



Ramsey County Public Schools Wellbeing Assessment

FINAL REPORT

September 2024



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Acronyms

BRFSS	Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System
CDC	Centers for Disease Control
CLT	Community Leadership Team
DHHS	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
HIPAA	Health Information Portability and Accountability Act
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer plus other identities
MESPA	Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association
MDE	Minnesota Department of Education
MDH	Minnesota Department of Health
MASSP	Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals
MSS	Minnesota Student Survey
PD	Professional Development
RC	Ramsey County
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
SHAPE	School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation
SHIP	Statewide Health Improvement Partnership
SPPS	Saint Paul Public Schools
SPRCPH	Saint Paul Ramsey County Public Health department
TIP	Trauma Informed Principles
TOT	Training of Trainers
YRBSS	Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey

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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.¹ In addition, students feel less supported by the school system as they age.²

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

¹ Saint Paul-Ramsey County Public Health Department. (2018). Community Health Assessment.

² Minnesota Department of Health. (2022). Minnesota Student Survey Results.

numerical scale, most respondents ranked or characterized it as about a three out of five on average. 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.³ In the school setting,

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

support for staff who are pregnant or lactating, is often provided ad hoc, and none of the 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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

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

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

implementation is not always supported effectively with sufficient follow-up and dedicated class 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.

Introduction

Ramsey County is home to more than 550,000 Minnesotans, which is approximately 10% of the state's population. It is also home to the city of Saint Paul, the state capitol, as well as the University of Minnesota's Saint Paul campus. It is the most densely populated county in the state and one out of three residents (36.5%) is a person of color. In 1997, Saint Paul and Ramsey County's previously separate, public health departments merged to form Saint Paul-Ramsey County Public Health (SPRCPH), one of the largest local public health departments in the state and nationally accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board. Ramsey County's Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (RC SHIP) is a multi-year grant awarded by the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) to SPRCPH 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. It is imperative to support teachers' wellbeing and mental health as they hold influential roles for students in fostering a positive learning environment. When the responsibility for students' mental health support falls on teachers, this can have a negative impact on teachers, who are required to take on additional roles in schools for which they are not properly trained or supported. Thus, it would be beneficial for students, teachers, school staff, and school environments to receive support on a spectrum of needs related to mental health, for which SHIP might play a role.

There are five school districts within the county borders: Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) plus four suburban school districts (Mounds View, Roseville, White Bear Lake, and North Saint Paul/Maplewood/Oakdale). Evidence shows that Ramsey County students demonstrate behaviors that become increasingly disengaged in school over time, starting around fifth grade and escalating until graduation.¹ There are higher dropout rates among African American students, Hispanic (Latine) students, English language learners, and students who formerly utilized the free and reduced-price lunch program.²

In addition, data show that students feel less supported by the school system as they age. The 2022 MN Student Survey (MSS) showed that there was a decrease in students' feelings of being valued and appreciated among all grade levels from 2019-2022. More specifically, 30% of eleventh graders and 32% of ninth graders disagreed that their teachers care about them as a person. This data exhibits concerns about the lack of protective factors students are displaying and indicates a need for more social-emotional support in the learning environment.

In light of these data, the RC SHIP team conducted this assessment of the status of mental health and wellbeing in Ramsey County public schools starting in early 2023. Its goal is to collect inputs from teachers, staff, and administrators to inform RC SHIP's allocation of financial resources to

¹ Saint Paul-Ramsey County Public Health Department. (2018). Community Health Assessment.

² Minnesota Department of Health. (2022). Minnesota Student Survey Results.
<https://www.health.state.mn.us/news/pressrel/2022/stsurvey122322.html>

support public school students' and staff's wellbeing and mental health with 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.

Methodology

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?

To answer the research question, RC SHIP collected qualitative data between September 2023 and March 2024, including semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 80 teachers and staff from four of the five public school districts in Ramsey County. This included 21 school administrators (principals or assistance principals), 26 classroom teachers, and 33 staff members (including district staff, school psychologists, social workers, nurses, and counselors, among others).

