YOUTH INSIGHTS REPORT

MENTAL HEALTH & HEALING AT SCHOOL

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National Center for Youth Law

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Youth Insights Report provides a *snapshot* of youth voice from the young people that our team engaged with in the spring of 2023.[1] Our team spoke with over 90 youth ages 12-18 across the state of California through virtual and in-person focus groups and interviews. We appreciate the support of our partners, who shared this opportunity with their students and youth networks. For more information on our engagement approach, please see the report underlined appendix.

This report would not have been possible without all of the insights that young people across California shared with us. To all youth participants, thank you for sharing your time and wisdom.

COVER ART: VIBRANT NATURE'S MAJESTY DREAM BY Z.P., AGE 16.

Artist's description: This artwork has to do with the exquisiteness of nature but turned into a vibrant dream. Nature can be calming and restorative and for me, mental health means different stages of emotion or development that is an important part of overall wellness. For example, I think flowers take different stages to bloom and so does a tree, so I incorporated those two in my art piece to explain the growing process of mental health and creativity.

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METHODOLOGY

GRADE BREAKDOWN.
We spoke with 38 high school youth and 55 middle school youth.

GENERAL SETTINGS.
The virtual focus groups took place in a shared virtual space (Zoom) and the in-person focus groups were facilitated in classrooms with teachers present. All youth participated voluntarily, and virtual participants had the option to answer questions directly, through private or group chat and email.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION.
The virtual focus groups had representation from youth in Southern California, the Bay Area and Northern California. The in-person focus groups represent the insights of students in a San Francisco Bay Area school district. We did not ask youth to report their gender, racial or other aspects of students' identities to ensure the responses would be as anonymous as possible and to address logistical constraints.

INTRODUCTION

Schools are critical places for young people. They are where they spend much of their days, where they build, and expand, both academic and social abilities, where they grow relationships with peers and trusted adults, and where they should be able to seek support for their health needs. Throughout the nation, there is a growing need for such support, especially for youth mental health and well-being. However, for many students, the available supports at their schools fall short of meeting their expanding needs amidst the ongoing youth mental health crisis. Despite the many areas of needed improvement, our conversations with youth also yielded areas of hope and existing growth. They were able to name their needs and spoke of a growing movement to destigmatize discussions on mental health, often with them and their peers at the forefront of that shift. Within these conversations, youth outlined practical ways that schools and communities can begin to provide, expand, and elevate the caliber of mental health supports made available to them.

HIGHLIGHTS

SOME KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM OUR REPORT INCLUDE, MANY YOUTH:

> Are incredibly knowledgeable about mental health and well-being, and have a sophisticated understanding of their own needs and healing strategies.

> Face mental health stigma in their families, schools, and communities.

> Value having trusted adults at school. They told us that authenticity, vulnerability and showing that you care about your students were some of the best ways to build trust with students.

> Feel like their middle or high schools do not provide them adequate information about mental health.

> Want their schools to do more to support student mental health and well-being.

> Have concerns about the confidentiality and privacy of information they share about their mental health, especially at the high school level.

> Wish their schools had more counselors, including mental health counselors, especially at the high school level.

> Want school counselors to reflect their school population.

> Recognize the value and impact of peer support resources and wish these were more widely available.

> Experience a large amount of academic pressure and feel overwhelmed by the volume of schoolwork they are expected to complete.

> At the high school level, receive mental health information from a trained mental health professional (e.g. therapist, counselor, etc.) at higher rates than students at the middle school level.

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT INSIGHTS

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE ON MENTAL HEALTH

MIDDLE SCHOOL YOUTH KNOW A LOT ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH.

They described mental health as "how you're feeling," "their state of mind," "emotional wellbeing," and how what is going on with a person may impact how they act. The students we spoke with recognized that negative mental health is often linked to poor social and emotional behaviors, like withdrawing from friends, feeling more moody, or getting upset more easily. They also described how positive mental health is often connected with feeling more motivated, focused, happier or calmer. Some students expressed that it is "uncomfortable" to talk about mental health because it might not be something they are used to talking about.

Middle school aged youth shared that they receive a lot of their mental health information from social media, parents, teachers or school counselors, and friends. They also shared, at a higher rate than the high school students, that they receive information about mental health from trusted (non-parent/guardian) family members, like older siblings or cousins.

When asked what strategies they like to use when they have a bad day at school, students reported playing sports they enjoyed, taking a nap or listening to music at home, talking to someone, ignoring negative feelings, or spending time with friends.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS SAID POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH MIGHT LOOK LIKE OR FEEL LIKE

> Calm and able to think
> Happy
> Able to focus
> Not as many worries
> Good coping mechanisms
> Comfortable in their own skin
> Motivation to do anything
> Good behavior
> Positive attitude
> Not afraid to try new things

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS SAID NEGATIVE MENTAL HEALTH MIGHT LOOK LIKE OR FEEL LIKE

> Someone who is always feeling drained
> No motivation for school
> Gets agitated easily, causes fights
> Anti-social
> Closed off to people they are close to
> No self-confidence, they doubt themselves and feel down
> They can appear happy but have depression on the inside
> Seem more tired or sleepy
> A sudden change in mood or behavior
> Being moody, giving everyone attitude
> Having bad grades, bad eating habits, lots of yelling
> Can't focus as much
> More emotional, outlashes
> Less active in school, not talking to people

BARRIERS

WHAT PREVENTS MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM FEELING HAPPY AT SCHOOL?

