

# Understanding and Addressing the Mental Health of High School Students

Views of School Administrators,  
Caregivers, and Students - 2020



The Jed Foundation

# Executive Summary

- The Jed Foundation (JED) partnered with Fluent Research<sup>1</sup> to conduct qualitative and quantitative research with high school students, caregivers of high school students, and school administrators from across the country.

**The study found that students' mental health needs were significant and were not being fully addressed in high schools.** Students reported anxiety as a top problem and their ability to cope with mounting stress associated with academic pressures and expectations for their futures was compromised. In addition, students felt that their peers did not know how to cope with stress, where to seek help for mental health issues, or even the signs of suicidal ideation. Although this research was conducted before the COVID-19 outbreak, there is now evidence that stress, anxiety, and other emotional issues are even more prevalent among students in the wake of the pandemic. A large number of school leaders responding endorsed a need for more comprehensive supports and strategies to address mental health and suicide prevention. Administrators reported more mental health promoting activity in their schools than did caregivers and students in this study. This finding highlights the need for collaboration and alignment in school communities as they

address mental health and ensure that families and students know of and can access resources that are available. The time is now to address the needs of students, better support school administration, provide caregivers and families with the tools they need to support their children, and ensure that students are being protected and cared for at school. Leaders, counselors, students, and caregivers alike are ready for increased support around mental health.

The study sample included 1,014 U.S. high school students in grades 9-12, their caregivers, and 479 high school administrators (344 principals/assistant principals, 129 school counselors, and 6 district superintendents). The sample represented a demographic mix of participants with respect to gender, race/ethnicity, geography, and income. This data was collected at the end of 2019 (before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic).

<sup>1</sup><https://fluentresearch.com/>

# Finding 1:

## Mental health was viewed by school administrators as a key issue for high school students.

School administrators rated students' mental health lower than students' physical health. Sixty-two percent rated physical health as excellent or very good, while only 51 percent rated students' mental health and emotional well-being as excellent or very good. Seventeen percent of administrators rated students' mental health as fair or poor - nearly two times higher than their rating of physical health (9%).

- School administrators in public schools, rural schools, and lower-income schools<sup>2</sup> were less likely to rate student mental health as excellent or very good (49% public vs. 62% private; 41% rural vs. 51% suburban and 60% urban; 42% lower-income schools vs. 56% higher-income schools).
- School counselors were less likely to rate student mental health as excellent or very good compared to school principals (21% counselors vs. 62% principals).

Administrators reported that student mental health issues were rising. Sixty-six percent reported that student mental health concerns have increased over the past five years and 84 percent of school counselors reported that these issues have increased over the past five years.

Frequently occurring mental health needs for high school students included anxiety, difficulty coping with stress, unhealthy social media use, and difficulty managing emotions.

According to administrators, these were the most significant problems related to student mental health:

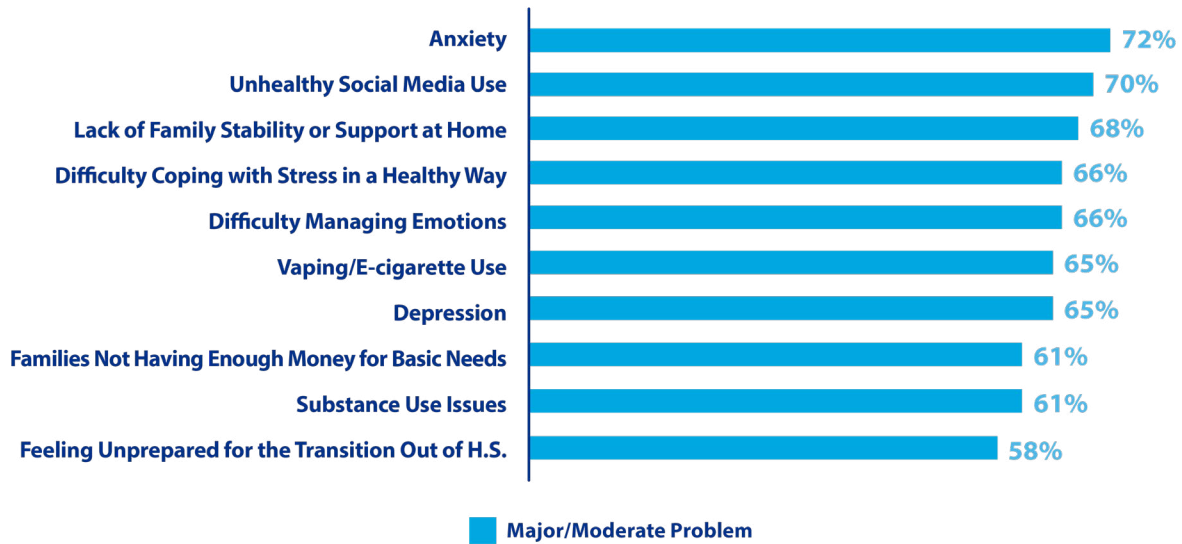
- 1) anxiety (72% rated this as a major or moderate problem)
- 2) unhealthy social media use (70%)
- 3) lack of family stability or support at home (68%)
- 4) difficulty coping with stress (66%)
- 5) difficulty managing emotions (66%)

