

School wellness centers: An innovative response to student stress and suicide

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Research suggests high school wellness centers help reduce teens' anxiety, and depression. Credit: Nate Edwards

The wellness center at Utah's Westlake High School is a port in the storm of adolescence. With comfortable couches, soft lighting, nature

sounds, healthy snacks and an array of sensory activities like Buddha Boards and puzzles, the wellness center offers overwhelmed students a place to relax and refocus, practice healthy coping mechanisms or talk with a counselor.

With the support of the community, Westlake first implemented its [wellness](#) center in 2020 following a string of student suicides, hoping to better identify and support at-risk [students](#). Recently, the [school](#) teamed with BYU researchers to see whether stakeholders believe the wellness center—an innovative but little-researched approach first pioneered in the Bay Area—is helping. The results were promising.

Of the 752 students, 124 parents, and 69 staff surveyed, all three groups believed the wellness center reduced students' anxiety and depression. Significantly, students who were more likely to experience marginalization or extra stressors—including students of color, female students, and those who identify as genderqueer—reported that they used and benefited from the center the most.

"Wellness centers can sometimes sound 'granola' or 'hippie,' but it's interesting that, even at a school that's about 80% white, we saw that diverse populations felt comfortable taking advantage of the center," said BYU school psychology graduate student Malka Moya, lead author of the paper, which was published in *Education and Treatment of Children*.

Although the respondents did have some suggestions for improving the center, including increased advertising and decreased stigma for visiting it, they appreciated the wellness center's calming environment. They also didn't feel that students, who can use a pass to visit the center for 20 minutes during any class, were just using the center to avoid work.

"It's a place where kids can come and get nourished physically,

emotionally, and socially," said coauthor and BYU education professor Paul Caldarella. "And if we're not addressing students' social, emotional, and behavioral struggles in school, then they're not going to do well academically, either."

"We expect students to manage their own emotional health but don't teach them how or give them the space they need to do so," added co-author Jennifer Bitton, who helped found the wellness center as the assistant principal at Westlake. "The wellness center has normalized discussions surrounding mental health. Students are no longer going home, hiding in bathrooms or hallways when they need a break—they understand that everyone has bad days, and the wellness center is there for them to use."

Having an on-site counselor, a feature of the more developed wellness centers, is also critical to its success. The counselor can gauge students' level of distress and refer students for additional professional care if necessary.

"We heard many stories from the staff about how the school's increased sensitivity to student distress has helped," Caldarella said. "In one incident, a student who came to the wellness center shared a plan to harm themselves with the counselor, and the center was able to prevent the suicide. So, who knows how many lives it's really saved? And my belief is that if you can save one life through the wellness center, it's well worth the resources you put into it."

Since the required resources are minimal—a classroom, supplies and a counselor—the group hopes that their study's findings will be a springboard for more research on wellness centers, as well as an inspiration for more schools to try them.

"In a perfect world, schools would take this concept and expand it

beyond one room, to bring calm, caring and a sense of civility to the entire school," Caldarella said. "But in the meantime, wellness centers can really help decrease the significant stressors that students are obviously facing."

More information: Malka S. Moya et al, Addressing Adolescent Stress in School: Perceptions of a High School Wellness Center, *Education and Treatment of Children* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s43494-022-00079-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s43494-022-00079-1)

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