The current workload middle school students face often leads to stress.
Many students spoke of the work they were expected to keep up with as a factor that keeps kids from feeling happy at school. Some youth remarked that the work is constantly "piling up" and that they often feel pressure from their parents or families to get good grades on their assignments. Students remarked how even at this age, they already feel like they don't have enough time to just be a kid, and they feel like their teachers forget that they may have extracurricular activities, other obligations, or just need some time to themselves when they go home.

"Stuff" going on at home impacts how students feel at school.
Although students did not elaborate on specific examples, they spoke of stressful home lives often contributing to how they show up at school. Middle school youth reported that their home lives can play a large role in the state of their mental health, and often exacerbate their stress.

Negative attitudes of teachers can lead to stress or negative feelings about school.
Middle school students shared that how their teachers treat them and their needs has a large impact on their school experience. For example, one student commented that when teachers don't allow students to use the bathroom, it causes them to feel more stressed and lose focus in class. Other youth reported not liking when teachers fail to give students a break or provide time for fun things outside of their assignments. Students also reported that the attitude of their teacher impacts how they feel at school, and negative attitudes towards students or the class are unhelpful.

Bullying or racist or offensive jokes are another source of stress at school for some students.
Youth shared that even if their peers say a comment was just a "joke," it is still hurtful and harmful to them and makes them feel unhappy or uncomfortable at school.

Asking for help can feel hard.
We asked students how they and their peers feel about asking for help and whether they thought students felt nervous or scared to ask for mental health support. In general, youth reported that students' comfortability depends on the individual young person. Some youth expressed that they wouldn't have a problem asking for help and would have no shame. However, others shared that some youth might feel scared that they'll be judged, won't be understood, or might feel embarrassed to ask for help if they don't know whether or not the person they share with actually cares.

> **Students worry about the confidentiality of what they share.**
> Middle school youth were also nervous about their parents getting notified if they talked to someone about their mental health, whether their teacher would tell other teachers, or if opening up would lead to them getting into trouble.

> **Students worry about what others think.**
> Students were worried that their teachers might think of them less positively after they shared information about their mental health with them. They also worried they might get made fun of or that asking for help from a friend could turn a conversation "awkward." Other youth reported not asking for

help because they don't want to feel like a "burden" to someone else or worry that their feelings will not be validated.

> **Stigma keeps students silent.**
  Students also worried about stigma and shared that since mental health is not always talked about a lot, some youth might feel less comfortable broaching the subject. Others thought that some middle school youth prefer to keep their mental health needs to themselves because it can be uncomfortable to talk about.

SCHOOL CLIMATE[2]

Whether students feel comfortable being themselves at school depends on the individual and who they are around. Youth thought that someone feeling like they could be themselves at school would vary based on the individual's own confidence and disposition. For example, they shared that some students may feel less comfortable standing out, while others feel less inhibited by this. Students also thought comfortability and ability to be one's self greatly depended on who the student was hanging out with. Youth recognized that some students might put their peers down for who they really are and stressed the importance of finding your "group." They also expressed that some young people are concerned with fitting in or feel a lot of pressure about who they have to be.

Students are concerned about school safety at both a local and global level. Participants shared that some students might not feel safe at school because they worry about getting "jumped" or physically harmed. Others reported that they worry about gun violence from the ongoing and recent news reporting in other communities. Youth noted that other threats to student safety on campus include interpersonal "drama," substance use, and bullying.

Basic things like the condition of school facilities also contribute to students' feelings about their school's climate. For example, some students told us that their boys' bathroom only had one working sink and they were frustrated that their school had not yet resolved the issue. Youth seemed to feel like this showed that the adults at their school did not care about them and negatively contributed to the overall school community's climate.

School can be a safe haven or source of stress, depending on the student. Youth also expressed that some students may view school as a safer alternative to their homes, while others might think of school as more of a stressful environment, depending on the individual's circumstances.

STUDENT SELF-EXPRESSION

Many students do not feel like they have the language to express themselves if they are having a bad day at school. Some youth thought it might be hard for them to identify how they feel, while other young people told us it depends how comfortable the youth is expressing themselves and if they've been taught to do this. Other middle school students told us that they may need time to first process how they feel before they could articulate it.

## YOUTH VISION FOR A POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH ENVIRONMENT

Breaks. Students spoke of wishing they had longer breaks during the school day. They felt like their current school schedule didn't provide enough time to decompress, speak with their friends and/or take care of basic needs, like using the bathroom, before their next class.

Meditation room. One teacher who was present during a student focus group noted that their school used to have a "timeout room" for students. The teacher recognized the punitive connotation of this kind of room, but thought their school could benefit from a "meditation room" or some space where students could go to collect themselves when they feel overwhelmed or need a moment to themselves, and then return to class feeling more calm or focused. Students in her class seemed to like this idea and agreed that they needed a space where they could take a break when they were struggling.