According to students, these were the most significant problems related to student mental health:

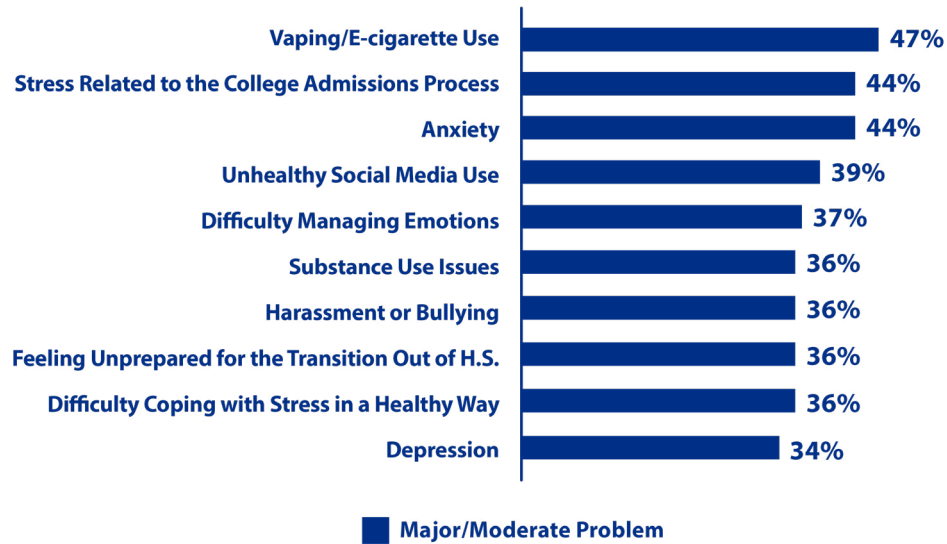
- 1) vaping/e-cigarette use (47% rated this as a major or moderate problem)
- 2) stress related to the college admissions process (44%)
- 3) anxiety (44%)
- 4) unhealthy social media use (39%)
- 5) difficulty managing emotions (37%)

<sup>2</sup>Lower-income schools was defined as schools with half or more of students eligible for free or reduced lunch

## School Administrators' Identification of Student Mental Health Issues



## Students' Identification of Student Mental Health Issues



*We can see from both administrators' and students' listings of the most common mental health challenges that one challenge does not necessarily rise to the top but that there are a number of issues that are clustered together as major or moderate problems. This shows that students are dealing with not just one but several issues related to mental health and emotional well-being.*

## Finding 2:

### The risk for student suicide was a strong concern for school administrators and students.

Fifty-three percent of school administrators rated suicidal ideation to be a major or moderate problem among students at their schools.

- Forty-six percent of administrators indicated that a suicide attempt (41%) or death by suicide (14%) had occurred within the past five years at their school.
- Seventeen percent of students were aware of a suicide attempt and 12 percent were aware of a death by suicide since they had attended their school. Thirty-five percent knew other students who had done acts of self-harm and 26 percent knew of other students who had shared their thoughts of suicide.

## Finding 3:

### Students from lower-income households were particularly vulnerable with regard to mental health issues.

Administrators at lower-income schools reported higher student suicidal ideation or completed suicides (53% versus 42%) in the past 5 years. Students with lower well-being scores<sup>3</sup> were also more likely to be from low-income households (51% versus 28% of students with higher well-being scores).

