

# *Board of Education*

## *Mesa County Valley School District 51*

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*Board Special Meeting Minutes*

*February 13, 2024*

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### **Board Special Meeting Minutes**

- A - José Luis Chávez
- B - Barb Evanson
- C - Andrea Haitz
- D - Will Jones
- E - Angela Lema

**Board of Education**  
**Mesa County Valley School District 51**  
**Board Work Session: February 13, 2024**  
**Adopted: March 26, 2024**

	A	B	C	D	E
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<b>AGENDA ITEMS</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
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Present:

x	x	x	x	x	x
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**BOARD SPECIAL MEETING/BOARD RETREAT**  
**Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance**

5:05 p.m.

President Andrea Haitz called the meeting to order at 5:05 p.m. and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

**1. Board Goals Facilitation**

- Mr. George Welsh, Senior Partner at CEI came forward, along with Mr. Alex Carter, Vice President Field Implementation at CEI, to explain they would “tag-team” the Board facilitation.
- A team-building exercise was done between the Board members.
- Mr. Welsh presented regarding norms, agreements, roles and responsibilities of the Board.
- How the Board should communicate with each other, and to the media, was discussed.
- Mr. Welsh will provide a written copy of the agreed upon procedures to the Board within a couple days following this meeting.
- An exercise was done to express what the Board and Superintendent felt were the duties of the Superintendent, duties of Board and what duties are shared.
- Mr. Welsh shared responses given in his previous individual one-on-one interviews with the Board members. This included what members thought were positive actions that are being taken, goals to accomplish this year, and greatest hopes for the District to be accomplished.
- Mr. Welsh will send copies of draft goals and evaluations for the Board and Superintendent. It was discussed to possibly have a Board Retreat review time in the fall and evaluations in the Spring.

[Recess 6:20 p.m. Resume 6:30 p.m.]

**2. Strategic Plan Overview**

- Mr. Alex Carter, Vice President Field Implementation at CEI, presented.
- He explained that out of 175 Colorado school districts, only 75 have a strategic plan and only about 25 of those are actually working/practicing their strategic plan.
- Three focus areas of the strategic plan were discussed; Students, Staff and Community. The plan includes a synopsis of everything that the community stated they wanted for their school and district.
- The D51 plan was written in 2019 and expires at the end of next year.
- The last pages of the strategic plan describe how we know if we are meeting the goals, how to carry out the goals and how to measure the progress.
- The Board questioned next steps and it was explained a five year plan would normally follow. Mr. Carter described what the next round would look like if we continue with CEI. The District would be encouraged to lean in further next time for a bigger push, using items from the first plan that are still working.

[Recess 7:00 p.m. to set up for next presentation. Resume 7:05 p.m.]

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**Board of Education**  
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A B C D E

**AGENDA ITEMS**

**ACTION**

3. Social Worlds and Youth Well-Being Study Update
  - Ms. Anna Mueller, PhD, Professor at Indiana University, and Mr. Seth Abrutyn came forward to present their findings. Findings in D51 were specifically discussed.
  - Ms. Mueller discussed goals of understanding how schools work to prevent suicide and support student well-being, identifying elements that impede or enhance suicide prevention strategies in school, and to leverage knowledge to develop strategies schools can use to prevent youth suicide.
  - Data regarding suicide rates among people aged 15-19 was discussed.
  - Mesa County suicide rates demonstrated were higher than both Colorado and the US. rates, and local rates showed a younger population at risk.
  - Ms. Mueller has collaborated with D51 to find a plan that works well in schools, including shadowing 271 D51 school staff and observing how staff support kids when in crisis situations.
  - Ms. Mueller discussed what youth had to say about how school staff can help them, and the role of schools in suicide prevention. Challenges of schools prioritizing suicide prevention were also discussed.
  - Survey results were reviewed describing the frequency of staff helping with suicide prevention.
  - Mr. Seth Abrutyn discussed how to build effective suicide prevention in schools, including MTSS (Multi-tier System Support) and how it is implemented and gaining staff support.
  - Communication barriers with non-English speaking families/students, and legal liability issues expressed by staff were also discussed.
  - Ms. Mueller went on to discuss the next steps beyond the school district, including needing more transportation, having limited activities, and improving access to mental health crisis care.
  - Initial recommendations were made.
  - Questions from the Board were discussed and answered.
  
4. Board Open Discussion
 

The Board discussed that once information was received from Mr. Welsh, each individual Board member will set their own goals. Norms can possibly be placed on the left side of agendas instead of what is currently displayed.
  
5. Adjournment

8:26 p.m.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Amy Navarette, Assistant Secretary  
 Board of Education



## Proposed Governance Operations and Relationship Norms



# Our Team

The **Mesa County School District 51 Governance Team** consists of five elected board directors working collaboratively with the Superintendent of Schools, each adhering to their defined roles, respecting each other's opinions, acting as a team, and relying on the Superintendent, administration, and staff to provide information and expertise to drive the district toward its vision.



# Our Communication Expectations

**Communication** within the Governance Team shall always **include the ENTIRE Governance Team.**

To ensure open and honest discourse, there is an expectation of **confidentiality** between Board Directors and the Superintendent **when communication not subject to Colorado's Sunshine Act takes place.**

In such instances and knowing that on occasion a Board Director may find themselves in the presence of another Director and may discuss district matters, to build trust it is agreed **such conversations will remain confidential**, knowing transparent deliberation will take place in a public meeting giving each Board Director the opportunity to speak for themselves.

The Superintendent will provide weekly updates **to the entire community regarding matters of importance to the district.**

The Superintendent will also provide occasional **Board Notification** messages to all Directors, with the aim of answering questions from individual Directors, addressing specific situations that have arisen, and preparing Directors for upcoming meeting action items.

It is understood **the ENTIRE Board will receive the same information,** leaving no member out of the loop.

Each Director will faithfully read these messages and circle back to the Superintendent **and the rest of the Board** for clarification, if needed.

When appropriate, the **Superintendent will refer Directors to staff members** they can contact for more detailed information.

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Each Director will faithfully read these messages and circle back to the Superintendent **and the rest of the Board** for clarification, if needed.

When appropriate, the **Superintendent will refer Directors to staff members** they can contact for more detailed information.

The **Superintendent and the Board President will meet on a weekly basis** for the purpose of planning future Board meeting agendas.

Additionally, to further develop relationships and lines of communication, the **Superintendent will meet individually with all other Board Directors** approximately once a month.

**Requests for information from Board Directors shall flow through the Superintendent of Schools and the Board President**, and responses to such requests shall be shared among the entire Governance Team **in a timely manner**.

Prior to, or during Board meetings, if it pertains to the agenda, all **Board Directors are welcome to ask for clarifying information** regarding action items they have been asked to vote on.



# Emergency Communication

A **district emergency** is defined as a life altering crisis or matter of urgency that develops quickly and **requires the full attention of the Superintendent.**

When a **district emergency** occurs, the Board understands the Superintendent will focus on the emergency, then **contact the ENTIRE Board via a group text message as soon as possible to explain the nature of the emergency.**

If the Superintendent does not have time to send a message, they will contact the Board President as soon as possible to explain the emergency, and **the Board President will pass information on to all other Board Directors.** This communication will be as factual and concise as possible, and in such circumstances, the Superintendent is free to refer Board Directors to staff members who can provide more detailed information.

Following emergencies, and only when time allows, the **Superintendent will contact each Board Director individually by phone, or as a group in writing**, to explain the situation in detail.

**Heads up communication** is defined as matters that lie somewhere between routine and emergency. When such communication is necessary, the **Superintendent will reach out to the ENTIRE Board via a group text as soon as possible**, not waiting for the weekly district update, nor sending an email Board Notification to communicate such matters.



# Communication With Media

When general inquiries about district business are made by media outlets, it is agreed **the Superintendent of Schools will serve as the mouthpiece of the district.** Board Directors agree to defer to the Superintendent, who will rely on the district's Public Information Officer and other district staff for expert support, when such communication with the media must take place.

When a **message must be sent on behalf of the Mesa County School District 51 Board of Education,** the Board President or highest available ranking officer will deliver it, only **after consultation with the district's Public Information Officer and the ENTIRE Board.**

It is also recognized that, on occasion, individual Board Directors will be asked to comment on their position regarding agenda items. When asked to do so, individual **Directors will seek advice and support from the Public Information Officer as they craft their response.**



# Fielding Concerns

When a **matter of concern to a member of the school community comes to an individual Board Director**, the Director will first listen carefully. Then, using their personal judgment, the Director shall refer the person with the concern to the proper level of the chain of command within the district to address it, looping in those staff members who will likely be approached about the concern.

**If** in the judgement of the Director, **the concern is of great importance**, they will directly **contact the Superintendent** by text or a phone call to inform them of the matter. If the matter does not require an immediate response, an email to the Superintendent, copied to each Board Director, will be sent.