More school events. Many middle school youth reported that they enjoy their school events (i.e. rallies, spirit weeks and dances), and thought that their school could help promote positive student mental health if they held more events throughout the year.

Opportunities to feel connected to friends and family throughout the school day. Young people in middle school told us that talking with friends is one of the things that helps them feel happy at school. Many students felt like their school's cell phone policies were too restrictive and prevented them from being able to check in with friends or family if they needed to. Some young people suggested it might be helpful for schools to consider allowing cell phones at lunch, especially to help combat loneliness. Other youth expressed wanting their cell phone when they needed a moment to themselves to help them relax or collect themselves or felt like their phones were a "safe space."
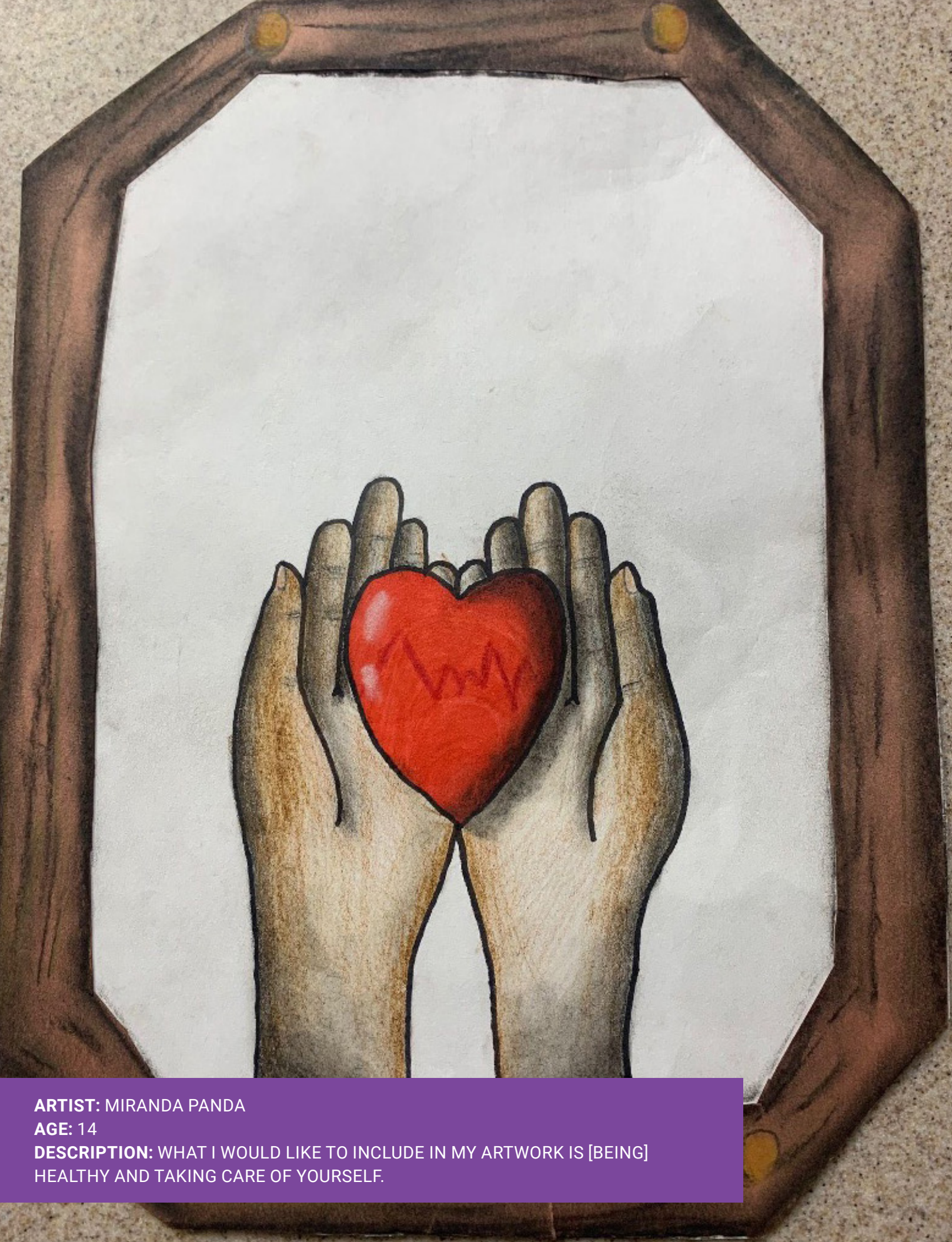
ARTIST: MIRANDA PANDA
AGE: 14
DESCRIPTION: WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO INCLUDE IN MY ARTWORK IS [BEING] HEALTHY AND TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT INSIGHTS

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE ON MENTAL HEALTH

HIGH-SCHOOL AGED YOUTH HAVE A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF MENTAL HEALTH.

Many young people viewed mental health to be an important, if not the most important, aspect of health that is intrinsically tied to general well-being. Young people described mental health as extending beyond the mind and as being connected to physical health, and as something that impacts your energy and emotions throughout the day. Like physical health, youth spoke on how the impacts of mental health are broad and expansive, affecting countless aspects of their lives, impacting their bodies, how they feel about themselves, how they interact and connect with others, and how they deal with emotions. Additionally, like physical health, youth described mental health as something to continuously be "cared for, exercised, and monitored"; they observed that mental health conditions can be as debilitating as physical illnesses. Young people raised the point that anyone can face mental health issues, whether or not they have a diagnosed condition, and that more discussion surrounding mental health is needed to elevate the topic.