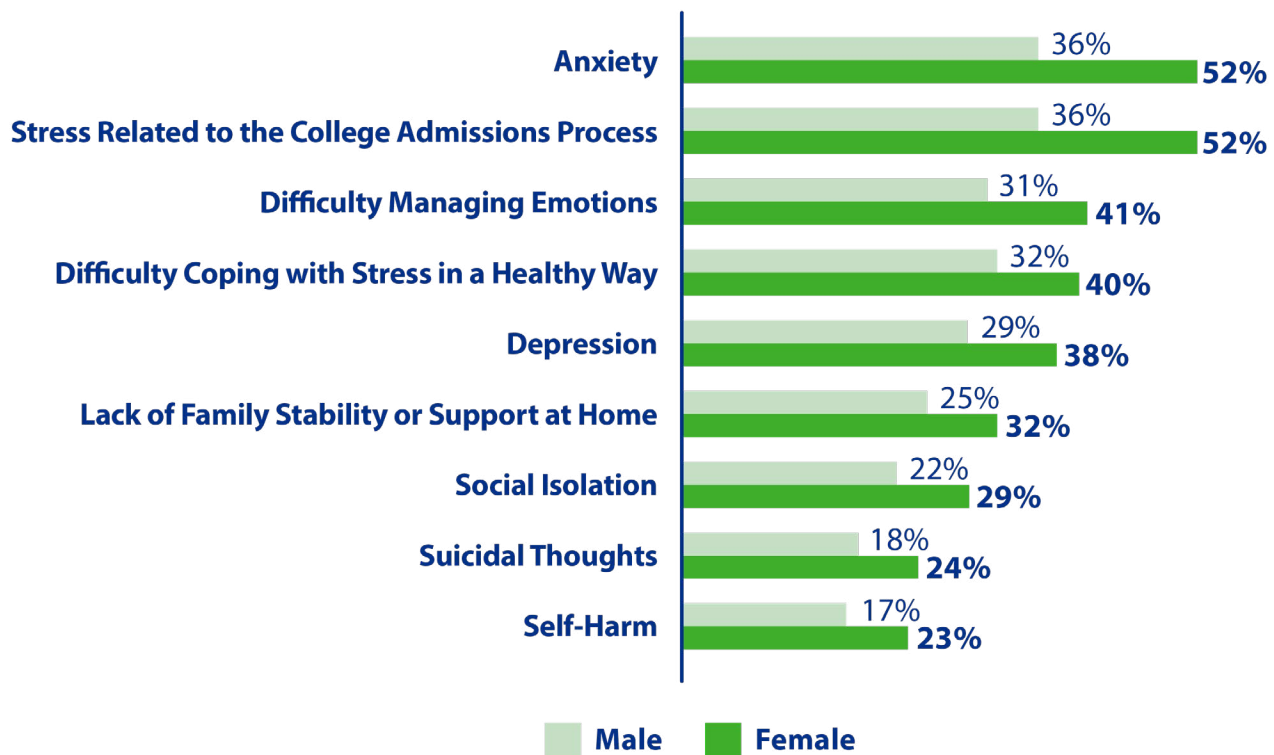
<sup>3</sup>The Wellbeing Score was computed based on level of agreement with six statements related to relationship with parents, happiness at school, having a lot of friends, feeling bored, feeling sad or unhappy, and getting into trouble. Students were then divided into three groups: high, medium, or low wellbeing.

## Finding 4:

**High school students who identified as female were more at-risk for mental health issues than those who identified as male.**

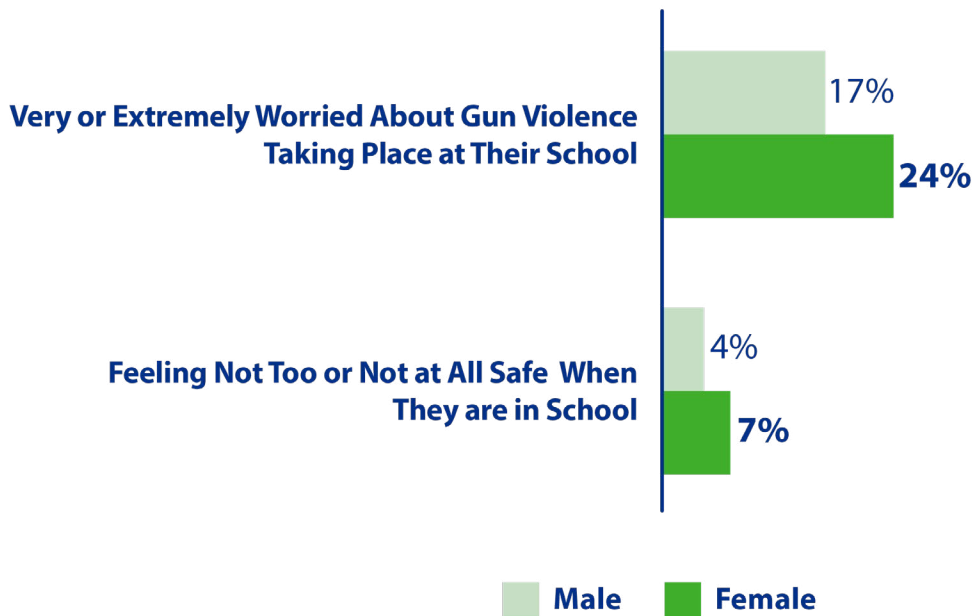
Female-identified students were significantly more likely to experience anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, difficulty managing emotions, and stress related to the college admissions process.