**Emails from the community or staff** sent to any individual Board Director **are to be shared with all members of the Board and the Superintendent**, to be treated as public comment. As such, while all members of the Board read all emails, the Board understands it does not have to reply except when it agrees to as an ENTIRE Board.

**ALL Board Directors** understand they **have no authority to address concerns of school community members as individuals**. Directors can only address concerns when they are brought before the ENTIRE Board.

In each instance referenced above, **the action the Superintendent takes regarding any concern referred at that level will be communicated back to ALL Board Directors** and the Superintendent and Board Director who reported the concern will come to an agreement as to who will circle back with a response to the individual or group that voiced the concern.



# Conflicts

The Mesa County School District 51 Board of Education defines a **conflict of interest** as a circumstance **when an individual Board Director could benefit personally or financially from a decision of the Board**. In such cases, Board Directors will disclose their conflict, seek advice from the district's attorney, then recuse themselves from discussing and voting on the matter if appropriate.

In democratic processes such as conducting Board business, it is understood there will occasionally be disagreement. **Assuming all information needed for Board Directors to make an informed decision on an action item has been provided**, if the board **decides on a split vote**, dissenters will be given an opportunity to explain their stance. However, in the end the entire Board will pledge to support the decision of the majority and take no action to undermine it.

# Possible Board Goals



# Worthy of Celebration

The pragmatic way we've approached decision-making in a data driven fashion, such as when we made difficult decisions about school closings. We did so in a succinct and kind way, while fulfilling our fiduciary responsibility to taxpayers.

Attracting and retaining high-quality educators and paying them fairly, thanks to significant raises for all staff during the last two years.

Getting organized, focused, and bringing a level of professionalism to the board room. We act professionally, worthy of the largest employer on the Western Slope.



# Worthy of Celebration

Finalizing the strategic plan that was nearly complete when we came into our positions. Those who pushed for change are starting to see positive results.

Increased student achievement and year over year growth.

Our work on the new Grand Junction High School, including the approval of an early childhood center within.



What We  
Wish  
to  
Accomplish  
this  
Year!

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To work as a collaborative unit, model civility, and come together to make decisions in the best interests of students.

To develop policy to move the district in a clear direction ensuring all are up to date and address the modern challenges in our schools.

To sustain the positive trajectory of the district by improving learning outcomes and compensating staff fairly.

To create a committee of students with diverse learning experiences to engage and inform the board about desired improvements.

# Our Greatest Hope

for the



To be recognized as most outstanding school district in Colorado when it comes to . . . .

- student achievement and learning growth
- providing exceptional learning opportunities that prepare students for the real world
- making ALL children feel welcome, safe, and supported for success
- making teachers feel valued, appreciated, and heard as they strive for excellent outcomes
- addressing funding challenges by investing resources wisely to achieve success

*. . . Simply stated, to be THE place  
parents take their children to grow and prosper.*





# The Social Worlds & Youth Well-Being Study



*Identifying Strategies to Improve Suicide Prevention on the Western Slope*

## The Final Report

**Anna S. Mueller**

**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY & THE IRSAY INSTITUTE, INDIANA UNIVERSITY**

**Seth Abrutyn**

**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

# Co-Investigator



Sarah Diefendorf, PhD  
Indiana University



# Research Assistants

Brindin  
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James Watkins  
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Katie Beardall  
IU



Hillary Steinberg, PhD  
U.S. Census



Jienian Zhang,  
PhD, IU



Lauren Beard  
University of  
Chicago



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IU

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Dorado  
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IU



Robert Gallagher  
IU



Olivia DeCrane  
IU



Hannah Worton  
(formerly) IU



Sidney  
Morris  
IU

Tamya  
Houston  
IU

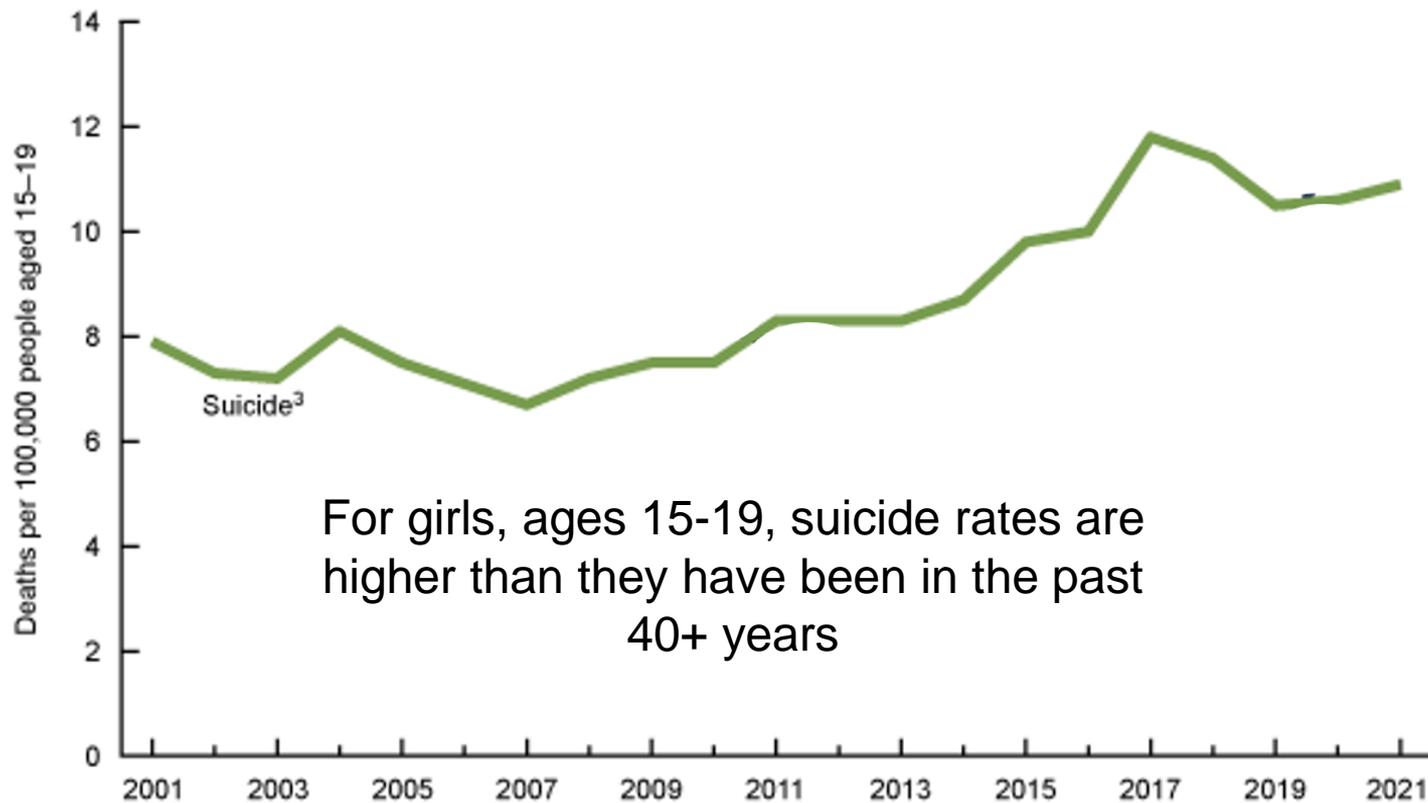


# Study Goals

- To understand how schools work to prevent suicide and support student well-being (i.e. learn *from* school staff)
- To identify elements that impede or enhance suicide prevention strategies in schools and their districts
- To leverage this knowledge to develop sustainable, effective, and equitable strategies schools can use to prevent suicide among youth.