> "[Mental health] is something that has to be
> cared for, exercised, and monitored."

One of the central elements of "positive" mental health youth identified was stability, equating good mental health with good mental stability. To them, good mental health does not mean "always being happy." Instead, they saw it as a state in which they feel balanced and in control over their mental health and emotions. Youth again emphasized the connection between mental health and well-being, uplifting how good mental health meant being able to address challenges without those challenges becoming overwhelming and impeding their ability to view the world around them rationally, function in their daily lives, or maintain positive relationships with others. This translates to feeling as though they are equipped with, and have the confidence to utilize, good coping mechanisms, tools, and supports to overcome difficult situations in positive ways. In contrast, youth viewed "bad" mental health as a state of being where they do not feel in balance or in control, where their ability to interpret what is going on around them in a rational way is challenged, and where emotions can more easily spiral out of control.

> "Happiness as the ultimate destination is not sustainable."
>
> "Much more than just taking care of your mind, it's your body, interactions with people, your environment. When you have good mental health, you're in a good state of mind."

EXAMPLES OF WHAT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SAID POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH MIGHT LOOK OR FEEL LIKE

> Smile
> Feeling comfortable
> Sense of happiness and peace
> Balance
> In control
> Rational
> Stability
> Self-confidence
> Supports

EXAMPLES OF WHAT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SAID NEGATIVE MENTAL HEALTH MIGHT LOOK OR FEEL LIKE

> Lack of motivation
> Confrontation
> Paranoid
> Anxious
> Sad
> Mood swings
> Body language
> Distant from everyone
> Overwhelming
> Out of control

STIGMA

Continued presence of stigma. Stigma remains a significant barrier for students in seeking help for their mental health and from even discussing mental health in general. Fear and stigma surrounding sharing information about one's mental health was top of mind for many students, who felt like their mental health needs had to escalate or get "really bad," before they were able to confide in others, even their loved ones. The young people spoke of how part of this fear was fear of feeling like they would let people down if they admitted they needed support and because of this, for many youth, there was also a progression of people with whom they felt they could confide in, often starting with their close friends and expanding to their family.

The general stigma associated with mental health is also underscored by, and intersects with, cultural stigma surrounding mental health for students in certain communities. Youth identified stigma existing in communities, like the Asian American community, that prevents them from sharing their struggles with their families. For youth, there was sometimes an additional disconnect with parents and older family members due to differing generational perspectives on mental health. Young people noted that mental health does not appear to be much of a priority for many of their older family members, dissuading the youth from sharing their needs with family.

Media and the glamorization of mental illness. Media, including social media, has both a profound impact on youth and the power to impact how mental health is perceived. Some youth identified social media and current beauty standards as something that gets in the way of feeling positive at school. One young person shared that in high school, "a lot of times we lack self-identity and who we think we are is a fabricated idea of what we put out on social media for others to see. . . You're trying to be somebody that you're not."

On the other hand, some youth shared that they felt like mental health is being destigmatized thanks to shows like HBO's Euphoria and Tik Tok trends that portray mental health issues as "cute." However, they said they then worried that this romanticization has brought in a new slough of problems for youth. Youth identified a need for balance in how mental health is portrayed so that mental health needs are elevated, but not glorified. Media remains a powerful platform to influence the stigmatization, or de-stigmatization, of mental health.

SOURCES OF MENTAL HEALTH INFORMATION

Youth have to actively seek out mental health information. Youth shared that because mental health is still not a topic that is frequently brought up or discussed, they have to actively seek information on mental health, as opposed to information being widely available or promoted. Additionally, young people spoke of the difficulty they often encounter obtaining individualized, while also reliable, mental health information. Social media, namely platforms like Instagram and TikTok, was the primary source of mental health information for youth, with some young people following specific accounts they identify as having more reliable information, such as the accounts of government bodies and mental health organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Trevor Project, and Active Minds, as well as specific people, such as counselors or therapists with social media accounts. More broadly, youth also sought information from other internet sources such as Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube for specific questions, or through crisis text lines or other hotlines and warmlines. Many students also flagged that they have mental health resources listed on the back of their student ID cards. While information from these spaces is readily available, youth noted that information can sometimes be vague or too broad.

> "I personally struggle with finding mental health resources. I get most of my mental health information from the internet/online which is sometimes lacking since it's not individualized."

Many youth reported that they go to their friends when they need to talk things through. Some students said they like talking to friends because it's helpful to have someone who is not a mandated reporter to talk to.

Youth also spoke about the value of discussing mental health in in-person spaces with trusted adults. In general, the high school students we spoke with received mental health information from a trained mental health professional (therapist, counselor, etc.) at higher rates than middle school students. They highlighted positive and productive experiences and conversations with therapists, school psychiatrists, counselors, coaches, teachers, and family members as especially helpful. Several young people described how their own mental health needs prompted them to seek professional help, which resulted in gaining critical information on tools and supports for their mental health. Especially if their parents or family were main sources of stress, students found it helpful to seek support from a mental health professional.