### Gender Differences in Ratings of Student Mental Health Challenges as Major/Moderate Problems at Their School



Female-identified students were also more likely to feel unsafe at school. Seven percent of female-identified students felt unsafe at school versus 4 percent of male-identified students. Similarly, 24 percent of female-identified students felt very or extremely worried about gun violence at school versus 17 percent of male-identified students.

## Gender Differences in Ratings of Feeling Safe in School



### What Should Schools Be Doing to Address Student Mental Health?

“I think schools have no choice but to be involved in their mental and emotional wellbeing. We are a consistent factor in their lives every day. We have a huge opportunity to model healthy emotional choices and guide them through developing their own healthy mental/emotional state. For some students, we may be the ONLY place they can get this.” - *School counselor*

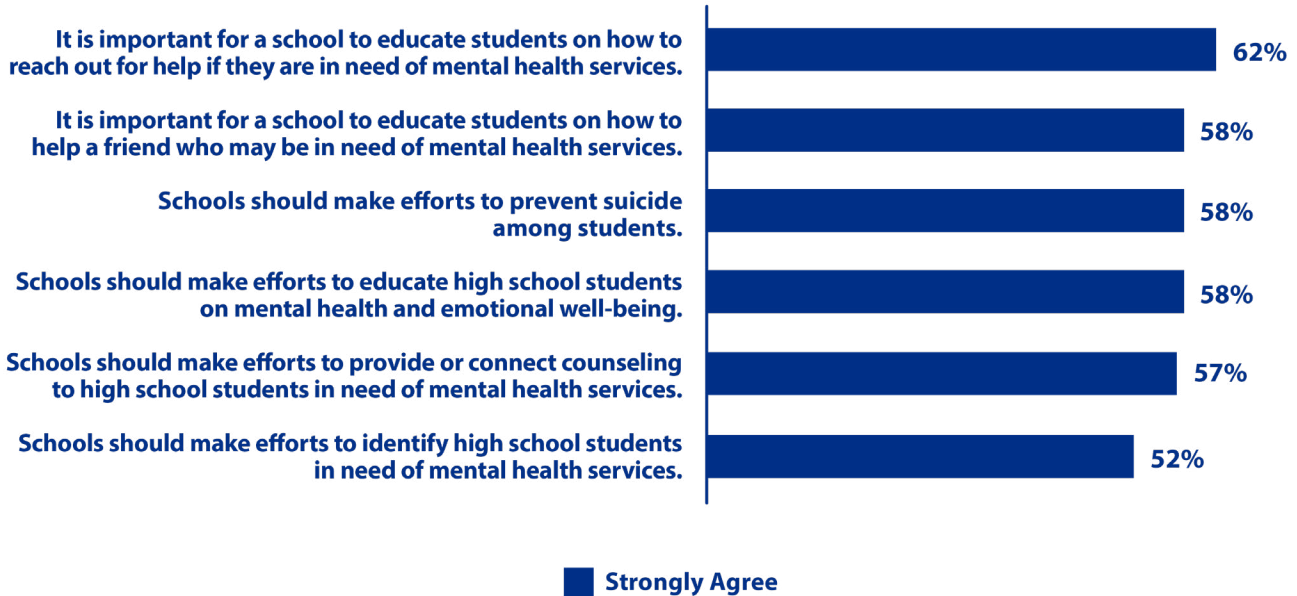
“It’s not that we would ‘like to’ [teach SEL skills in schools], it’s that we ‘have to.’ We are really at the ‘have to’ point, because the parents are not necessarily equipped with how to instruct their kids on SEL, and society has changed...So we have to find a way to get it into the schools at this point, because otherwise we have kids in hospitals.” - *Superintendent*