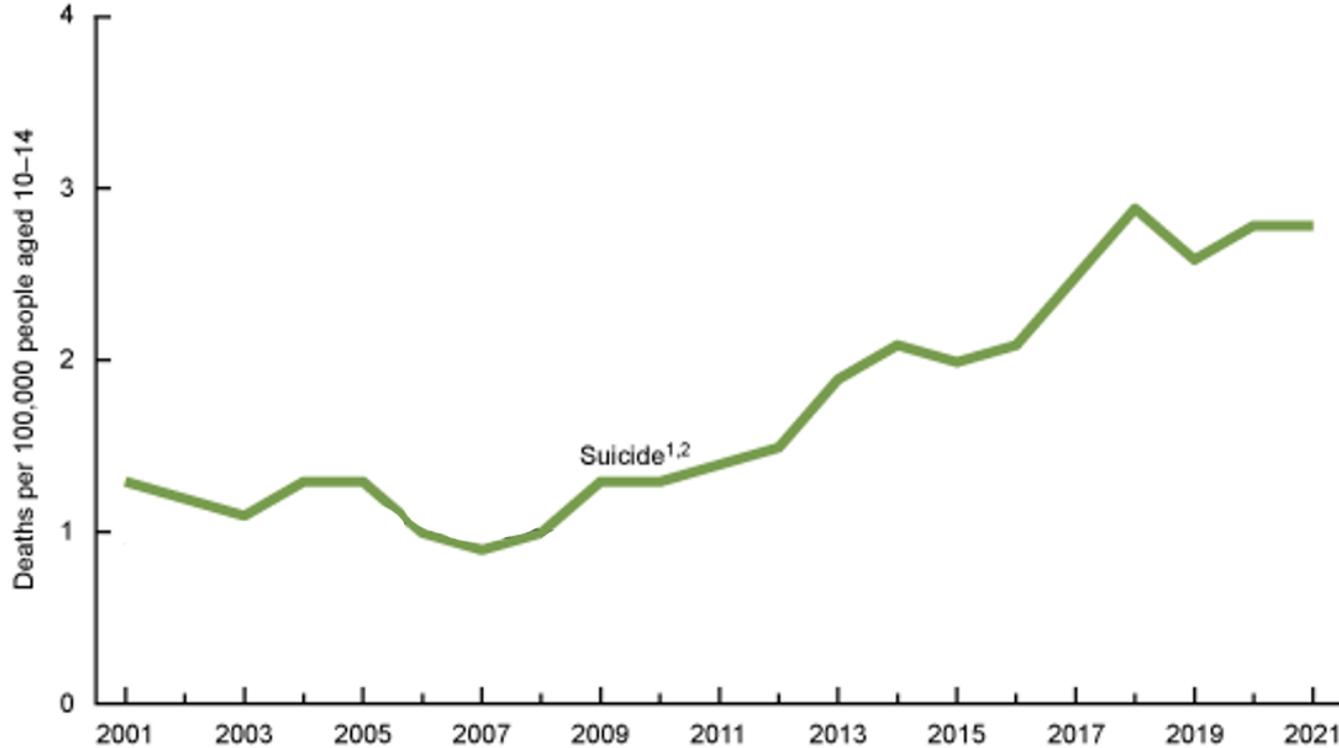


## Suicide rate among people aged 15–19: United States, 2001–2021



SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality data file.

## Suicide rate among people aged 10–14: United States, 2001–2021



This is a  
national  
crisis



SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality data file.

# Mesa County is Particularly Impacted by Suicide

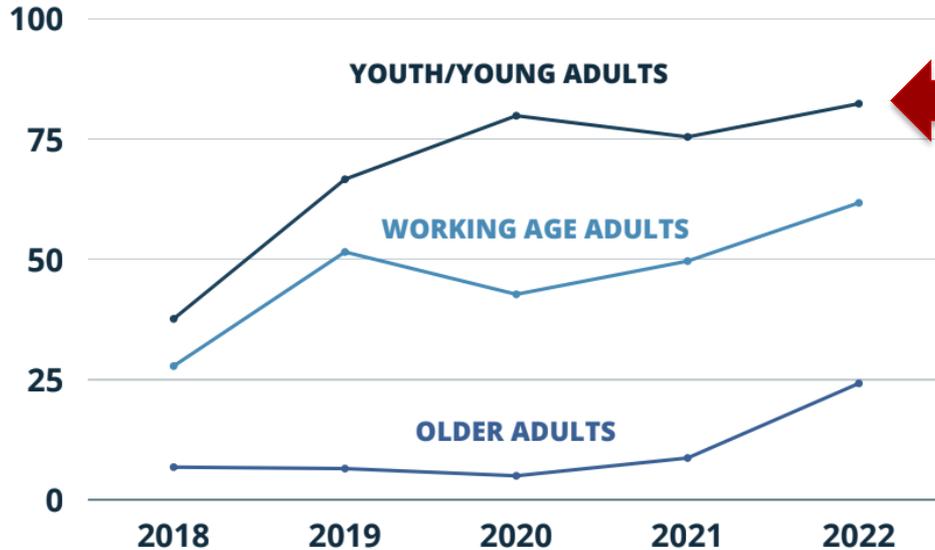


**RATE OF SUICIDE DEATH PER 100,000 IN MESA COUNTY, COLORADO, AND THE UNITED STATES (2009-2022)**

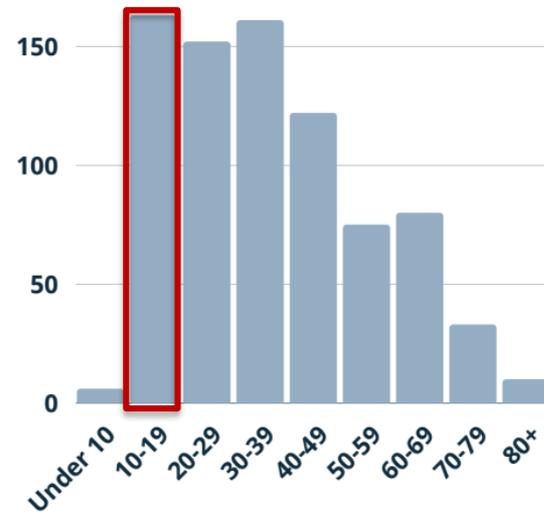


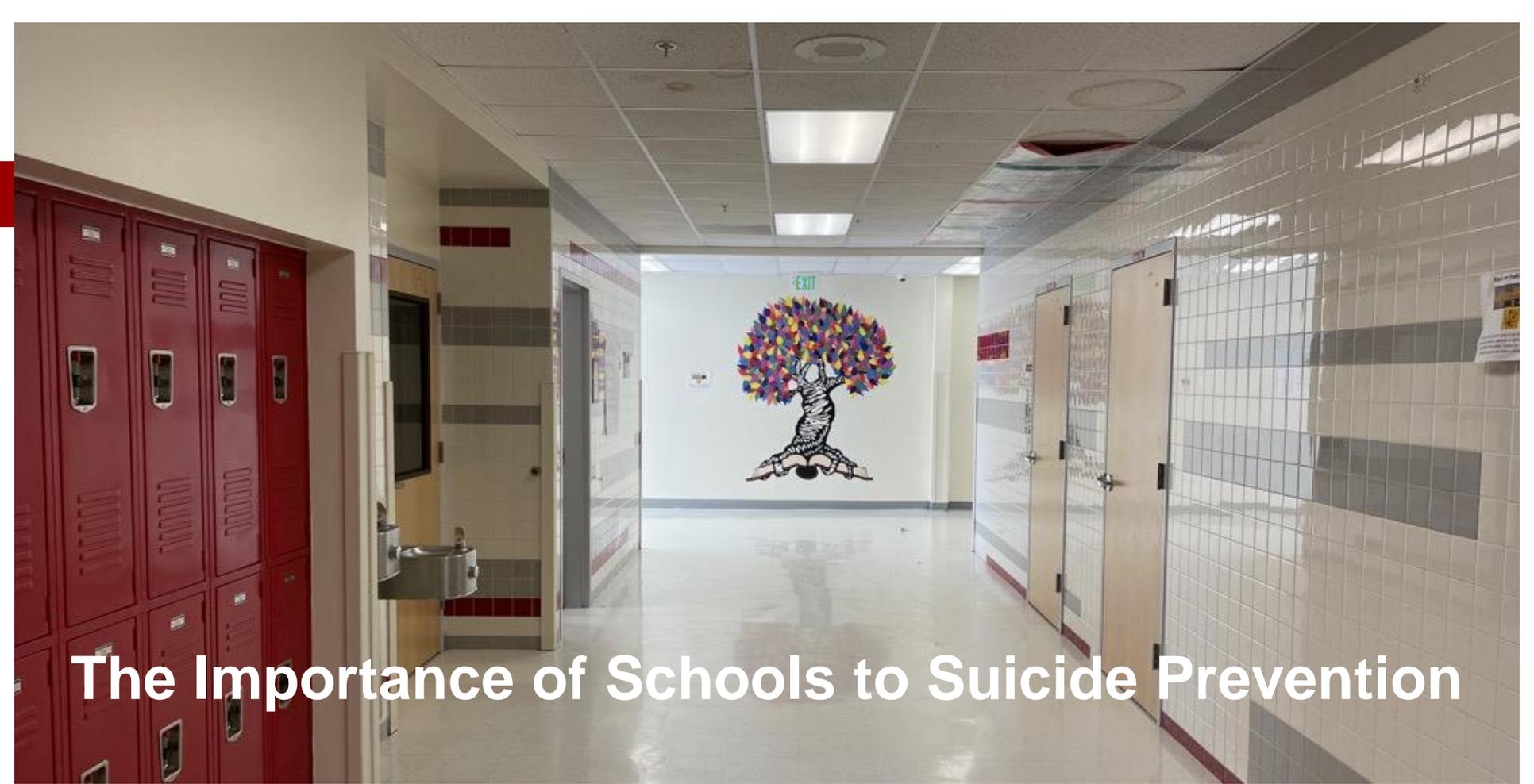
# Mesa County's Children are Particularly Vulnerable

**EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT VISITS BY AGE GROUP**



**AGE DISTRIBUTION, SUICIDE ATTEMPTS AND IDEATION**





# The Importance of Schools to Suicide Prevention



# FUNDING



LEAVE YOUR MARK...