Despite the value of receiving in-person mental health information from trusted adults and sources, youth voiced that there was an overall lack of such interactions at their schools and that when such information was made available, it often felt superficial or not very in-depth. They added that formal mental health instruction at school, including mental health curriculum and newsletters, especially during virtual learning, did not often delve into the topic and lacked interactive elements, making them unengaging. And, students shared how it can also be difficult to communicate with someone who hasn't "been through it."

It is also worth noting that many of the youth highlighted that they were involved in mental health advocacy spaces or had more knowledge about mental health issues than, perhaps, the average young person. They voiced that most students may not know of available resources or more in-depth information, highlighting an informational divide. Again, youth called attention to the reality that for most students, mental health information is still not widely available or accessible (or that the information often shared is too broad to be helpful on an individual level) and that the onus of obtaining in-depth and individualized information often falls on the students themselves.

BARRIERS

WHAT PREVENTS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM FEELING HAPPY AT SCHOOL?

Like many youth nationwide, the young people interviewed were experiencing challenges to their mental health in the past year, with some citing their mental health as in flux and turbulent due to the ongoing stresses. During our engagement sessions we asked high school youth a series of anonymous "yes/no" questions about how their school and community meet their mental health needs. To see the youth responses, please see the Poll Results appendix.

> "[My] therapist has said it's been like a wave, go from super great to super low and when super low, [I] don't know how to get out of there and tend to linger in the bad."

THE CURRENT ACADEMIC CULTURE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FACE LEADS TO THEM TAKING ON TOO MUCH.

The most significant stress that youth cited was academic pressure. High school students and recent high school graduates spoke of a "toxic" academic environment that prioritizes achievement over mental well-being. Youth noted that the push for academic success, especially during the college application process, leads to students taking on too much, which results in them delaying taking care of themselves. This competitive culture manifested in students feeling the overwhelming need to enroll in too many classes and extracurricular activities, take on the most challenging classes, and sacrifice sleep, with one youth sharing they would only get 3 to 4 hours of sleep each night. For youth who had finished the college application process, they were left with a lingering feeling of burnout. For those in college and who were more removed from the process, they recognized the impact the stress had on their well-being, which led to more intentionality about their course load in college and prioritizing their health overall.

> "You're doing too much that you're sacrificing something, usually that means your health."

THE AMOUNT OF SUPPORT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS RECEIVE IS DEEPLY CONNECTED TO THE STATE OF THEIR MENTAL HEALTH.

Youth spoke about the connection between the amount of support they received and the state of their mental health. They highlighted how having help, such as therapy services, support from a loved one, or support through their community, elevated their mental health; in its absence, their mental health declined.

> "I started off really well and was receiving the support I needed but at one point I no longer had support and so my mental health went downhill."

> "Holidays are really difficult for me so at the beginning of the year I had horrible mental health. However, through connecting with community, focusing on school, and starting therapy I have been able to reach a healthier mental health."

ENSURING PRIVACY

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY ARE BIG CONCERNS.

Privacy fears as to what information would be shared with parents and other people was a significant concern and barrier for high school students. Not knowing how their information will be shared has a chilling effect on youth asking for help. Some youth shared that they have a fear of getting in trouble or being "taken away" under mandated reporting laws, and this adds stress or pressure to seeking help for mental health needs. Youth placed a lot of value on trustworthiness and stressed the importance of counselors and other providers developing a relationship with students built on trust. Some youth shared that if adults are not clear on their reporting responsibilities, it feels like they are then just asking you to share your business, "then they snitch." Other youth said that if they don't know what information triggers reporting requirements, then they may even be scared to share that they are depressed. Youth shared that this creates a harmful cycle, because if young people don't feel comfortable talking to someone again, they are more inclined to "just bottle it up," making the situation worse.

In addition to fears about disclosure to third party agencies through mandated reporting, students also underscored a fear that whatever they share with counselors will be shared with parents at a stage when they are not ready for information to be shared. Other youth expressed that they wished adults would give them a heads up that they were going to notify their parents so that they could mentally prepare to go home and think through how they might handle the situation. For students, one of the ways that counselors and other providers can build this trust is to establish what expectations and boundaries for privacy protections are, or are not, in place at the start. For young people, this means providers listing out whether their information would be shared, with whom, and how this information would be used.

> "I think most students feel that they can't completely talk to counselors. They have to walk on eggshells. They feel like, if I say this then I may be taken to the psych ward, taken from my parents, put on meds. Students should be able to say how they feel without being worried about something negative coming from that."

> "Youth should feel safe when they are talking to someone."

PROVIDING SUPPORTIVE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH INSTRUCTION IN SCHOOLS.

Youth shared that their health class focused on nutrition and healthy eating, not mental health. Some thought their current health courses might even be detrimental to some youth's mental health since their current curriculum was not very sensitive to those who might have struggled with an eating disorder or body image issues. One youth had an opportunity to learn more about mental health through a class-specific research project that focused on mental health, but this seemed to be an uncommon experience that most students had at school. In general, young people viewed mental health as not part of the "learning criteria" at their school. Other students felt like their school told them about available resources their freshman year of high school, and then they never heard about the resources again.

