/clinic-based mental health services.

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee	Jewish Family Services
Children's Wisconsin Foundation	Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin & Upper Michigan
Community Advocates Elevate	NAMI Southeast Wisconsin
Family Service of Waukesha County	Ozaukee Family Services
The Friendship Circle	REDgen
	Wellpoint Care Network

IMPACT IN ACTION



"What gives me hope is that mental wellness is becoming normalized," said Ellie, a junior at Grafton High School. "I hear students as they walk the hallways, saying 'Oh my gosh, I'm so stressed about...' It's just a conversation you overhear but it feels normal. We know it's okay to not be okay and it's okay to come talk to somebody if you're not okay."

Through Teen Mental Wellness: Empowering Minds, Grafton High School found the structure and the support to put mental wellness ideas into action.

Mental Health Improvement Fund

To support the entire family, United Way partners with the Milwaukee Health Care Partnership* on the Mental Health Improvement Fund. This fund supports organizations that provide mental health and substance use programs and services for people of all ages residing in Milwaukee County.

2026-27 Investments

Advocate Aurora Walker's Point Community Clinic	Meta House
Ascension Wisconsin Foundation	Milwaukee Women's Center
Benedict Center	Outreach Community Health Centers
Bread of Healing Clinic	Pathfinders
Community Advocates	Penfield Children's Center
Convergence Resource Center	Progressive Community Health Centers
Courage+	Serenity Inns
Cudahy Health Department	Sherman Phoenix Foundation
Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center	Sixteenth Street Community Health Center
House of Love Youth Homes	United Community Center
IMPACT	Wellpoint Care Network
Jewish Family Services	

*The Milwaukee Health Care Partnership consists of: Ascension Wisconsin, Aurora Health Care, Children's Wisconsin, and Froedtert ThedaCare.