**WESTERN COLORADO  
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION**

*Charitable Funds for Community Good*



National Institute  
of Mental Health



# Methods

- **Data**

- **Participant Observations**

- (N=271)**

- Almost 3 school years; mostly school staff

- **Interviews (N=281)**

- Students (Youth) (n=48)
    - Young adults (n=4)
    - Families (n=69)
    - School & district staff (n=164);
    - Community members (n=12)

- **Surveys**

- Family: N=701
    - School & District staff: N=568
      - Response rate: 75%

- **Field Researchers**

- Seth Abrutyn, PhD
  - Anna Mueller, PhD
  - Jienian Zhang, PhD
  - Olivia DeCrane, BA
  - Katie Beardall, MA
  - Robert Gallagher, MA
  - Hillary Steinberg, PhD
  - Sarah Diefendorf, PhD



# Highlights from the Final Report



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# Youth's Insights

1. Listen to youth
2. Participate in developing mental health promotion strategies
3. Don't judge me
4. Don't label me as "bad"
5. Give us stuff to do



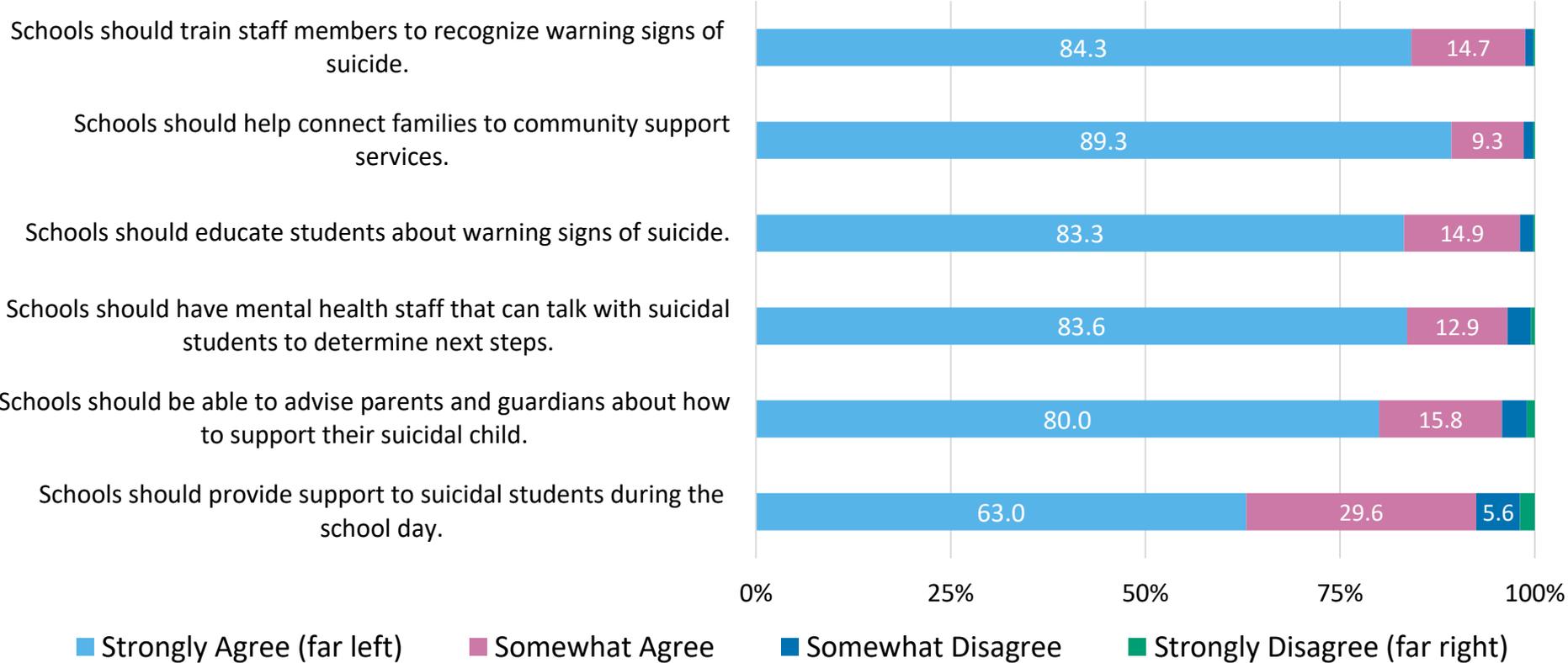
# The Role of Schools in Suicide Prevention

## 1. Bottom Line:

- Staff embrace suicide prevention as part of the work of schools
- Families concur



## Figure 2: Overall, Families Agree that Schools Should Play a Role in Suicide Prevention.



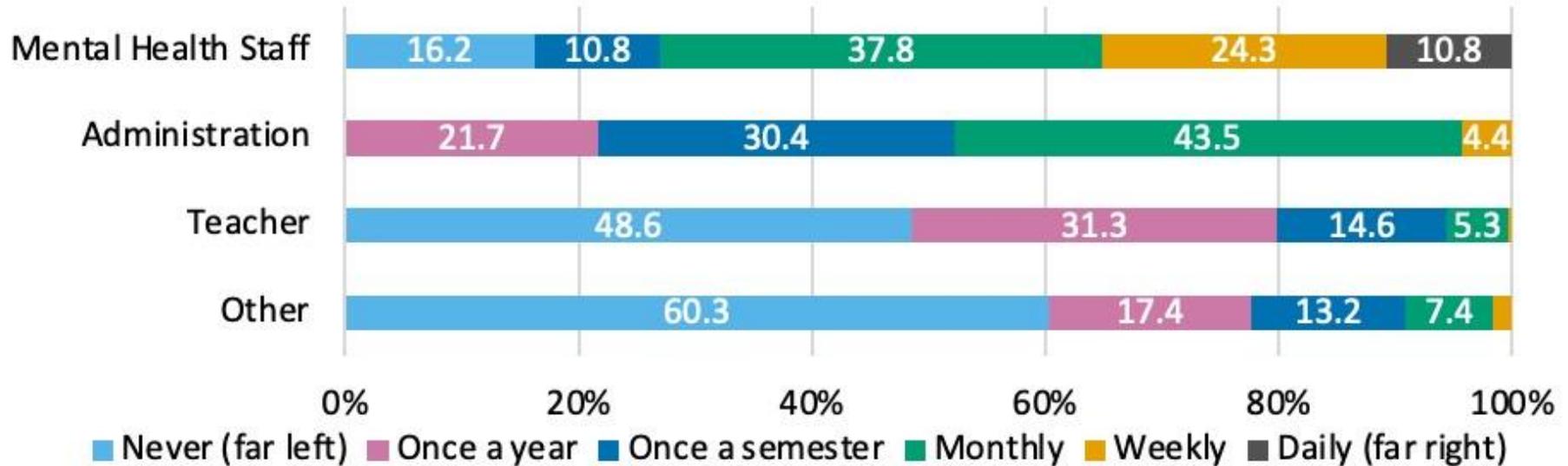
# Challenges to Schools Prioritizing Suicide Prevention

1. Balancing academics versus social-emotional wellbeing
2. Resource scarcity, including not being able to fill positions
3. Some families recognize schools are overburdened and wish a different social institution could pick up this slack