> "I can't think of the last time we've really learned anything about mental health in the classroom."

PROVIDE MORE MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR BOTH STUDENTS AND STAFF.

Because of the lack of adequate mental health instruction, youth elevated the need for more formal mental health training and education for both school staff and students, stressing the value of teachers understanding mental health conditions. For students, it was critical that any sort of training and education efforts delved beyond surface-level instruction. One of the criticisms with current forms of mental health education efforts is that they often felt invalidating and that administrators were merely "virtue signaling" or doing it just for show. They brought up how schools had yellow ribbons tied around trees for suicide prevention week, instead of providing pragmatic help such as identity-specific resources, in-depth information such as the rising rates of mental health needs, or what type of information would get reported or shared. Youth stressed that mental health curriculum for students should aim to provide all students a solid understanding of mental health and provide practical advice so that students are able to take care of their mental well-being. Some young people said they themselves, and their peers involved in on-campus advocacy groups, were the ones who put together such resources for other students.

INCREASE AVAILABILITY OF PEER SUPPORT.[3]

Youth elevated the need and value of peer counselors. Many young people shared that they were more comfortable speaking to other youth and were more likely to talk to each other about shared struggles. Youth called for adults to promote peer supports, especially in instances where some existing peer support has been shut down at school. Though youth acknowledge that peer supports and peer counselors would not fill the need for adult counselors or therapists, they envisioned that such supports would be another safe way for students to connect and share resources.

> "Let us make your jobs easier."

INCREASE THE NUMBER OF AVAILABLE COUNSELORS.

Despite many students noting that there are counselors at their schools, just as many noted that the ratio of counselors to students did not allow them to actually utilize their services. Students repeatedly stated that because of underfunding of counselors, the counselors on their campuses are often overworked, leading them to be unavailable for all the students that need such support and deterring them from developing meaningful relationships with students. This uneven ratio, often with just a few counselors serving hundreds, or even thousands, of students, makes youth feel that counselors are only available to serve students who are "really struggling." Young people raised a chain of issues arising from the lack of counselors. When students who do not feel that they are struggling at the level of going to a counselor, they either do not seek help or seek support from supportive teachers, who can provide some help, but are also balancing numerous responsibilities. For youth who can access counselors, there were other barriers, such as the need to make appointments weeks in advance. Some youth also shared that they felt like their appointment was rushed and their counselor wasn't listening because they were clearly trying to get to their next appointment. Youth feel that this is also the case for many school counselors; providing mental health support is also just one of their many duties, so there is a need for mental health-specific counselors and providers to fill the growing need on school campuses.

> " [I] feel like they didn't have the space for me."

ENSURE COUNSELORS REFLECT THE SCHOOL POPULATION.

Beyond the number of counselors, youth also called for counselors that more closely resembled the communities represented at their schools, including BIPOC counselors and LGBTQIA2s+[4] counselors. For students in these communities, it is critical that the counselors and providers who serve them can relate to experiences and challenges they face.

YOUTH VISION FOR A POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH ENVIRONMENT

ADDRESSING PROBLEMATIC PRACTICES AS THE PLACE TO START.

Before even delving into ways schools can integrate positive practices to promote mental health, youth shared that institutions should first address harmful practices that are currently in place. The young people criticized the punitive policies that some of their schools took, such as locking all the doors at 8:30 a.m. then proceeding to give late students detention, or taking away all soap in the bathrooms and instead providing hand sanitizer to students as punishment for vandalized restrooms. Such practices, that do not allow for flexibility or that punish all students for the actions of a few, made young people feel criminalized. Youth called for a shift from punitive practices that criminalize students and create an environment of distrust to a focus on restorative practices that create safe spaces for students and build trust.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING.

One of the primary aspects of the youth's vision for a more positive school mental health environment was more empathy and understanding from teachers. With the weight of academic pressure being top of mind for youth as the major stressor in their lives, youth praised teachers who showed compassion and patience. Some students said they appreciated when teachers did daily check-ins, established a personal connection (i.e. shared about their lives and asked students about theirs), and adapted their teaching methods to students' learning abilities and styles. Times when teachers were flexible with deadlines or absences and open-minded when students were having difficulties stood out for students as meaningful and effective shows of support and understanding. Other youth shared with us how talking with their teachers is a helpful way to receive advice and reframe their perspective on an issue.

CREATING A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH SOMEONE ON CAMPUS.

Teachers and other school staff who showed genuine interest in the students' lives and who shared aspects of their own personal life were the adults whom youth felt they could trust and seek advice from. As such, many students said they have developed "solid" relationships with teachers, coaches or other staff on campus and those relationships make it more likely that the youth will talk to someone at school when they are struggling. Youth shared that these relationships are easier to build if the teacher is "naturally open" or vulnerable. Young people told us that vulnerability means that the teacher or staff member is willing to share about their personal life, gives space to students, is open to talking, and builds community in classrooms by providing opportunities for students to talk with their peers and teacher about things outside of class (i.e., "how was your weekend?").

HELPING STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND COMMUNICATE HOW THEY ARE FEELING.