# Finding 5:

## Administrators, Caregivers, and Students Agree: It is time to address student mental health

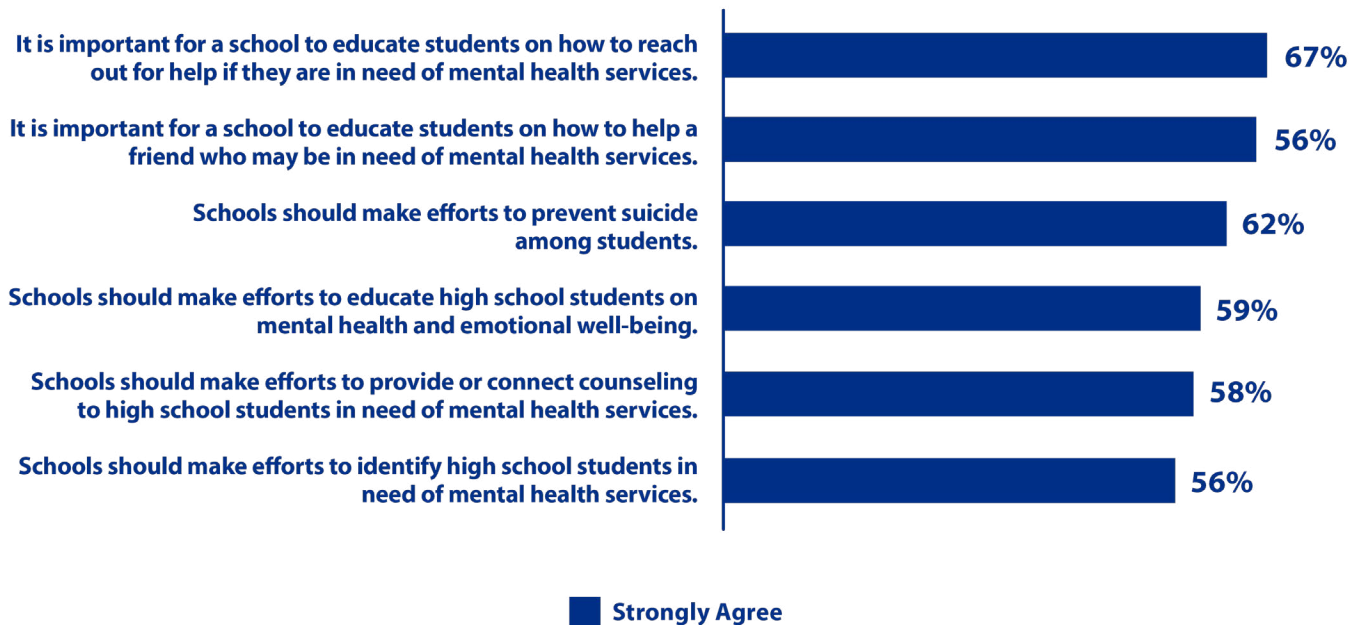
Both school administrators and caregivers believed it was the school’s responsibility to address students’ mental health and emotional wellbeing. This was especially true when it came to educating students on how to reach out for help if they needed mental health services (62 percent of administrators strongly agreed that this was the school’s role; 67 percent of caregivers strongly agreed that this was the school’s role). Additionally, 58 percent of school administrators and 62 percent of caregivers strongly agreed that it was the school’s responsibility to make efforts to prevent suicide among students.

