



The Jed Foundation

# JED Policy Agenda

## Introduction

For more than 25 years, The Jed Foundation (JED) has been working to protect emotional health and prevent suicide for teens and young adults. It has been a uniquely challenging period for youth mental health, including the rise of smartphones and social media and living through the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, JED has built knowledge and expertise, developed key relationships, and gathered extensive data in order to ensure that our programming and campaigns make a real impact on the lives of young people. The bulk of the work of reducing teen and young adult suicide rates, however, still lies ahead.

As highlighted in [JED's report Youth Suicide: Current Trends and the Path to Prevention](#), suicide remains the second-leading cause of death for those ages 12 to 24. Reversing that trend will require multiple solutions touching on all areas of society with which young people regularly interact, including schools, communities, systems of care, and culture. Hand in hand with education systems and other key partners, JED advocates for and helps advance systematic, comprehensive policies to create a culture of caring to protect youth mental health. Our advocacy falls under our three established policy levers:

- ▶ **Community engagement:** Recognizing and addressing the distinctive opportunities and requirements of communities, and actively engaging youth voices on their own terms
- ▶ **Coalition building:** Creating alliances and fostering collaboration among key stakeholders and partners, both state and federal
- ▶ **Foundational practices:** Establishing fundamental recommended practices and metrics to achieve significant outcomes in student mental health





By focusing on those key areas, we believe it is possible to create a more supportive environment for youth mental health and work to reverse the concerning trends we are seeing. Now is the time for state and federal policymakers and other stakeholders to take action to address the infrastructure, data, and access needs of our nation's youth. It will require sustained cooperation among the disparate agencies and entities that are each responsible for a piece of the overall puzzle.

This policy agenda is intended to offer a framework to guide JED's advocacy work, articulating our values and priorities to focus our attention on the endeavors likely to have the biggest impact on improving youth mental health and reducing suicide among teens and young adults. To truly move toward a better future for our nation's youth, JED advocates for the following priorities:

1. Increase Access to Mental Health Services, Especially In and Through Schools
2. Implement a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention in Schools and Other Youth-Serving Settings
3. Address Mental Health Disparities Among Youth Populations
4. Enhance Mental Health Supports for Educators and Administrators
5. Enact Regulations and Guardrails on Social Media and Other Digital Technologies
6. Implement, Evaluate, and Scale Promising Practices for Youth Suicide Prevention
7. Eliminate Mental Health Policy and Implementation Siloes
8. Establish a Youth Mental Health Research Initiative for Our Nation
9. Invest in Mental Health Through Robust Federal Funding



# JED's Policy Pillars: A Detailed Overview

## 1. Increase Access to Mental Health Services, Especially In and Through Schools

Mental health care is health care, and affordable, timely access to it is critical for youth well-being. [Research shows](#) that 56% of youth ages 12 to 17 with major depression do not receive any form of treatment and [more than 40%](#) of young adults ages 18 to 25 with mental health conditions have unmet mental health needs. It is particularly challenging to [find culturally competent care](#) for young people from diverse or marginalized communities.

States and the federal government must take steps to increase access to treatment. JED recommends access to school-based mental health care be added to the mandatory benefits under state Medicaid programs. Given how much time young people spend in school, institutions of learning serve as critical places to access care. Schools are making strong efforts, but they must be provided with the necessary support to effectively navigate the process of obtaining Medicaid reimbursement for mental health services. State and federal agencies should increase enforcement of existing mental health [parity laws](#) to ensure that coverage of mental health care and substance misuse is equivalent to physical health care coverage.

## 2. Implement a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention in Schools and Other Youth-Serving Settings

[JED's Comprehensive Approach](#) encompasses strategic areas crucial for supporting mental health, mitigating substance misuse, and reducing suicide in community settings. The model emphasizes strategic planning tailored to the specific needs and resources of each campus, school, district, and community-based organization, and involves multiple tactical activities to enhance student mental health. The approach addresses four key thematic areas: enhancing protective factors and resilience, early intervention, availability and access to clinical services, and environmental safety. Those elements provide a robust framework for understanding the model's foundations and its application in mental health promotion and suicide prevention within communities.

Adopting a comprehensive approach to youth mental health would benefit many areas of society. Scaling this proven approach to a broad spectrum of young people requires partnerships with key policy stakeholders, including state and federal systems. JED will continue to nurture those partnerships, forge new strategic partnerships, and together work to inform the national conversation on youth mental health.

## 3. Address Mental Health Disparities Among Youth Populations

Providing mental health support is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. [Research](#) shows disparities in the challenges and outcomes among different populations of youth, specifically by race, ethnicity, geography, and sexual identity. To cite just a few examples, American Indian and Alaska Native youth have suicide rates almost twice as high



as the national average, while suicide rates among young people in rural areas are nearly double those in large metro areas. Female and LGBTQIA+ students experience higher levels of violence, substance use, poor mental health, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors than male and cisgender heterosexual students, according to the CDC's [Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary and Trends Report: 2013–2023](#).

It is imperative that mental health services are accessible to students from all demographics, offering tailored, targeted, and transparent support. That includes prioritizing the needs of the communities where students seek support and psychological safety. JED is committed to continuously exploring the unique needs of students with intersecting identities and developing frameworks that inform effective mental health strategies.



#### 4. Enhance Mental Health Supports for Educators and Administrators

The learning environment has become increasingly challenging across the pre-K–20 landscape. Teachers at all levels are being asked to take on more and serve as counselors in addition to their traditional educational duties. Due to issues such as burnout, educators and administrators are [leaving the profession](#) at unprecedented rates, exacerbating existing shortages. Simply put: Schools lack the resources to support educator mental health.