Some students might struggle asking for help because they don't have the language or resources to identify their needs. For example, some youth shared that emotions can serve as a barrier to asking for help because they are complicated and might be hard for youth to understand. Others shared that they might not even know what they're experiencing emotionally, especially if they don't have the time or space to process what the problem might be. Other students thought that high school was a period of rapid growth and new experiences, so youth might not know how to explain something because they haven't experienced the feeling or issue before.

SHIFTING THE CURRENT ACADEMIC CULTURE OF COMPETITION.

Another area for improved school environment that youth identified was the competitive, and sometimes toxic, academic environment. Students lamented that the nature of contemporary academic expectations, especially in contexts like the college application process, which one youth described as feeling like a "lottery," made them feel like they were competing to outdo each other on their number of extracurricular activities and Advanced Placement and Honors classes. This constant pressure to take on heavier workloads not only causes students to often take on more than they can handle while also taking care of their well-being, it creates an environment where they do not feel able to actually learn. In part because of this competitive academic culture, youth were also stressed about their general future, graduating, going to college, and achieving high grades, and felt a lot of pressure to figure out their next steps. Other youth said they felt pressure comparing themselves to others in these realms.

INVESTING IN SAFE SPACES FOR STUDENTS TO TAKE BREAKS AND REGROUP.

For many students, one tangible way that schools can promote a supportive environment is to provide a safe and private place on campus for students to go when they are feeling overwhelmed. Youth described such a space to be a sort of designated wellness center where students could go to take a break and compose themselves. For some youth, teachers provided similar spaces in classrooms with comfortable seating where students can work or relax. Some youth shared that they like to sit in the library in silence, stay in the front office, listen to music, or just take some space to think.

Students also said they wish they had more time to spend outside, with friends, on break, or to listen to music at school, a strategy that continually came up among the students we spoke with. Youth also shared that a lot of the coping strategies they use when they are having a bad day at school involve having some time to themselves. Other students said they want a wellness area that could be a "safe spot in an unsafe environment."

ENSURING STUDENTS FEEL SAFE ON CAMPUS.

Youth shared that students feel scared when there is increased fighting on campus or breaches in campus security (which they defined as, for example, incidents of adults coming onto campus and "jumping" or harming students). Youth shared that they don't necessarily want more security on campus and many understood and were concerned about the potential harmful impact that this could have on students of color and other marginalized groups, but they wanted their schools to do something to help keep them safe at school. Students also noted that witnessing their peers fighting or arguing on campus can be triggering to youth who experience violence or verbal arguments in their home or community. When there are threats to student safety on campus, youth shared that they need to be informed of what is going on to feel safe, otherwise they might feel unnecessarily scared, panic, or call their parents.

CONCLUSION

Students have incredible insight and wisdom as to how they are feeling and what they need to better support their mental health and well-being. It is critical that youth have a seat at the table to impact policy and local practices, so that the systems intended to serve them better reflect what they actually want and need. This report is one source of information that captures what youth want and need to thrive in their school communities and beyond. Our hope is that it inspires other advocates, policymakers, and educators to take the steps they need to help youth inform and drive progress forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS[5]

> Increase student-provider ratio for services students can access at or through their schools

> Ensure there is a more diverse mental health professional workforce

> Provide all students the opportunity to meet with their providers at the beginning of the year to establish rapport

> Train providers on trauma-informed best practices for communicating reporting duties to youth

> Provide more resources to students, beyond just the helplines found on their ID cards (i.e. flyers or websites linking to local community resources, referral pathways, etc.)

> Educate and train school staff on mental health needs and resources for students

> Increase protections and practices that support student confidentiality, including transparency about the limits of confidentiality

> Provide more robust mental health and well-being curriculum, including curriculum that focuses on students identifying and gaining language to describe emotions

> Support the development of more student organizations that focus on mental health education

> Host informal sessions at school where students can learn about different mental health topics and connect or discuss the information with their peers (i.e. lunch workshops hosted by school staff)

> Create and support infrastructure for peer support programs at schools

LEARN MORE

Youth are actively leading efforts to advance youth mental health and well-being overall. Here is a brief list of some youth-led organizations to learn more about the advocacy efforts led by young people.

> Black Students of California United (statewide organization focused on inspiring, educating, organizing and activating Black Youth in California to make local and structural changes to improve the quality of all Black lives)

> Californians for Justice (statewide youth-powered organization fighting for racial justice)

> California Youth Empowerment Network (CAYEN) (youth-led program of Mental Health America of California that aims to develop and strengthen the voices of transition age youth to shape local and statewide public policy)

> GenerationUp (GENUp) (California-based, nationwide student-led social justice organization and student-activist coalition that strives to advocate for education through the power of youth voices)

> Mind Out Loud (youth-led mental health movement focused on amplifying student voice)

> A New Deal for Youth (youth-led, youth-centered effort advocating for the creation of new systems, policies, investments, and structures that reimagine life for young people in America)

ARTIST: HAILEY WASHINGTON
AGE: 22
DESCRIPTION: BEING ACCEPTED BY EVERYONE CAN HELP IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS. WITHOUT ACCEPTANCE, YOUR MENTAL HEALTH CAN CAUSE YOU TO THINK NEGATIVELY AND HAVE MENTAL BREAKDOWNS AND PANIC ATTACKS.