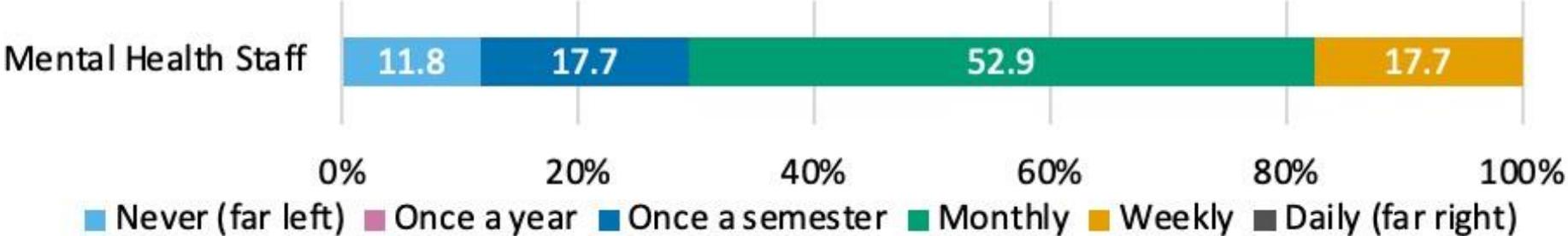


# Prevalence of Suicide Prevention Work in Schools

**Figure 6: Staff's Response to "How Often Do You Ask a Student if they are Thinking About Suicide?"**

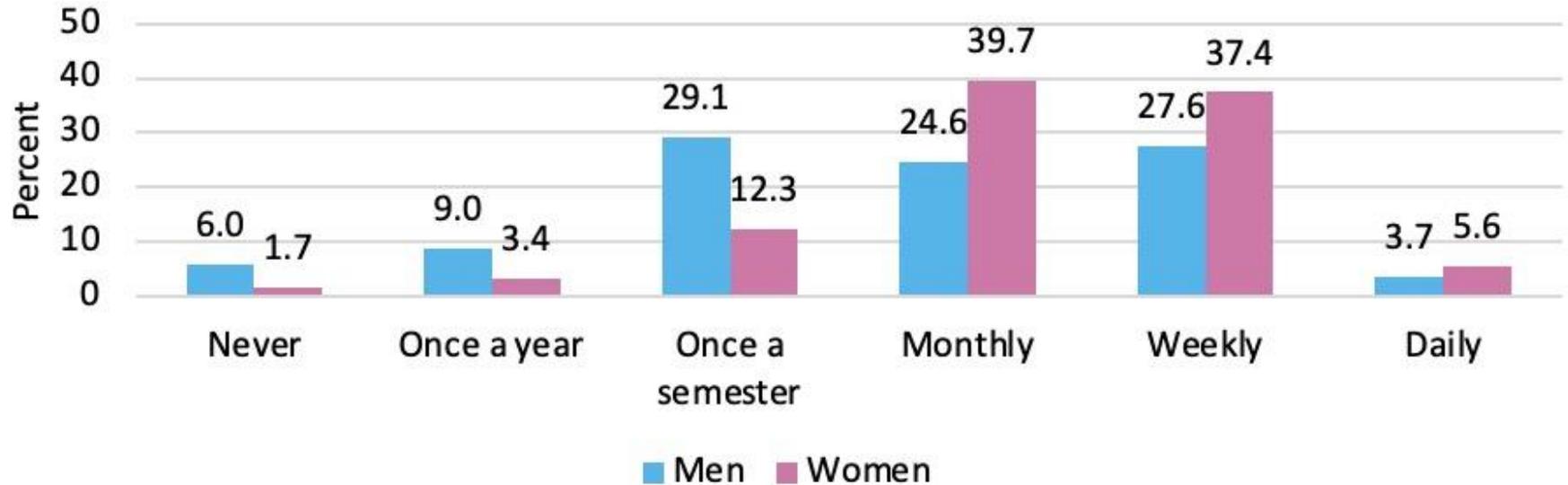


**Figure 8A: Mental Health Staff's Response to "How Often Do You Screen a Student for Suicide Risk?"**



# Demographic Differences in Who Does SP Work

**Figure 9A: How Often Teachers Send Distressed Students to the Counselor Differs by Gender**



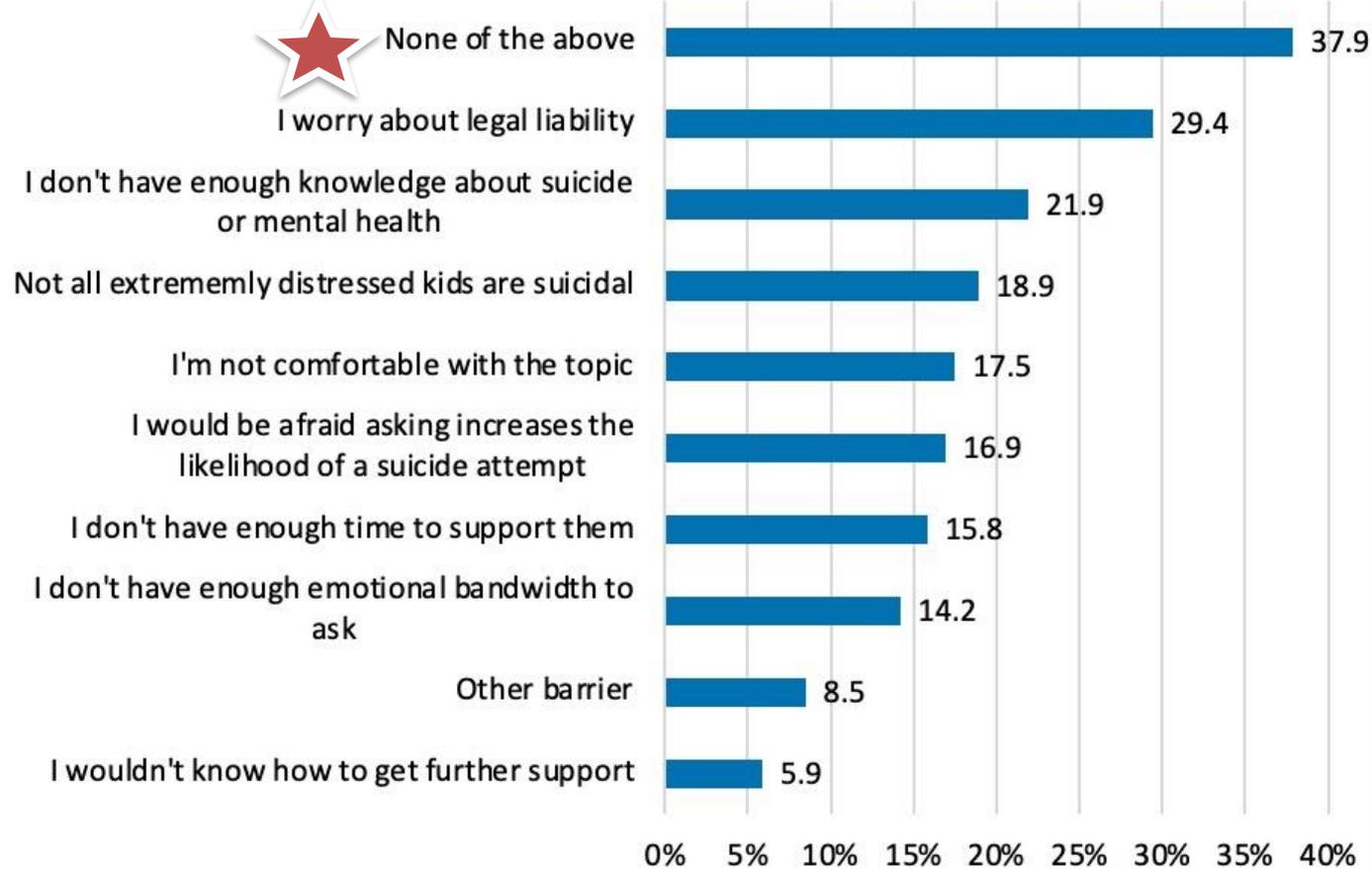
# What Enables Staff's SP Work

1. A clear understanding that it is their job
2. High quality suicide prevention training has an effect on the margins for teachers
  - It encourages teachers who otherwise would never do this work, to do it once a year
3. Staff with more comfort and knowledge about mental health topics
  - Suicide, trauma



