

2021 YOUTH VOICES FORUM ON MENTAL HEALTH

Summary Report

Background & Purpose :

In February, 2021, the Kane County System of Care (“KCSOC”) and the Kane County Regional Office of Education hosted the 2nd annual Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health. This virtual event created a space for youth to have their voices heard as they shared their thoughts, experiences, and insights related to mental health. Students and staff from eleven Kane County High Schools participated in the Forum, including: Geneva High School; Mades-Johnstone Center; Bartlett High School; Larkin High School; South Elgin High School; Dream Academy; Elgin High School; Dundee-Crown High School; Jacobs High School; Central High School; and Hampshire High School.

This report includes a summary of key findings and common themes that students shared during the group discussions.

Students Shared the Following Key Messages :

- Their mental health is a priority.
- They have much to share about their experiences with mental health services.
- They need support from the adults in their lives as well as school and community leaders to improve their mental health.
- Young people can make valuable contributions to improving existing mental health services.
- Young people can be resilient in the face of stress and change such as the COVID-19 pandemic when they feel heard and supported by their families, schools and communities.

Strengths of Existing Mental Health Supports :

Students reported remarkable adaptability in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual learning.

Students reported having at least one trusted adult connection within their school and participated in services that they found helpful.

Students who identified as having mental health challenges and/or who identify as LGBTQ reported that parents also learned, adapted, and became more supportive over time.

Strengths of Existing Mental Health Supports Cont:

Students felt that school is a place where they would like to receive information about mental health.

Many students reported positive relationships with school mental health staff including social workers, counselors and community based therapists.

Students strongly value peer support and the ability to share their experiences with peers facing similar mental health challenges.

Areas of Improvement in Mental Health Services & Supports:

Students identified that they would like it if more teachers and parents in their lives trusted and understood their experiences with mental health and their individual identities; particularly students who identify as LGBTQ.

Students universally reported a desire for more teachers to view students as whole people and take interest in the complexity of their home lives and responsibilities as related to school work and performance.

Students identified a strong desire for more access to mental health professionals, more diverse professionals, and trusted adults in the school.

Students' Dreams & Vision to Enhance Mental Health Supports:

Young people reported many thoughtful suggestions for interventions that fell into three common themes:

- 1. More spaces for them to talk about mental health**
- 2. Greater access to supportive adults with knowledge of mental health**
- 3. More access to reliable mental health information**

Specific suggestions included...

- Designated “safe spaces for mental health” both in school and in the community
- More flexibility within the school day to accommodate changing social and emotional needs of students, including “any time” passes
- Mental health clubs
- Regular systems of “check ins” for all students
- Additional mental health staff
- Support animals
- More services connecting students to mental health supports as they leave high school and more services that are accessible to students without insurance.