### School Administrators’ Ratings for School Roles/Priorities in Supporting Student Mental Health





## Caregivers' Ratings for School Roles/Priorities in Supporting Student Mental Health

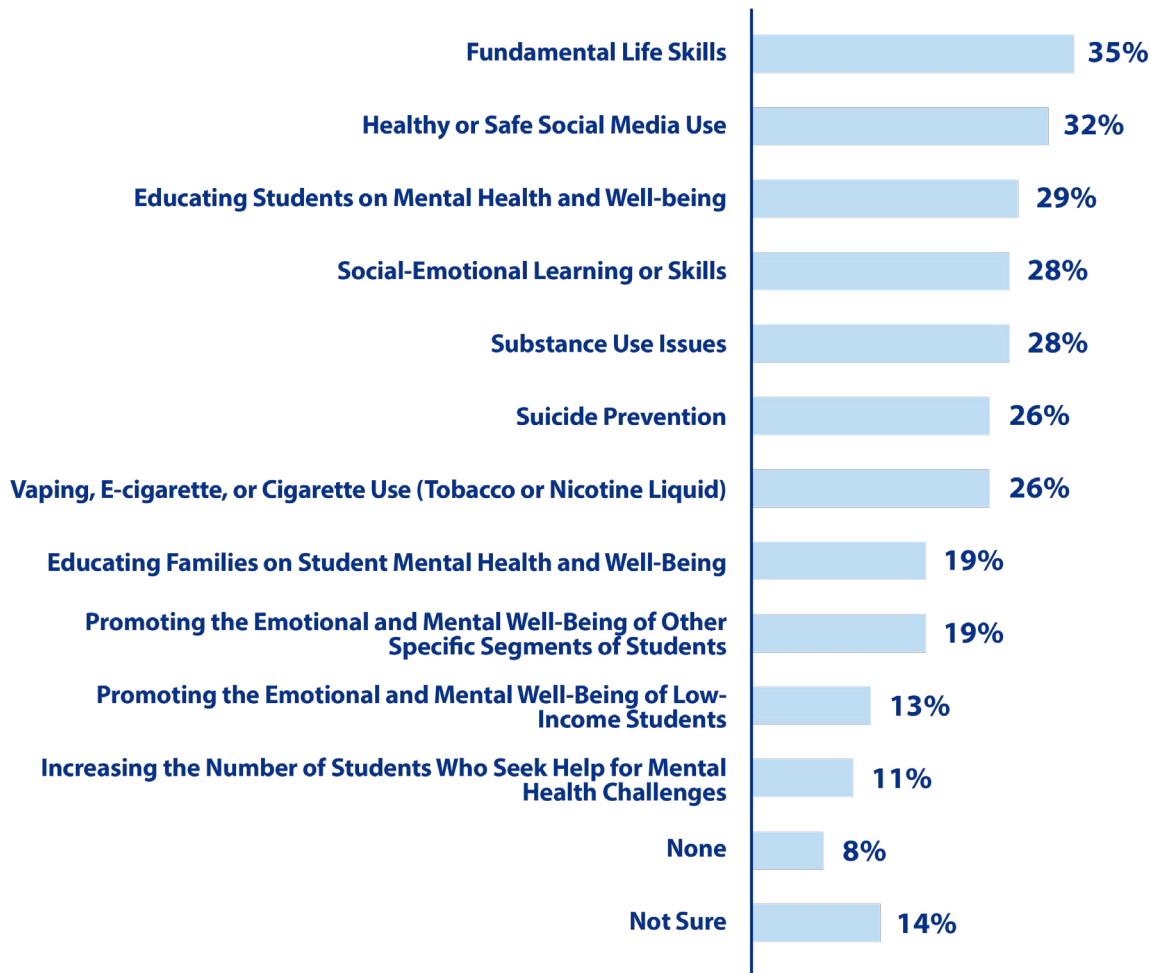


- Administrators, caregivers, and students all agreed that it was a high priority for schools to play a role in increasing student help-seeking behavior and identifying at-risk students. Other key priority areas were divergent among the three groups, with administrators listing the key priority area of helping students develop life skills and social emotional skills, caregivers listing the key priority area of providing services for students to prevent substance use issues, and students listing the key priority area of providing mental health services.
- While all three stakeholder groups agree on the importance of addressing mental health at school, caregivers and students were much less likely than administrators to rate schools' efforts as effective. About half of administrators rate their schools highly on increasing mental health help-seeking (52 percent) and delivering suicide prevention strategies (54 percent) compared to one-third or fewer caregivers (29 percent for help-seeking; 31 percent for suicide prevention) and students (24 percent for help-seeking; 29 percent for suicide prevention). Moreover, as discussed further below, most students report a sense of discomfort around seeking help from an adult at school and a lack of knowledge about what mental health resources are available to them. The discrepancies in perceptions of administrators versus caregivers and students indicate that there may be a need for schools to build better awareness of the mental health efforts they are pursuing among students and caregivers.
- In contrast to their understanding of student mental health needs as a priority, administrators and caregivers reported that schools needed better resources to address those mental health needs. Eighty-two percent of administrators and 77 percent of caregivers believed that schools were ill-equipped to treat student mental and emotional health issues.

- Thirty-six percent of administrators cited a specific challenge: lacking a comprehensive approach to mental health, emotional wellbeing, and suicide prevention. Instead schools currently have moderately effective programs or curricula (e.g., social and emotional or life skills), school awareness campaigns, or school assemblies on topics related to mental health. Only 33 percent of schools reported currently having a suicide prevention program at their school.
- Among students, the top social and emotional health promotion programs that exist included those that teach fundamental life skills (35% report this), healthy or safe social media use (32%), education for students on mental health and wellbeing (29%), and social- emotional learning or skills (28%).