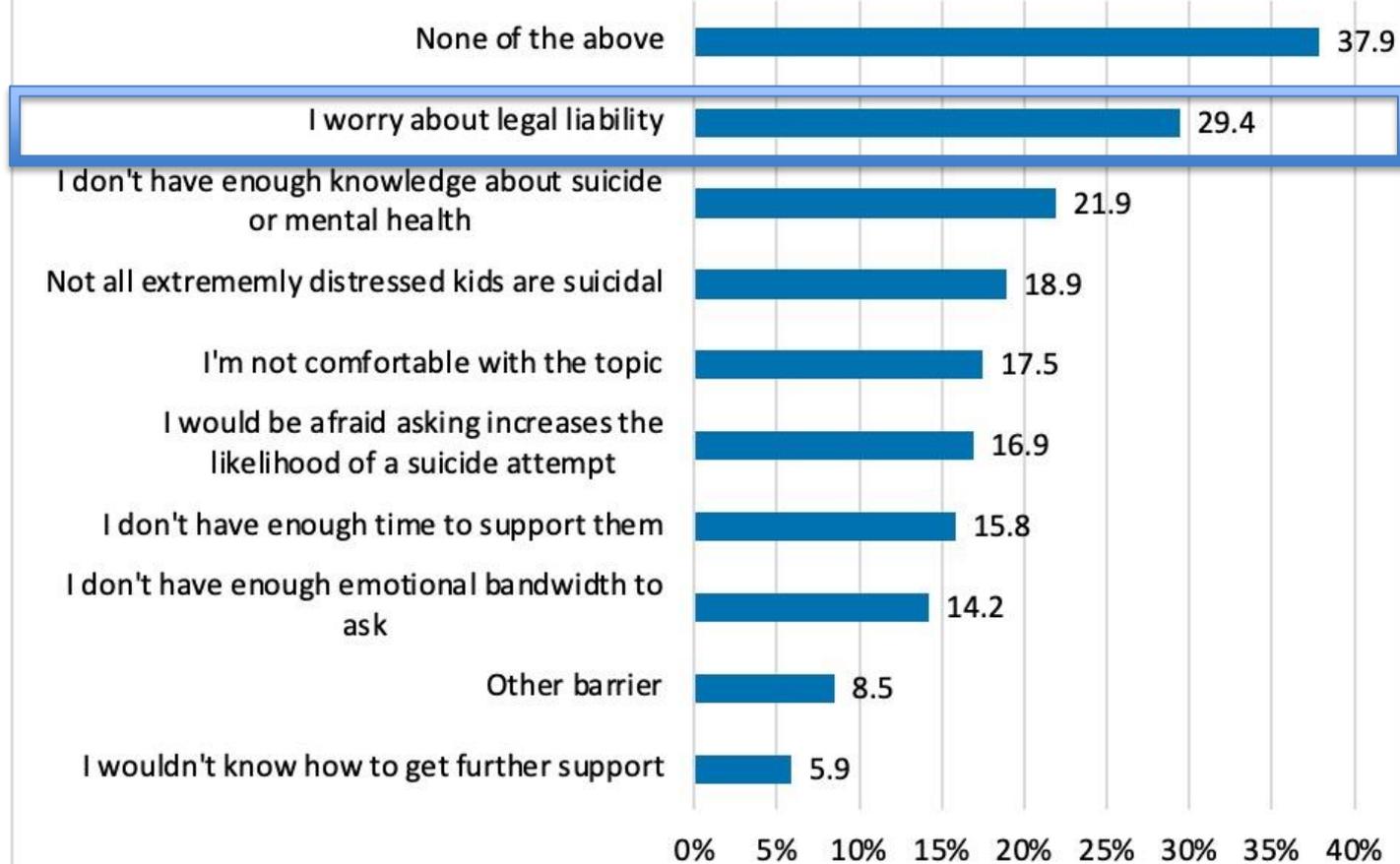
# Barriers to Critical SP Work

**Figure 10: Barriers that Staff Report Would Stop Them from Asking an Extremely Distressed Student “Are you thinking of killing yourself?”**



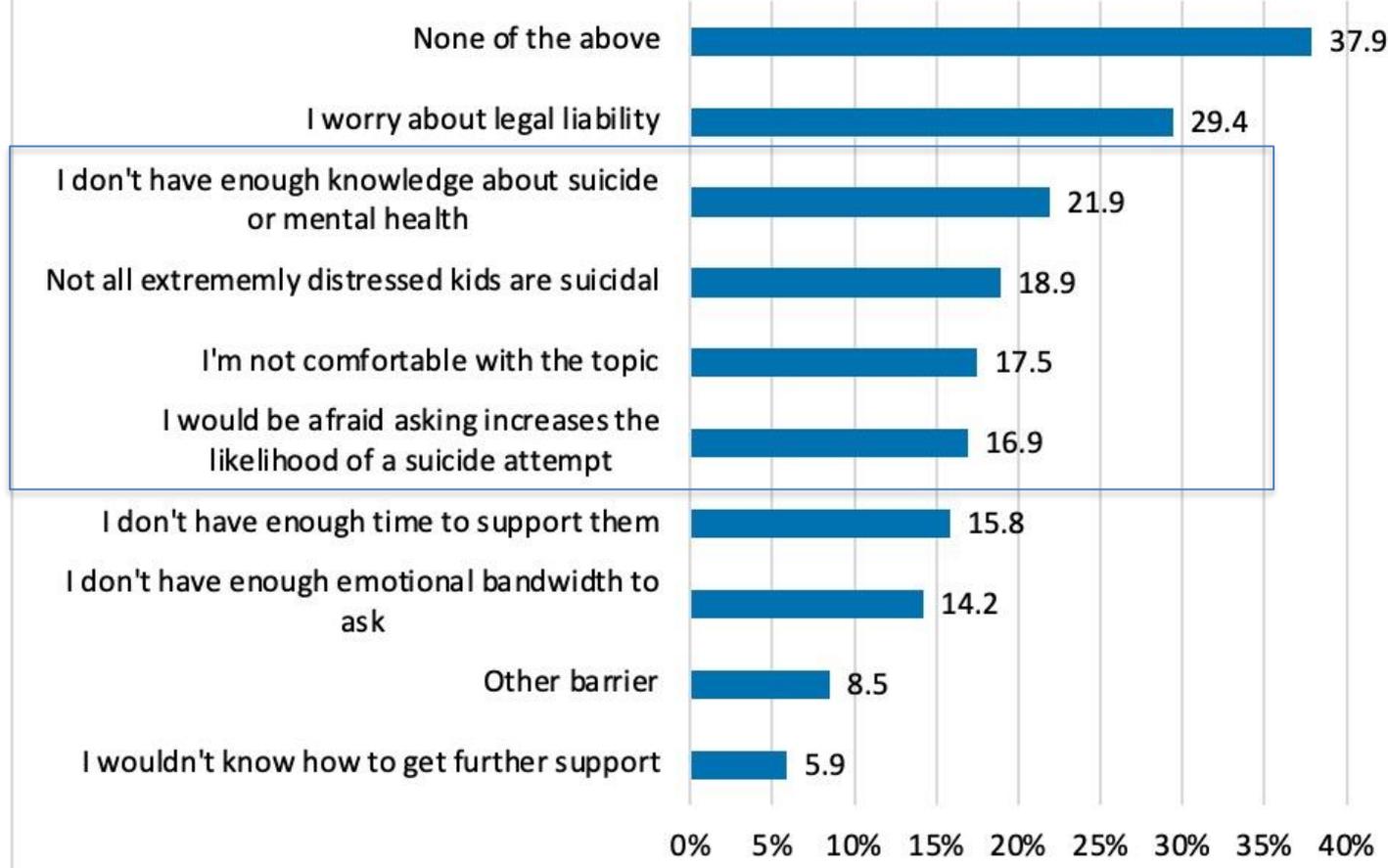
# Legal Liability as a Barrier

Figure 10: Barriers that Staff Report Would Stop Them from Asking an Extremely Distressed Student "Are you thinking of killing yourself?"



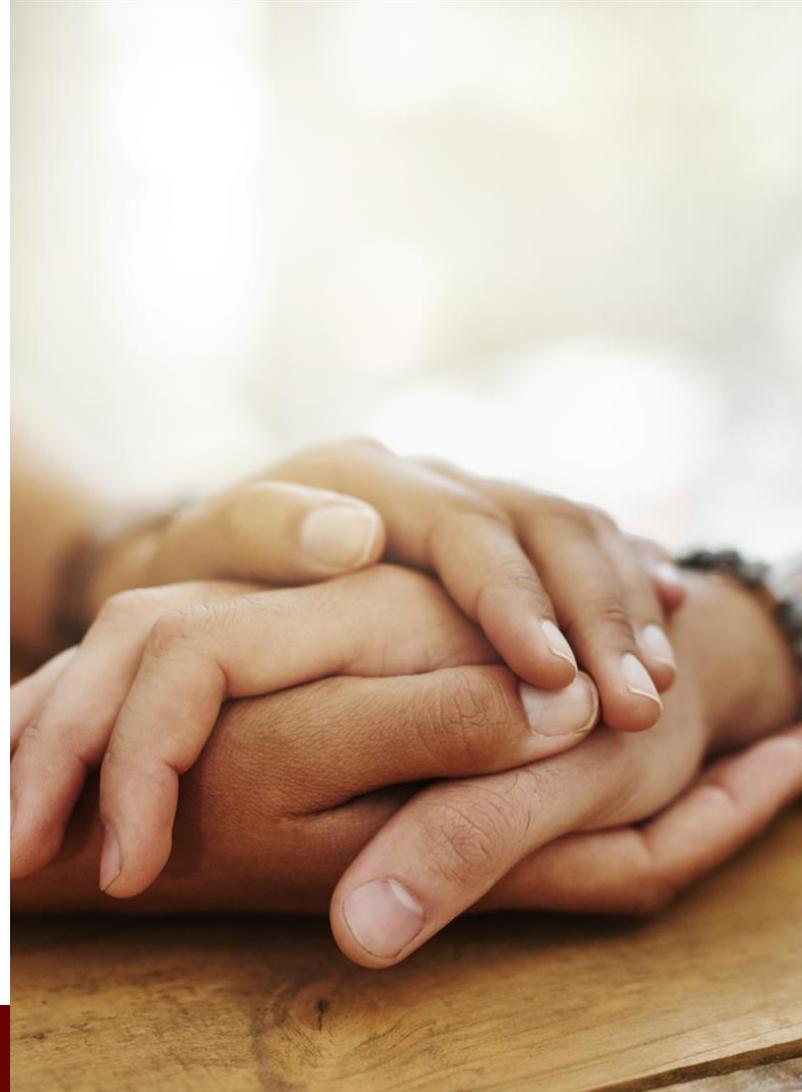
# Knowledge Gaps as a Barrier

**Figure 10: Barriers that Staff Report Would Stop Them from Asking an Extremely Distressed Student “Are you thinking of killing yourself?”**



# Supporting Teacher's Well-Being

1. Among teachers, we found that, on average, teachers who do more work to prevent suicide and support student mental health report higher levels of secondary trauma
  - though we are not able to establish the cause and effect in this relationship – this is merely an association



# Factors Associated with an Increase Secondary Trauma in Teachers

## 1. Worrying about legal liability;

## 2. Work Life Balance Issues

- Feeling they don't have enough emotional bandwidth to engage in suicide prevention work;
- Feeling that if they focus on student mental health that they can't fulfill their other work responsibilities;
- Feeling they don't have enough time to support student's mental health.

