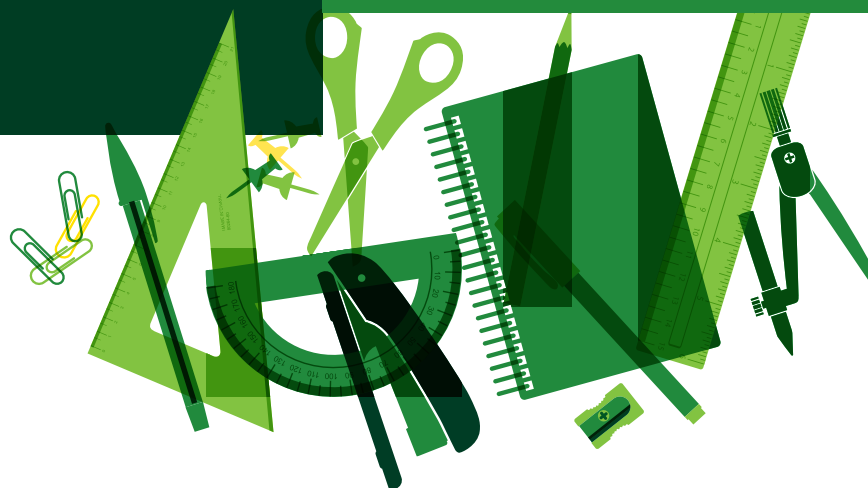




# Ramsey County Public Schools Wellbeing Assessment

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

September 2024



# Executive Summary

Ramsey County's Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (RC SHIP) is a multi-year grant received from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) to promote policies, systems, and environmental change within four context areas: increased physical activity, healthier eating, commercial tobacco-free living, and improved mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health is a significant component of wellbeing and the long-term mental health impacts of the COVID pandemic are still being understood, including in the school setting. However, evidence shows that Ramsey County students become increasingly disengaged in school over time.<sup>1</sup> In addition, students feel less supported by the school system as they age.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the RC SHIP team conducted this assessment of the status of mental health and wellbeing in Ramsey County public schools. Its goal is to collect inputs from teachers, staff, and administrators to inform RC SHIP's allocation of financial resources to support public school students and staff with wellbeing and mental health programming that falls within SHIP's context areas. The results will inform the development of a planned RC SHIP funding opportunity for the 2024-25 school year.

The research question for this school assessment is:

**How should RC SHIP resources be allocated to support better mental health and wellbeing in Ramsey County Public Schools?**

There are five school districts within the county borders: Saint Paul Public Schools plus four suburban school districts (Mounds View, Roseville, White Bear Lake, and North Saint Paul/Maplewood Oakdale). RC SHIP conducted 80 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with staff from four of the five public school districts. This included 21 school administrators, 26 teachers, and 33 staff members (e.g., district staff, school psychologists, social workers, nurses, and counselors).

This assessment strives to identify the most-commonly needed areas of support that fit within SHIP's context areas. However, the process of developing this guidance required the SHIP team to collect a wide range of inputs, not all of which can be addressed within the scope of our work. Thus, the data includes recommendations from teachers and staff that are beyond SHIP's scope; these are phrased as findings throughout the Findings and Conclusions section. Conversely, SHIP Recommendations focuses solely on the allocation of RC SHIP resources.

## Findings and Conclusions

### OVERALL WELLBEING

Respondents rated the overall wellbeing of students and staff in Ramsey County public schools as "okay." While the interview guide did not ask respondents to rate the status of mental health on a numerical scale, most respondents ranked or characterized it as about a three out of five on average

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Paul-Ramsey County Public Health Department. (2018). Community Health Assessment.

<sup>2</sup> Minnesota Department of Health. (2022). Minnesota Student Survey Results.

In other words, there are some key strengths and some major challenges. One staff member stated,

*“Mental health is probably our biggest concern that we’re having right now. It’s very difficult to do things in a public school that will help students with mental health concerns.”*

Respondents feel that mental health and wellbeing in wider society has been struggling post-COVID, and this struggle is reflected in the school learning environment.

