

Community Partnerships to Address
*Mental Health
& Wellbeing*
with The Colorado Springs
School District 11



Why are suicide prevention and mental health & wellbeing activities important?

Given the crucial role that schools play in the lives of students, fostering a safe and supportive environment is critical to addressing and mitigating mental health concerns affecting our youth. Collaborative efforts between schools and the broader community are essential in preparing, empowering, and supporting the mental health of young people.

Data from the El Paso County Coroner's office collected between 2020 – 2022 underscores the necessity of school and community involvement. Our community averages seven youth deaths by suicides per year. Leading up to suicide, 60% of youth experienced a mental health problem, 43% of youth experienced a family problem, and 43% of youth experienced a school-related problem.

Additionally, the 2021 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey results found that:

- 39.6% of youth experienced feelings of depression in the past year (feeling so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities)
- 17.1% of youth seriously considered suicide in the past year
- 68.5% of youth experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

Recent coordinated community efforts have helped decrease youth suicides in El Paso County over the past two years. While this is good news, it also points to how important it is for District 11 (D11) to engage in a comprehensive community-wide approach to further decrease the number of youth suicides.

How did this idea initially take shape?

Community Health Partnership (CHP), a local nonprofit established in 1992, began meeting with D11 representatives in April 2023 to address shared concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of the district's students, teachers, staff, and parents/caregivers.

CHP's mission is to transform the way people work together to solve complex community health issues like mental health and suicide. Rather than developing and implementing solutions in isolation, CHP supports individuals and organizations in co-creating transformative solutions. Through a process of listening, learning, convening, innovating, and rebuilding, CHP develops essential skills and capacities within the community, incubates ideas, encourages proactive innovation, collaborates with diverse voices, and facilitates win-win outcomes.

Because of CHP's unique position in the community, D11's administrative leadership asked the organization to bring together community partners and D11 staff to assess how they could work together in a different, more effective way to provide additional mental health and wellbeing support for D11.

CHP convened representatives from the Suicide Prevention Collaborative of El Paso County (The Collaborative), El Paso County Public Health's Youth Suicide Prevention Workgroup, Pikes Peak Suicide Prevention Partnership (PPSPP), and D11. The goal was to assess existing assets in D11 and develop recommendations for administrative leaders and community partners to better support students, teachers, staff, and parents/caregivers.

Project AWARE and Future Aware previously facilitated conversations and processes outlined here on behalf of the district. Expanding community partnerships aligns with their goals and contributes to the overall success of the initiatives.

Who identified recommendations for D11 and community partners?

To identify and develop recommendations, an Exploration Team was formed with the following members:

- D11: Valerie Scates, Executive Director of Future Ready
- D11: Nicole Herrera, Project AWARE Coordinator
- D11: Tamara Acevedo, Chief Academic Officer
- Pikes Peak Suicide Prevention Partnership & The Collaborative: Cass Walton, Executive Director*
- Pikes Peak Suicide Prevention Partnership & The Collaborative: David Galvan, Faith-Based Liaison and Trainer
- El Paso County Public Health: Brittany Riffle, Youth Resilience and Suicide Prevention Planner**
- Community Health Partnership: Nicole Johnston, Suicide Prevention Project Manager
- Community Health Partnership: Amber Ptak, Chief Executive Officer

* The Suicide Prevention Collaborative of El Paso County (The Collaborative) is a partnership of public health professionals, health and social service agencies, nonprofit organizations, first responders, veteran organizations, businesses, faith-based groups, academic organizations, and Colorado residents working collaboratively to reduce deaths by suicide. CHP staff supports the Suicide Prevention Collaborative as a Colorado National Collaborative member, implementing the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Suicide Prevention Technical Package.

**El Paso County Public Health convenes the Youth Suicide Prevention (YSP) Workgroup, a network of community partners taking collective action in support of youth mental health and suicide prevention. The YSP Workgroup works closely with The Suicide Prevention Collaborative of El Paso County.

How were recommended partnerships developed?

The Exploration Team discussed recommendations through the lens of prevention, intervention, crisis response, and culture, as well as the perspectives of teachers/staff, students, parents/caregivers, and administrators, including the D11 Board of Education. The main themes identified include:

- Policies and procedures
- Resource flows and partnerships
- Build trust through relationships
- Address mental models that create barriers to discussing and comprehensively addressing mental health and wellbeing in the district

Many of the proposed recommendations align with Project AWARE and existing community and district initiatives. While some of these recommendations are already underway, they require additional support from administrators to expand, prioritize, and/or operationalize and socialize across the district.

This initial report aims to catalyze and/or expand relationships between D11 and community partners. It identifies tactics for the district to pursue in the next 18 months. The goal is for D11 to collaborate more closely with community partners to realize a long-term plan to support the D11 community.

We acknowledge the complexity of these issues and understand there are no simple solutions. However, there are opportunities for the district to demonstrate a new kind of leadership in this space, and community partners are eager to support it.

Recommended Partnerships

Formalize partnership with Pikes Peak Suicide Prevention to include:

- Develop a process for re-entry of students after discharge from a mental health facility to coordinate support.
- Expand Teen Mental Health First Aid opportunity to all high schools.
- Provide parent/family workshops regarding mental health education.
- Support district efforts to train staff in suicide prevention.
- Support district with suicide screening and intervention steps process and documentation.

Explore “Handle with Care” in partnership with local law enforcement.

Develop a process to prepare staff to “handle the child with care” and respond in a trauma-informed way when law enforcement encounters a child at the scene of an incident.