## Students' Responses to Whether School Has Mental Health Related Programming

*Does your school currently have any programs, lessons units, courses, or other activities or resources about any of the following topics?*



Forty-two percent of administrators said it was difficult for their school to find out about high-quality, effective student mental health and emotional well-being programs or resources.

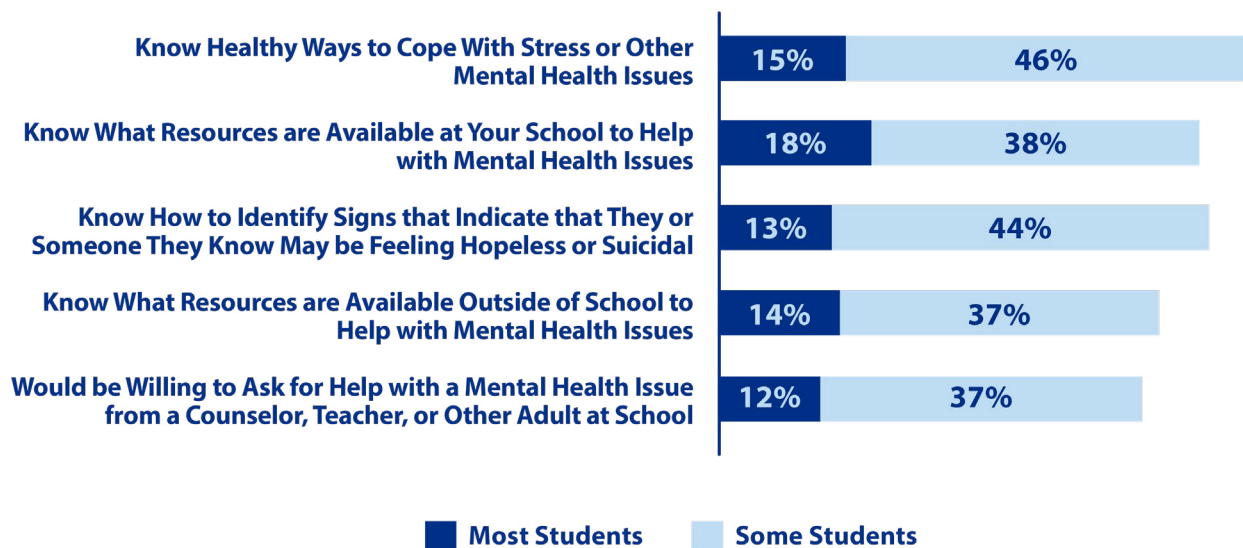
# Finding 6:

## Students need more mental health resources and strategies.

- Eighteen percent or fewer students felt that most students know healthy ways to cope with stress, available resources to help with mental health issues, and the signs of suicidal ideation.
- Only 12 percent of students felt that most other students would be willing to ask for help from a school adult for a mental health issue.