## **TEACHERS AND STAFF**

### **Teacher and Staff Mental Health**

Teacher and staff mental health suffers due to lack of accessible resources, especially for teachers, and inadequate mental health supports for the students. This can put a lot of the burden on teachers and staff, some of whom are not formally trained for this role. Changes in leadership and pay disparities further challenge staff motivation and sense of being supported in their role. Staff recommendations included making mindful changes to support teachers and staff to use their professional day and/or other collaborative time to support better mental health and wellbeing.

### **Teacher and Staff Access to Mental Health Resources**

Respondents said there is a disconnect between districts’ mental health resource offerings and what staff understand to be available and find useful. Teachers’ access to mental health resources is limited – staff reported they get four free therapy sessions, which they feel is not enough to meet their needs. Access is especially limited for teachers who cannot leave the classroom when they are having a mental health crisis. Staff also reported insufficient pay or benefits to seek mental health support beyond what is offered by the school, which limits their capacity to foster mental health using their own resources. Respondents said that much of the support is phrased in terms of “self-care,” which they also feel to be insufficient to meet their complex social-emotional needs.

### **Teacher and Staff Trainings**

There are varied and inconsistent responses about what training would be beneficial to teachers and staff. Some respondents feel overwhelmed by the existing training requirements, for which there is often limited or no follow-up to support implementation in the classroom. Others express a desire for more training opportunities, including social-emotional learning, trauma informed principles, and bullying curricula, that are culturally relevant and current for today’s social media environment.

Respondents indicated that training works best when facilitated by an external partner. It should not be an additional burden on the teachers’ and staff’s time to complete the training and/or implement it in their learning environment. There must be sufficient follow-up support (including time) to implement it in the classroom or it will not be effective.

### **Teacher and Staff Maternity and Lactation**

State and federal law requires all workplaces to accommodate lactation.<sup>3</sup> In the school setting, support for staff who are pregnant or lactating, is often provided ad hoc, and none of the

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<sup>3</sup> Nursing Mothers, Lactating Employees, and Pregnancy Accommodations. Minn. Stat. § 181.939. (2024). PUMP for Nursing Mothers Act. Public Law § 117-328. (2022).

respondents said their school has formalized maternity leave or lactation support policies. Teachers and staff must arrange their own coverage and support is given at the discretion of the school administrator.

## STUDENTS

### Student Behavior

Students are struggling with mental health issues post-COVID and it affects the learning environment. Respondents indicated that some students are having mental health crises multiple times a day. This leads to increased violence in the classroom, student absences and skipping classes, and decreased engagement in learning. Bullying, especially cyber-bullying, is a big issue. Schools are now required to develop a cell phone policy by 2025 to comply with a new state law.<sup>4</sup>

### Student Access to Mental Health Resources

The students have access to mental health support at school but staff report there are not enough mental health counselors and social workers to meet the increased student demand. In more than one school, respondents said they have one social worker to address the needs of some 2,000 students. It can be difficult for students to access the services available to them, requiring them to make appointments or navigate difficult systems to get help. There is a strong need for more mental health supports for students, and especially students of color and LGBTQ+ students.

### Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) can promote positive outcomes in social and emotional skills, academic performance, mental wellness, healthy behaviors, and a safe school environment.<sup>5</sup> Respondents reported the use of various SEL curricula, but their application varies by school and are optional for teachers to implement. All respondents recognized the importance of SEL for students and feel that SEL curricula with surveys are especially beneficial in identifying students' needs. In some cases, they said curricula need to be updated to be more culturally relevant.

### Conflict Resolution

More support and training are needed to address student conflict, facilitate restorative practices, and apply trauma-informed approaches while still maintaining a positive classroom environment. Respondents emphasized the importance of non-punitive approaches to resolve conflict. Using trauma-informed approaches can help to identify deeper root causes of students' disruptive behavior. The Dean Model is mentioned as an effective strategy for ensuring direct meetings with students on a regular basis, building connections, and holding students accountable for their behavior.