APPENDICES

OUR APPROACH

In developing this report, we spoke with 93 youth total. The youth we spoke with were ages 12-18 and ranged from middle school students to freshmen in college. All youth that we spoke to engaged voluntarily and received a gift card in the amount of $25 (20-minute interviews) or $50 (60-minute focus groups) as a thank you for sharing their time and expertise. Prior to the engagement, our team created age-appropriate questions, developed protocols to protect student confidentiality and safety, and developed an equitable pay scale and consent form for youth and parents/caregivers.

VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT.
We engaged with 25 youth virtually over Zoom. We engaged with 23 of those youth in one-hour focus group sessions, and engaged with 2 young people in 20-minute one-on-one interviews. During both the focus group and interview sessions, the National Center for Youth Law had one staff member facilitating the conversation and another staff member taking notes. We did not record our virtual sessions.

PARTICIPATION.
Youth were invited to participate on or off-camera, depending on their preference, and could verbally contribute to the conversation or share their thoughts via the chat function in Zoom or email. Young people that participated were provided with introductory information about the purpose of our engagement work, background information on the National Center for Youth Law and its staff facilitating the sessions, and confidentiality considerations. Participants were told that they could take a break at any point in the session and did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to. Youth had previously provided assent and parental/guardian consent prior to the focus group or interview sessions.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION.
Youth that participated in the virtual engagement opportunities ranged from grades 10 to freshman in college. They attended schools in the Inland Empire, Los Angeles area, the Central Valley, and Northern California. We did not ask youth participants to report on their racial, gender, sexuality or other identities.

OUTREACH TO VIRTUAL YOUTH PARTICIPANTS.
Many of the youth that participated in the virtual focus groups or interviews were involved in some youth organization or advisory group to an advocacy organization. We shared this opportunity via email with our contacts in the child advocacy space and also sent cold emails to other youth organizations on our radar. We recognize that this outreach strategy likely means that we spoke with youth that might be more plugged into advocacy or mental health efforts than others.

IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT

PARTNERSHIP & PARTICIPANTS.

Our in-person engagement was done in partnership with a San Francisco Bay Area school district. Thanks to their partnership, the National Center for Youth Law was able to go into three classrooms to facilitate our focus groups. In total, we spoke with 63 students from the district over the course of two days. The high school class we visited had 15 youth participants ranging from grades 9-12. The first middle school class we visited had 26 students participate in our focus group, and the second class had 27 students participate.

APPROACH.

We adapted our questions for this setting to address student needs and school climate more broadly, instead of asking about individual student's mental health needs. We made this adjustment to ensure that youth felt comfortable in our discussion and did not feel like they were "outing" any information among their classmates and peers. Under this format, students were able to share their experiences and insights however they felt most comfortable, claiming the experience as their own or keeping their observations more general.

For the in-person sessions we had one staff member facilitating the conversation and another staff member taking notes. We did not record the sessions. Teachers were present in each of the sessions, and welcome to participate or share their experiences as well.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION.

We did not ask students to report or self-identify.

ENGAGEMENT QUESTION BANKS

Please see the following links for the questions we used in our spring 2023 engagement sessions.
> Virtual Engagement Question Bank
> In-Person Engagement Question Bank

POLL RESULTS

During our engagement sessions with high school students, we presented three binary questions at the end of our sessions to help inform this Youth Insights Report. The three questions were:
> (1) Does your school support your mental health needs?
> (2) Do you currently experience mental health stigma in your life?
> (3) If you needed to talk to someone about issues with your mental health, is there at least one person you trust that you could talk to?

Students could only answer "yes" or "no." The results and submission were anonymous. Youth submitted their responses privately and could only see the poll results in the aggregate. In total, we received poll results from 39 high school students. Their results are summarized below and have been incorporated into the themes of this report.

Schools still have a long way to go to support their students' mental health and well-being. Only 54% of the high school students we engaged with said they felt like their school supported their mental health.

"Lots of students have lost trust in their schools' ability to help them cope."

Mental health stigma is a prevalent barrier. Over 80% of the high school youth we spoke with said "yes" they experience mental health stigma in their life.

Some students shared that their parents see therapy as an "extreme," or fear it will interfere with their child's career prospects.

Many youth have trusting relationships in which they would feel comfortable talking about mental health. Ninety-five percent of the high school students we spoke to said "yes" there is at least one person they trust if they needed to talk to someone about issues with their mental health.

ENDNOTES

1   This report provides a summary of what we learned through engaging with students during spring 2023, and is one component of a multi-pronged, ongoing practice of engaging with youth to ensure that our policy advocacy is informed by and built in partnership with young people. See https://youthlaw.org/focus-areas/health for ongoing updates and information.

2 School climate is a term used to describe the "quality and character of school life." For more information on how to create an inclusive and supportive school climate please see the National Center for Youth Law's toolkit.

3 See the toolkit section on peer supports for more information on this type of support here.

4   LGBTQIA2s+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual, Two-Spirit, or other gender or sexual identity). For more information see https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/diverse-populations/lgbtq/equity-eo/

5 Note these recommendations attempt to summarize and translate what we learned from young people in our engagement sessions into actionable policy recommendations for advocates and stakeholders.

National Center
for Youth Law