## 3. Negative Attitudes towards Mental Health Work

- E.g., Believing it shouldn't be their job to support student's mental health.



# Factors Associated with an Decrease Secondary Trauma in Teachers

1. Having faith in District **protocols**
2. Having mental health relevant **knowledge**
3. Having **social support** at work
  - Colleagues they can turn to for information and emotional support



# Building Effective Suicide Prevention Strategies in Schools

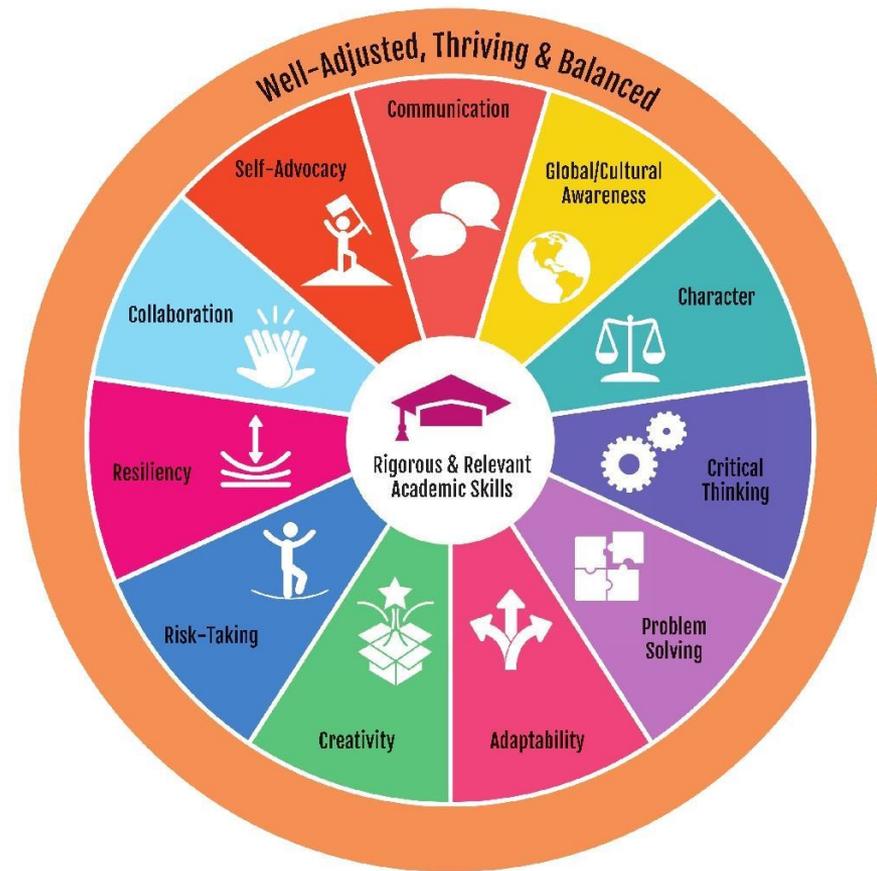


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# The Foundation

1. Whole Child Educational Philosophy
  2. Culture of Belonging
- We have found that these increase student's willingness to seek help from school staff



## Well-Adjusted, Thriving & Balanced

Physical well-being, emotional well-being, positive relationships and social awareness, self-awareness, self-management and happiness.



# Special Issues with Belonging

1. Students who aren't "ideal" students
2. Gender & Sexual Minority Youth
3. Racially Minoritized Youth
4. Sensitivity to youth who have gone through trauma



# Building Systems

For Advice on What Strong MTSS Systems at the HS  
Level Look Like Please See Pg 64 of the Report

1. MTSS could be more effectively harnessed to support students in some schools
  - There's wide variation in how MTSS is implemented
  - Not all staff believe MTSS is worthwhile; Need uniform leadership buy in
2. Focus on:
  - Use the system for academic, behavioral, engagement, and mental health/social emotional challenges (an integrative whole child approach)
  - Pursue root causes of student problems
  - Including more staff in the process, especially teachers (non-school counselors)
  - Clear referral protocols (so that it gets used)
  - Improve strategies to prevent information loss



# Addressing Communication Barriers

**Juanita (a mother):**

I'll call [my son's school] because my son has appointments and I want to go pick him up. I call [and] say "Spanish" [to the person who answers the phone] and they say "One moment" and then send me to an answering machine...I need them to respond to me at the moment, not leave a message. I need someone to respond to me at that moment because my son is about to have an appointment. I need to go pick him up.

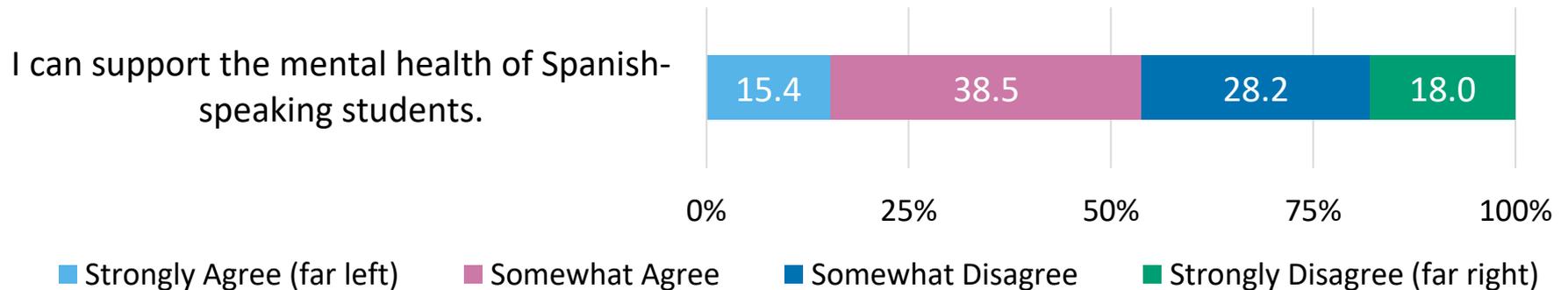


[translated from Spanish]



# Addressing Communication Barriers

**Figure 12: Over 45 percent of mental health staff doubt their ability to support the mental health of Spanish-speaking students**



A wide landscape view of a valley with a rainbow in the sky. The foreground shows a rocky, sparsely vegetated hillside. The middle ground features a valley with scattered buildings and trees. In the background, there are rolling hills and a large, flat-topped mesa under a blue sky with scattered clouds. A vibrant rainbow arches across the upper portion of the sky.

# The District's Role



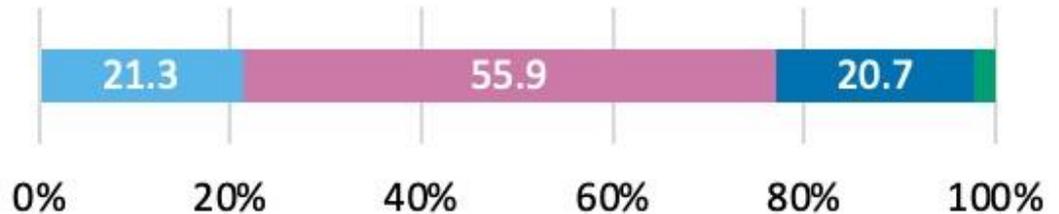
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# In general, the majority of teaching and support staff feel district policies protect them

**Figure 19: About 77 percent of classroom staff AGREE that district protocols for supporting suicidal students protect them from legal liability**

District protocols for supporting suicidal students protect me from legal liability.



