

Mental Health in Whatcom County Schools:

Sustaining the momentum



A Case for Support

Introduction

There is something special about Whatcom County; its rich history, community pride, astounding natural beauty, and collective commitment to care for its residents make this a wonderful place to live. Each community in the County differs, with unique geographical and population characteristics, but they all share a collective commitment to the health of community and care for children and youth. Collectively, seven school districts in Whatcom County, *Bellingham, Blaine, Ferndale, Lynden, Meridian, Mt. Baker and Nooksack Valley*, serve over 27,000 Whatcom County students.

Background

Over the past several years, local, State and national leaders have provided sobering reports to our community on the state of our children, youth and collective societal wellness, including:

- The Children & Youth Mental Health Crisis declared by Washington Governor Jay Inslee in 2020
- The Epidemic of Loneliness & Isolation declared by Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy in 2023
- The Opioid & Fentanyl Crisis identified in 2024 by various local governing bodies, including Ferndale City Council & Whatcom County Council
- Washington State Healthy Youth Survey Data (2023) indicates that the Youth Mental Health Crisis and other societal stressors have impacted students in Whatcom County:
 - Half of Whatcom 10th graders reported being unable to stop or control worrying over the last two weeks
 - Despite improvements, a higher proportion of Whatcom 10th graders made a plan to attempt suicide compared with the state-level data (roughly 15% in Whatcom County vs. 11% statewide)

In response to declining youth mental health, local school districts received a surge of local and federal funding in 2022, allowing Whatcom County Schools to hire staff focused on belonging, social emotional learning and mental health. In total, 19 employee and contractor positions were funded, providing a web of vital mental health support across seven Whatcom County Districts. This funding ends in June of 2026, so we are sharing the impact of this work and seeking support so that it can continue.

The Impact

These funded positions were embedded directly in Whatcom County Schools, providing care and support to students directly when they needed them the most.

“Talking with Kelsey gave me what I needed to keep going and keep trying. She helped me out and listened to me when I had no one else.” - Ferndale High School Student

Data on Social-Emotional Learning in Nooksack Valley indicated that after implementing the SEL framework BELONG, student survey reports of belonging and safety increased significantly:

In this school, there is at least one adult at school who knows me and cares about me.

Everson Elementary: 7% growth / Nooksack Elementary: 13% growth / Sumas Elementary: 19% growth

I feel safe at school.

Everson: 15% growth / Nooksack: 22% growth / Sumas: 38% growth

Whatcom County Mental Health Expansion (MHE) Funds comprised 70% of the additional funding districts received over the past three years. Data indicates that these funds significantly increased the supports provided to students. One example is the 2024-25 MHE Service Report Numbers:

Individuals served: 813

Total service sessions: 10,876

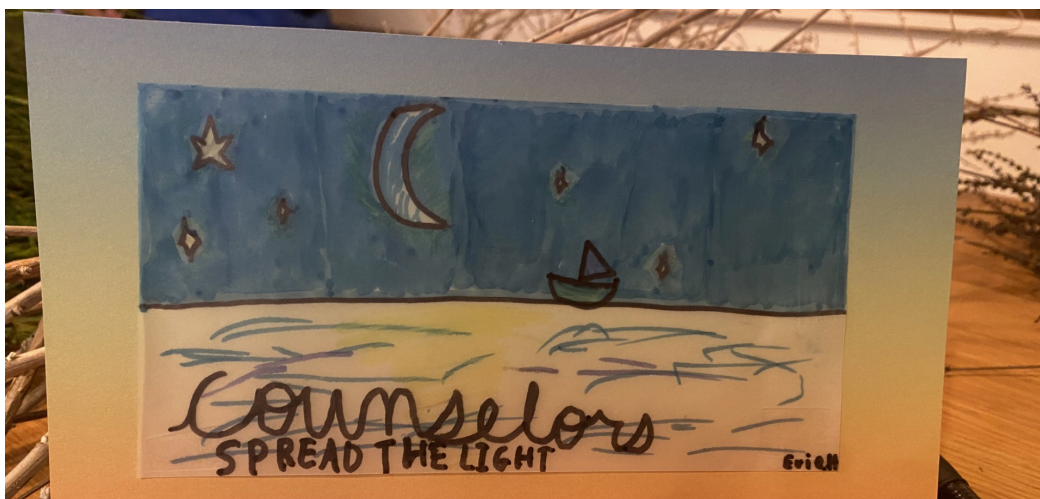
Referrals made for other social supports: 426

Connections made for other social supports: 322

Individuals reached through large events: 6,564

“Mental health specialists serve as an incredible bridge to ongoing community-based mental health services and also provide essential, in-building support for students. Students trust and rely on them.”

-School Principal



- Custer Elementary Fifth Grader

A Community-Based Solution

These grants end in June 2026 and the federal government has made cuts to programs like Title IV, which supports student wellbeing. As education funding continues to diminish at both the state and federal levels, schools and community organizations are facing increasing challenges in sustaining mental health resources that many students rely on each day. We are seeking local support to help “mind the gap” to continue providing these vital services across Whatcom districts.

District	Students Enrolled	\$15/student (Stronger Connections)	\$35/student WCHD Grant (MH Expans)	Miles from Bellingham (\$1.5k/mile)	FRL (+\$10k)	Proposed Total District Funding \$/Year
Bellingham	11390	170850	398650	0		569500
Ferndale	4840	72600	169400	13500	\$10,000	265500
Lynden	3670	55050	128450	22500		206000
Nooksack	2050	30750	71750	26250	\$10,000	138750
Blaine	2010	30150	70350	33000		133500
Meridian	1920	28800	67200	12000		108000
Baker	1580	23700	55300	39000	\$10,000	128000
Whatcom Co	27460	411900	961100	146250	\$30,000	1549250
Sustainability Funds to Develop Framework for ongoing funding streams						50,750
Total Proposal \$ for Whatcom County School-based Mental Health Support						1,600,000

The **2022 Stronger Connections Grant** was part of the Bipartisan Safer Communities funding allocated via WA state. **WCHD Mental Health Expansion** was a 3 year grant provided from one-time county funds in 2022.

Stronger Connections Funds (\$15/Student/year): school-based mental health services per enrolled student, based on per pupil rate of \$14.1/student/yr in 2022. (6% increase to \$15 for 2026)

WCHD Grant-MH Expansion Funds (\$35/Student/year): proposed funding for school-based mental health services per enrolled student, based on per pupil rate of \$35/student/yr in 2022.

Miles from Bellingham: acknowledging the decreased access to mental health services for children and families, based on the distance to where most MH services are located.

FRL: Free & Reduced Lunch, a designation for which districts qualify (over 50% of district students) as an indication of increased impacts of poverty on a district-wide scale.

This proposal allows local districts to sustain their on-site mental health supports for students at current or slightly reduced levels as well as a small fund to continue developing ongoing funding streams beyond the 2026-2027 school year.



Gratefully,

*Whatcom Coalition for Youth
Mental Health in Public Schools*

Please reach out to learn more about our work in Whatcom County schools and how you can help make a difference in the lives of students who need the most support:

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