With that in mind, significant investments are needed to increase equitable access to mental health care and leave for educators, expand initiatives focused on ensuring that all educators feel a sense of safety and belonging at work, and institute safeguards against workplace mistreatment and discrimination. JED supports federal programs such as the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program and Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program, which help increase student access to mental health care in school, alleviating burdens on educators.

#### 5. Enact Regulations and Guardrails on Social Media and Other Digital Technologies

Technology is ubiquitous in the lives of teens and young adults, who have grown up alongside smartphones, social media, and online gaming. Although technology can be useful for young people, offering them valuable social connections and access to helpful information and even health care, there are significant risks associated with its use and excessive time spent online. Research highlighted in JED's report [Can the Metaverse Be Good for Youth Mental Health?](#) shows that cyberbullying — which brings a [greater risk of suicidality](#) — body-image issues, and exposure to harmful content are prevalent concerns. Those issues are so pressing that the U.S. Surgeon General has called for a [warning label on social media platforms](#) and [issued an advisory](#) on the risks of excessive use, cyberbullying, and exposure to harmful content. The rise of AI introduces new risks, such as the potential for biased algorithms, privacy breaches, amplification of harmful content, and risks related to manipulation and exploitation. We agree with the Surgeon General's advisories and believe we cannot leave decisions about how to ensure the online safety of our youth to tech companies themselves.

Regulators, therefore, must establish minimum safety standards that are responsive to the demands and needs of youth users and work to prevent harm. The standards should include supporting access to mental health resources, requiring better tools to flag harmful content, and mandating clear and user-friendly privacy settings. Additionally, the federal government should establish a national advisory council and commission that examines the latest data on the impact of digital technology, social media, and AI, and regularly reports on evolving recommended practices. Regulation should restrict the methods — including algorithms — that companies use to create engagement by minors with their content and platforms. Companies should be compelled to make data, including algorithms, available for further study, and outline how their platforms work with independent researchers.

## 6. Implement, Evaluate, and Scale Promising Practices for Youth Suicide Prevention

All of the institutions that work with young people have essential and unique roles to play, schools as well as community-based organizations (CBOs) such as college-preparation or leadership-development programs. We must ensure that recommended practices, when they exist, are being implemented throughout the youth-serving ecosystem. When they don't exist, we must develop them by funding, learning from, and sharing promising practices. Developing and sustaining a coordinated and comprehensive approach to mental health and suicide prevention that engages the full ecosystem of youth-focused organizations — and includes sharing learnings and promising practices — will have immense benefits.

JED has over 20 years of experience in developing and implementing evidence-based strategies to address teen and young adult mental health using a comprehensive approach across the education pipeline. We have also provided consulting services to youth-serving CBOs, and recently established a formal program to support their mental health work through a dedicated CBO comprehensive approach. The Student Mental Health and Wellness Learning Community, led by JED and the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), is working with states to identify best practices to ensure a state- and systems-wide approach to bolster institutions' abilities to effectively promote and support student mental health and wellness. Efforts like these should be maintained and expanded in scope and funding, and their efficacy should be deepened continuously through research, analysis, and information sharing.

## 7. Eliminate Mental Health Policy and Implementation Silos

Multiple state and federal agencies do work that intersects with mental health. It is critical to facilitate collaboration among the agencies to avoid duplication of resources and conflicts of standards and practices. With limited communication on this critical issue, there is a risk of missing valuable opportunities for synergy and intentional collaboration that could drive significant progress in addressing systemic changes related to youth mental health.

To directly address that gap, a Youth Mental Health Roundtable led by federal agencies should be held annually. The roundtable should include the White House, Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services, nonprofit organizations, state organizations such as the National Governors Association, and youth advocates. Congress should establish a dedicated grant program aimed at increasing support for educators.



## 8. Establish a Youth Mental Health Research Initiative for Our Nation

Reversing current youth mental health trends requires a high degree of sustained cooperation among disparate government entities. The federal government must make comprehensive investments in youth mental health research to better understand what approaches are most effective, and ensure that the agencies responsible for the research are adequately funded for years to come.

JED supports the creation of a Youth Mental Health Initiative led by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to encourage focused research on the causes of youth mental health challenges, prevention strategies, and treatment. The initiative presents a valuable opportunity to break down silos among NIH institutes to foster collaboration across diverse research cohorts. Key stakeholders, including youth advocates and federal agencies such as the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services, should actively shape the initiative's priorities.



## 9. Invest in Mental Health Through Robust Federal Funding

Many states have started to make conscious investments in youth mental health, but efforts vary greatly. Sustained federal funding will help ensure that every state is able to make investments in improving youth mental health.

[Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention Grants](#) and [Project AWARE Grants](#) have delivered important resources to colleges and pre-K–12 institutions, respectively, but that funding is subject to annual appropriations. The need is also far greater than the current funds available. Congress should allocate robust, mandatory funding to enhance youth mental health programs. Collaborating with key stakeholders across state and federal entities, JED will continue to advocate for increased funding and support for expanding the impact and reach of youth mental health initiatives.

## Our Commitment

This is by no means a comprehensive list of all the policy areas for which JED advocates. Within all nine policy focus areas, there are countless ways to leverage policy and advance systems changes to enhance mental health outcomes and prevent suicide among our nation's youth. In evaluating policy approaches, JED will continue to be guided by the three levers of community engagement, coalition building, and foundational practices.

We at JED envision a future in which our local, state, and federal policies empower and protect young people wherever they are — school, home, community, and online — and are tailored to the unique needs of all youth, regardless of their backgrounds, identities, or circumstances. Together we can create the effective web of support our youth deserve, and we will continue to work tirelessly to make that vision a reality.