Continue to support school based clinical partnerships.

- Expand established partnerships with Children’s Hospital, Mindsight, In the School Counselors (ITSCO) Burning Sage Therapy and Diversus Health.
- Communicate established referral mechanism, Care Solace to the community and external mental health providers.
- Explore opportunities to sustain grant funded clinical mental health services in schools.

Resource Flows & Partnerships

Continue implementation of programming that enhances wellbeing and resilience.

Support the continued implementation of programming that increases wellbeing, help-seeking behavior, resiliency, healthy coping, and belonging. This includes social emotional cognitive skill building through programs currently in D11 such as Where Everyone Belongs, Link Crew, Kindness in the Classroom, Second Step, and Restorative Practices.

Continue to partner with the Colorado School Safety Resource Center.

Access resources for educators, emergency responders, school mental health professionals, community organizations, and parents to create safe, positive, and successful school environments for Colorado students in response to the Colorado Safe Schools Act.

Allocate adequate resources.

Dedicate sufficient financial and human resources to support mental health initiatives. Ensure that teachers, staff, coaches, and administrators have access to suicide prevention training throughout the year. Develop a sustainability plan for Project AWARE staff and resources sooner than later.



Explore and operationalize new and existing community partnerships.

Collaborate with local mental health organizations, crisis hotlines, and healthcare providers to ensure students have access to a continuum of care beyond the school setting. Develop agreements with PPSPP to expand services throughout the district. Review existing MOUs with providers and expand scopes of work, as necessary, including Diversus Health, Care Solace, Mindsight, Burning Sage, ITSCO, and Children's Hospital. Meet with leaders from Diversus and Peak Vista to explore expanding partnerships.

Develop sustainable plans to explore funding opportunities and leverage existing resources and partnerships.

Colorado Department of Education, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and congressional and senate offices allocate funding to their districts every year that may be able to support the mental health and wellness recommendations. Local funders such as Gazette Charities and Colorado Springs Health Foundation prioritize behavioral health programs.

Pursue local state and federal funding sources.

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Partner with the City of Colorado Springs.

Investigate opportunities to collaborate on after school academic and enrichment programming. Explore the Community of Many Providing After School Success (COMPASS), funded by the Colorado Department of Education with Aurora Public Schools and the City of Aurora.

Explore a ballot initiative.

Consider a ballot initiative to support infrastructure and mental health and wellness initiatives.

Build Trust and Enhance Relationships

Implement a comprehensive workplace wellness program.

Work with Human Resources to conduct a review of mental health and wellbeing resources for staff and ensure D11 is implementing best practices to enhance wellbeing. Prioritize the mental health and wellbeing of school staff by providing resources and support. Teachers and administrators who are mentally and emotionally well are better equipped to support students.

Develop peer support programs.

Implement peer support programs or clubs where students can provide support and a listening ear to their peers facing mental health challenges. Increase trust and engagement by asking students to design ways for schools to better support their mental health and wellbeing.

Increase parent and guardian engagement.

Engage parents and guardians in the school's mental health initiatives. Host informational sessions, workshops, and support groups to help parents understand the signs of distress and how to support their children. Meet parents where they are, including school events, PTA meetings, and back-to-school events. Add modules to Schoology for parents to access mental health resources.

Challenge Mental Models and Increase Education/Awareness Activities

Prioritize training for administrators, teachers, staff, parents/caregivers, and students.

Expand training on recognizing the signs of distress, depression, and suicidal ideation in students. Programs like Mental Health First Aid, QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer), ASIST, and Youth Mental Health First Aid can equip educators with the skills needed to identify and respond to at-risk students.

Increase opportunities for student-led education and awareness activities.

Continue and expand mental health education programs within the curriculum to raise awareness and provide students with tools to manage their own mental health and seek help when needed. Increase access to Teen Mental Health First Aid for high school students. Implement age-appropriate mental health and suicide prevention education programs with all students. Expand opportunities for students about emotional well-being, stress management, coping strategies, and how to seek help for themselves or their peers.



Promote a supportive, connected environment.

Foster a school environment that promotes connectedness, empathy, and inclusivity. Encourage positive relationships between students and staff. Model this behavior at school board meetings, faculty meetings, and other connections. Organize school-wide awareness campaigns during Suicide Prevention Month and throughout the year. Use posters, assemblies, and social media to educate students and staff about the warning signs of suicide and available resources. Create a school environment that fosters a sense of belonging and connectedness among students. Encourage clubs, extracurricular activities, and initiatives that help students build positive relationships with peers and adults.

Increase regular communication about mental health and wellbeing.

Maintain open and regular communication with students, staff, and parents about the school's commitment to mental health and suicide prevention. Encourage a culture of speaking openly about mental health. Create more opportunities for leadership to lead by demonstrating high Emotional Intelligence and Social Emotional Learning best practices.

What are the next steps to implement a D11 Mental Health and Wellness Plan?

CHP was asked to convene community partners to listen and learn about ongoing mental health needs in D11. CHP engaged partners to develop a robust, comprehensive collaborative approach addressing the mental health and wellness of students, staff, leadership, and the broader community. The recommendations outlined above will take a multi-year approach. D11 will begin with a one-year Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan that outlines recommendations, team lead organizations, and data collection needed to track outcomes.

D11, Project AWARE, and community partners will work together to coordinate strategies and outcomes developed in the one-year plan. D11 will assess progress and needs to inform its subsequent multi-year strategy. CHP looks forward to the continued innovation and transformation of this work as it becomes embedded in students, staff, parents, board, leadership, and the overall school community.