

Addressing Mental Well-Being through Afterschool Programs

Afterschool and summer programs play an important role in supporting the healthy development of young people and are all the more critical today.

The Challenge

Experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, have declared children's mental health "a national emergency," citing rising rates of teen suicide and mental health concerns that worsened throughout the pandemic.¹ Young people are experiencing more anxiety, depression, anger, fear, hostility, and aggression. In Wyoming, the suicide rate among young people has been increasing for years and is continuously higher than the national rate.²

Afterschool Is a Solution

Data like these feel overwhelming but a powerful network of afterschool and summer learning programs across Wyoming stand ready to help. These local programs serve as a fundamental setting for healthy development and learning. They are staffed by caring mentors who are trained to help young people feel connected and develop important life skills like coping with stress and using their voice. Programs provide a safe, supportive space for youth-led activities, consistent support for families, and connections to social services and other community resources.



Photo Credit: Joey Burke

Program Spotlight: Boys & Girls Club of Douglas

Wyoming parents see afterschool programs as part of the solution to social and mental health struggles. In Douglas, the Boys & Girls Club is a shining example. CEO Joey Burke uses evidence-based strategies to help her staff and program participants cultivate coping skills and develop resiliency together.

She said, "Every staff meeting on Friday, we do an activity to develop ourselves so that we can manage our stress and have our own coping skills so that we can teach our youth."

Through practice and determination, she has worked to transition the club to become a trauma-informed organization. This has resulted in fewer disruptions, reduced absenteeism, and a higher participation rate.

Afterschool programs provide integral developmental supports:

-  Caring and supportive mentors
-  Safe spaces where students build confidence and feel a sense of belonging
-  Opportunities to work collaboratively, problem solve, and think critically

In turn, these supports help kids:³

-  Gain self-control and confidence
-  Develop strong social skills
-  Build healthy relationships with their peers and adults
-  Improve work habits and grades
-  Improve school day attendance and behavior
-  Reduce risky behaviors, such as tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol use

Meeting the Need in Wyoming

Leading authorities and parents recognize the power of afterschool in supporting kids' mental well-being.

The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the mental health crisis encourages young people to enroll in afterschool programs as a way to build healthy relationships. It recommends that community organizations "implement evidence-based programs that promote healthy development, support children, youth, and their families, and increase their resilience" and calls out afterschool as an example.⁴

Wyoming parents strongly support afterschool programs and agree that they:³



Allow youth to build positive relationships with caring adults and mentors **82%**



Provide opportunities for youth to build confidence and learn life skills **84%**



Provide opportunities for youth to engage with their peers **89%**

Yet Wyoming has never had enough afterschool programs to serve all the families who want to attend. For every student enrolled in afterschool, three more are waiting to get in—that's more than 43,000 Wyoming youth who are missing out.³



Enrolled



Waiting

Sources

1. Horowitz, J. M. & Igielnik, R. (2020). Most Parents of K-12 Students Learning Online Worry About Them Falling Behind. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/10/29/most-parents-of-k-12-students-learning-online-worry-about-them-falling-behind/>; Learning Heroes. (2021). Out-of-School Time Programs: Paving the Way for Children to Find Passion, Purpose, & Voice. Retrieved from https://bealearninghero.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Finding-Passion-Purpose-Voice_research-deck_final_9.21.pdf; American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, & Children's Hospital Association. (2021). AAP-AACAP-CHA Declaration of a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. Retrieved from <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/>
2. https://health.wyo.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Adolescent-Suicide_2021.pdf
3. www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM
4. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>



Power of Partnership

We must seize this moment to fund Wyoming's afterschool programs so they can serve all families in need and help address the urgent youth mental health crisis. We can do this by providing resources that will allow programs to partner with more schools, community organizations, mental health agencies, and pediatricians. The Wyoming Afterschool Alliance is helping to make these connections.



The Wyoming Afterschool Alliance (WYAA) is working to ensure that all young people have access to quality out of school time programs. WYAA connects providers to resources and professional development opportunities so programs can help young people become strong problem solvers and critical thinkers who will help to take us into a bright future for Wyoming and the world. As Wyoming's most important natural resource, we cannot afford to waste the potential of any of our children.

Contact us!

Michelle Sullivan, Director, Wyoming Afterschool Alliance
307-752-1637

michelle@wycf.org

1472 N. 5th Street #201,
Laramie, WY 82072

www.wyafterschoolalliance.org

Twitter: @WyomingOST

Instagram: @wyoming_ost