### Trauma Informed Principles

Trauma Informed Principles (TIP) is an approach used in all schools to foster a supportive and empathetic environment for students and staff. However, not all staff are trained in TIP and its implementation is not always supported effectively with sufficient follow-up and dedicated class

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<sup>4</sup> School Cell Phone Policy Act. Minn. Stat. § 121A.73 (2024).

<sup>5</sup> Morse, Tina. (2021). Perceptions Regarding the Benefits of Social and Emotional Learning. Lindenwood University.

time. Some staff have sought out private TIP training to enhance their skills. However, in most cases, the current approach does not adequately prepare staff to address trauma in an educational setting.

### **Commercial Tobacco and Substance Use**

Commercial tobacco free living is a SHIP context area and an important issue in the school. Vaping is an issue in school bathrooms, but respondents could not suggest good solutions to address the problem, including ideas for more effective consequences beyond suspension. Respondents recommend having an outside expert come to the classroom to educate students about the negative health impacts, rather than asking the teacher to facilitate this lesson.

### **Social and Physical Activities**

Physical activity is a SHIP context area and an important component in health and wellbeing. Most physical activity comes in the form of physical education class, which is only required for elementary students. In addition, schools in the city often lack sufficient outdoor space for student recreation. There is a need to support teachers to implement effective brain breaks in the classroom.

### **Healthy Eating**

Healthy eating is a SHIP context area and Universal Free School Meals was implemented at the start of this school year. This has been a game-changer for schools in their ability to feed students. All respondents said their school has an additional program to send food home with students (e.g., a backpack program, food shelf or share table, or pick-up meal program). Recommendations included creating access to community and urban gardens, so students grow their own food and learn to cook it, and to have more culturally connected foods for take-home programs.

## **DISTRICT SUPPORT AND RESOURCES**

Districts have limited inputs to support mental health and wellbeing in the classroom; they largely include policies and systems supports. Thus, respondents' inputs focused mostly on what policies and systems changes are needed, including more support to understand what the expected roles are for teachers and staff in enforcing policies in the classroom, especially punitive policies. Respondents also seek better systems to ensure that teachers can take time off for their personal needs, and to invest in technologies that can help them to do their job more efficiently and effectively, so they can take the personal time they need to manage their own mental health and wellbeing.

## **FAMILY SUPPORT**

Support from families comes most often in the form of family nights, parent conferences, and groups like family teacher organizations. Schools also offer a wide range of cultural events for families, and many schools have staff dedicated as cultural liaisons focused on specific cultural groups. Support from families is essential, but it can be a challenge to keep families engaged. Some families may lack confidence in the school system due to past harm and trauma. Others are facing their own social-emotional challenges, and some look to the school system as a source of support. There are many key areas in which parents and families can get involved in supporting wellbeing in schools, including supporting teachers, volunteering their time to supervise school events, organizing extracurricular activities, food shelves and clothing distribution events, and other engagements.

# SHIP Recommendations

These recommendations will be shared with SHIP and SPRCPH Leadership for consideration for how to allocate SHIP's funding and other resources going forward.

## Recommendation 1

Support for the districts and/or school administrations to develop and/or implement a "no cell phone" policy in compliance with the new state law requiring this by 2025. RC SHIP can provide technical assistance for policy development and/or policy implementation.

## Recommendation 2

Create and/or update existing lactation spaces for teachers and staff in compliance with state and federal law. There is a need to enhance support for lactating staff, including more systemic coverage for classroom teachers.

## Recommendation 3

Enhance partnerships to provide more food resources for families, including fresh fruits and vegetables, and culturally appropriate food options. Facilitate opportunities for students to learn about agriculture, grow their own food, and cook with it.

## Recommendation 4

Create partnerships for addressing student violence and promoting social connectedness (e.g., implementing restorative circles).

## Recommendation 5

Create partnerships for more physical activity and movement (e.g., active recess like Playworks or Safe Routes to School).

## Recommendation 6

No more training or Training of Trainers (TOT) investment unless it is specifically providing support to address mental health crises for students who cannot see a mental health counselor in a timely manner, and the training is supported by sufficient follow-up and guidance for effective implementation.

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