### Classmates' Awareness of Mental Health Resources

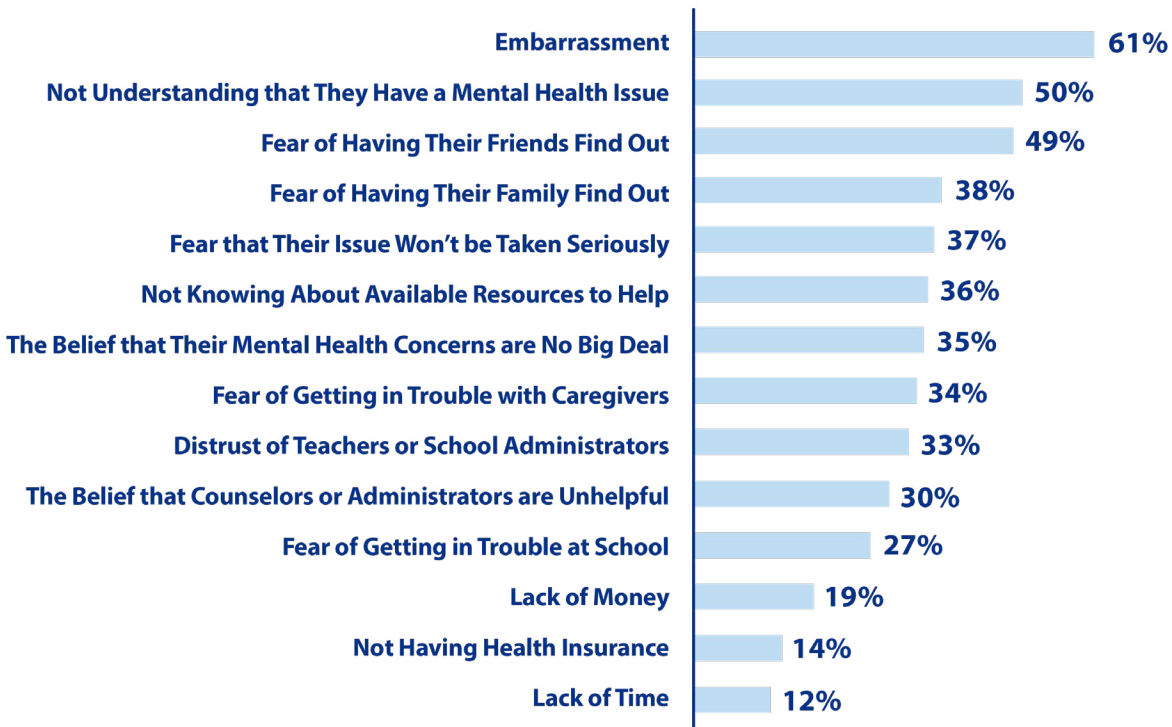
*At your school, how many students do you think...*



- Embarrassment about one's mental health issues topped the list for why a student would not seek help, with 61 percent of students citing this as a key barrier.
- Other key barriers to seeking mental health care included not understanding that one has a mental health issue (50%), fear of friends finding out (49%), fear of family finding out (38%), and fear that their issue would not be taken seriously (37%). Only 12 percent cited a lack of time as a key barrier and 19 percent cited a lack of money as a barrier to seeking and receiving help.

*These findings show that mental health programs in schools that educate the student about mental health and address the reduction of mental health stigma can go a long way in students' likelihood to seek help for themselves during times of distress.*

## Students' Top Reasons That Prevent Them From Getting Help With Mental Health Issues



### New Trends in Student Mental Health in 2020

COVID-19 is likely making these mental health issues among adolescents worse. While this was not a finding of this study, which was completed before the outbreak, we know from subsequent research that 83 percent of teens with a history of mental illness said the pandemic was making their condition worse.<sup>4</sup> This was in part due to a lack of access to mental health and peer support resources, many of which were obtained through schools. We already know that teenagers who are socially isolated or lonely are more likely to become depressed.<sup>5</sup> Loneliness is associated with an increase in both anxiety and depressive symptoms in youth.<sup>6</sup>

COVID-19 has also presented various mental health obstacles that appear to vary by gender, just as we found in this research. In one study of mental health and well-being during COVID-19, 57 percent of female-identified students reported feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious, as compared to 38 percent of male-identified students. Notably, 70 percent of students that do not identify as either male or female reported these symptoms/experiences during COVID-19.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Lee J (2020) Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30109-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext)

<sup>5</sup>Jacobs L (2020) Adolescents and young adults are paying a high price for COVID-19 prevention. Available at: <https://www.statnews.com/2020/04/27/adolescents-young-adults-paying-high-price-covid-19-prevention/>

<sup>6</sup>Loades ME et al (2020) Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19. Available at: [https://jaacap.org/article/S0890-8567\(20\)30337-3/pdf](https://jaacap.org/article/S0890-8567(20)30337-3/pdf)

<sup>7</sup>YouthTruth Student Survey (2020) Students Weigh In: Learning & Well-Being During COVID-19. Available at: <https://youthtruthsurvey.org/get-started/students-weigh-in/>



## Next Steps: Comprehensive Approach Addresses Mental Health Needs in High Schools

JED will be launching JED High School, a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for High Schools, to support high schools in their quest to meet the mental health needs revealed by this study. JED High School is a public health, systematic approach that districts and individual schools can use to assess and strengthen their policies, programs, and systems that support emotional well-being and suicide prevention for students. The program encourages high schools to take an approach that incorporates strategic planning and cultural humility into plans around student mental health and suicide prevention. JED High School is an approximately 18-month program that will help districts and individual schools assess and enhance their efforts in the following key areas: developing life skills, promoting social connectedness and positive school climate, increasing help-seeking behaviors, identifying students at risk, promoting well-being and access to mental health services, establishing and following crisis management procedures, and creating a safe environment.



The Jed Foundation