■ Strongly Agree (far left) ■ Somewhat Agree ■ Somewhat Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree (far right)



# Additional District Level Issues

1. All forms should conform to evidence based standards
2. Clarify expectations for staff with regard to suicide prevention
  - Everyone contributes to building a culture of care and belonging for students
  - Non-mental health staff need to help identify and refer kids to counselors +
  - Mental health staff must be ready and able to complete an evidence-based suicide risk review and advise parents or guardians on appropriate next steps



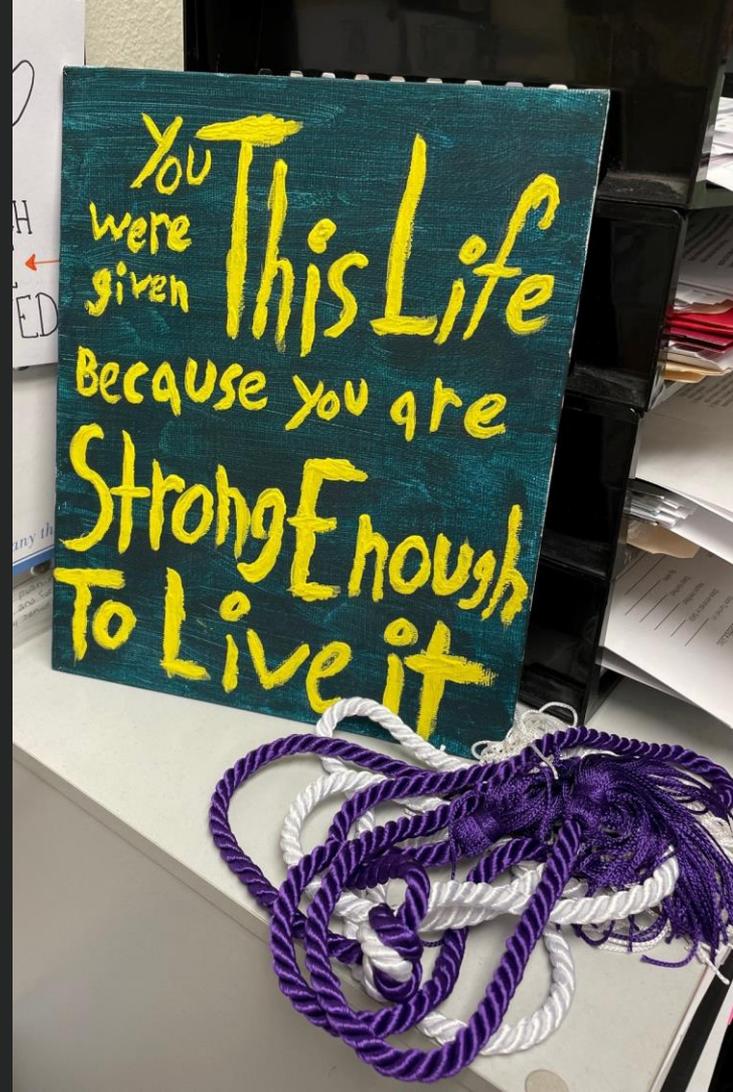
# Beyond the School District



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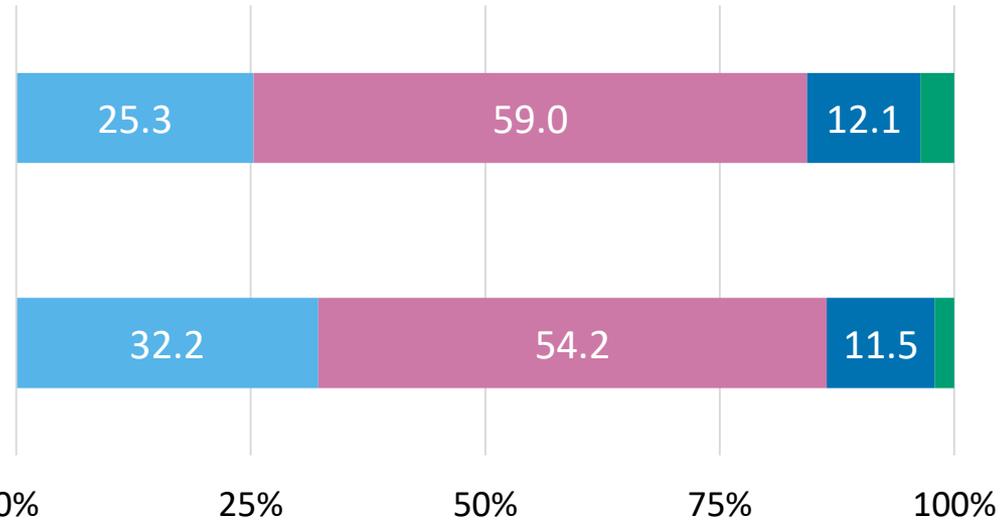
# Beyond the School District

- Community Resources
  - Limited Activities
  - Need for transportation
- Improve access to mental health crisis care
- Diminish suicide in suicide hotspots

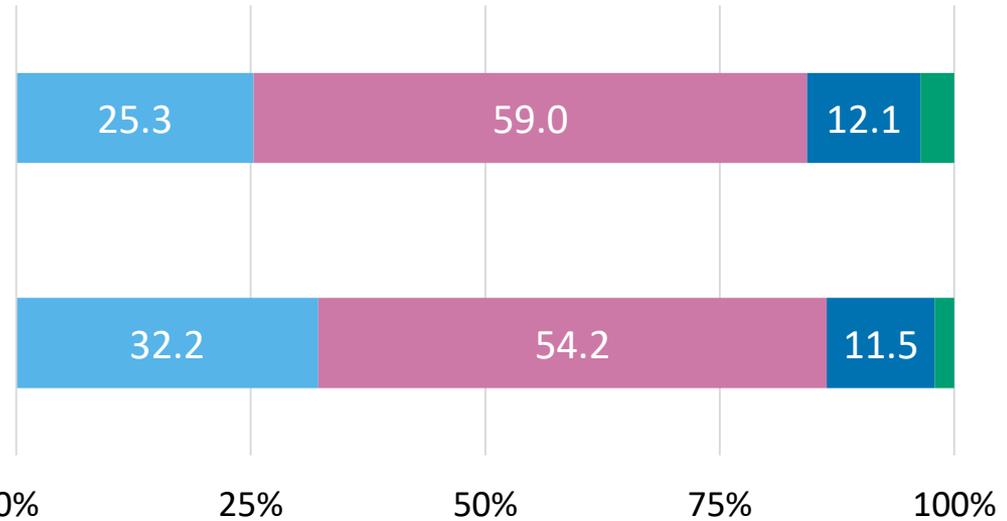


# Address Mental Health Stigma

Adults feel afraid to tell others about their mental health issues.



Adults feel embarrassed about having mental health issues.



■ Strongly Agree (far left) ■ Somewhat Agree ■ Somewhat Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree (far right)



# Engage Faith Communities

1. 74 percent of families agreed that faith in God can relieve mental health struggles
  - “It's such a wonderful thing to realize how much God loves me and that he wants me to be healthy. So that helps me want to pursue therapy because I want to get to be my best self. And people who love you and accept you, no matter what state you're in, I find those people in my church and I find it in my best friend, and I find it in my spouse, and I find it in my kids.” ~ A parent
2. Almost 20 percent of families who had actually experienced a mental health crisis with one of their children turned to their religious leader for help.
  - Of those who turned to their faith leader, almost 60 percent rated that person as “very helpful” and no one rated them “not at all helpful.”
3. Faith leaders can be trained in suicide prevention
  - Soul Shop - <https://afsp.org/soul-shop/>
  - Living Works Faith - <https://livingworks.net/training/livingworks-faith/>



# Initial Recommendations



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# Recommendations for Improving Suicide Prevention

1. School funding is fundamental to suicide prevention
2. More mental health staff are needed in schools
  - Pay attention to the needs of different schools
  - Make sure that staff are available where the kids need it most



# Recommendations for Improving Suicide Prevention

1. Reframe what suicide prevention is - - It's **so much more** than handling kids in suicidal crises
  - It's about **building relationships** with kids
  - It's about **making kids feel cared about, seen, and heard**
2. Clarify expectations for staff with regard to suicide prevention



# Recommendations for Improving Suicide Prevention

1. The District should ensure that all suicide prevention and postvention protocols are evidence based and consistent with professional best practices;
2. Address concerns around legal liability
  - Make it clear to staff how District protocols protect staff
    - the importance of documentation
    - communicating with parents
      - see Erbacher, Singer, and Poland [2014]; Gallo and Wachter Morris [2022]



# Recommendations for Improving Suicide Prevention

1. Provide staff with training in mental health and suicide prevention
  - Helps staff and helps staff help kids
2. Make sure all mental health staff are ASIST trained



# Recommendation for Improving Staff Well-Being

- District & school leadership should identify strategies to help teachers and school staff form supportive relationships with each other
  - Social connections that help them avoid secondary trauma from the sometimes difficult work they have to do during the school day





# Take Home Points



1. Schools have a broad mandate from families and staff to do mental health promotion and suicide prevention
2. Schools **MUST** do this work because emotionally distressed and suicidal kids are at school in need of support
3. The district and schools must have systems to support this critical work to support our children
4. Ensuring staff are trained and knowledgeable about mental health and trauma helps staff's own wellbeing and their ability to help kids
5. Our school staff work tremendously hard – we need to consider their well-being too
6. Schools cannot do this work alone – they need the support of their broader community
  - Pediatricians, faith communities, psychiatrists, therapists, crisis counselors, emergency rooms...





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**Thank you!**



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