This assessment strives to identify the most-commonly needed areas of support that fit within SHIP's four context areas (increased physical activity, healthier eating, commercial tobacco-free living, and improved mental health and wellbeing). As such, data analysis focused on finding the most common answers from all respondents (teachers, staff, district staff, and administrators) on these topics. There were many and diverse opinions on what is needed in Ramsey County Public Schools; this assessment focuses on identifying the ideas that fit best within the third quintile of representation in the qualitative data (i.e., the "average" opinion).

However, the process of developing this guidance required the SHIP team to collect a wide range of inputs from teachers, staff, and administrators, not all of which can be addressed by SHIP. Thus, this report is also intended to document of the mental health and wellbeing needs of Ramsey County Public Schools so that others may also work to address them. Therefore, the data set includes many recommendations from teachers and staff that are beyond the scope of SHIP. These are phrased as findings (i.e., 'respondents recommended') throughout the Findings and Conclusions section. The SHIP Recommendations section focuses solely on the allocation of resources for Ramsey County SHIP and SPRCPH Leadership.

Please see [Appendix C: Methodology](#), for a detailed description of the methodology.

Findings and Conclusions

The following section outlines the findings and conclusions from the qualitative data. The sections are organized by teachers, students, district support, and family support.

Throughout the interviews, respondents were read the definition of four key terms, including wellbeing, trauma informed principles, brain breaks, and food insecurity, to ensure that everyone understood the topics being discussed in the same way. These definitions are included in blue-shaded boxes throughout the report. (See [Appendix D](#) for a copy of the interview questionnaire).

OVERALL WELLBEING

Wellbeing is defined as: Activities and policies that promote a sense of social belonging, opportunities for healing, and increase of mental health. This includes active living, healthy eating and extracurricular activities offered outside of traditional school hours for students and/or school staff.

Overall, respondents rated the overall wellbeing of students and staff in Ramsey County public schools as “okay.” While the interview 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; in other words, there are some key strengths and some major challenges.

“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.” (Staff).

“The overall wellbeing of my school is reflective of the overall wellbeing of community, of our society. We have a lot of amazing kids here, and amazing staff, that are also going through some things, just as we think about what’s going on in our world right now and specifically in our community. We [schools] are a microcosm of society. So, all the things that are going on in society are going on here, in our similar demographic spaces.” (Administrator).

Administrators tend to rank their school’s overall wellbeing higher than the general staff, and teachers tend to give it a lower ranking than other types of respondents. Individuals who have been working in the education field for five years or fewer tend to rank mental health and wellbeing as lower, whereas teachers with six to ten years’ experience tend to rank it the highest, and teachers with more than 11 years’ experience tend to rank it around the average. SPPS staff tend to rank it slightly lower than the suburban school districts, but it was a minor difference, and that district was facing a teachers’ strike during the data collection period, so this is not surprising.

Several respondents shared the perspective that the status of mental health and wellbeing in the schools reflect the social-emotional struggles in wider society post-COVID. Staff and students are struggling with mental health, and this is reflected in their learning environment.

“I really think since COVID, the wellbeing of staff and kids have really been struggling ... I also see a real increase in stress among teachers, moving towards burnout, really not wanting to keep doing this job because the behaviors of the kids, based on their being unsettled, is causing more difficulties in the classroom.” (Staff).

“There is this ‘before and after’ with COVID-19. [It] certainly impacted people’s wellbeing. We had educators that were already working really hard before the pandemic and then, all of a sudden, felt like they had to ‘Apollo 13’ education, to try to teach it remotely. That really caused a lot of stress; the social isolation was difficult. So, if you were to look at pre-2020 and post-2020, we’ve seen wellbeing decline because a lot of the things that came out of the pandemic were concerns about mental health and people’s social and emotional wellbeing.” (District).

“The wellbeing of students has declined recently and same with staff. I think that people are trying very hard to take care of themselves and others and they are running into a lack of resources and/or tools in the toolbox to do so.” (Teacher).

More than one respondent used this analogy of a toolbox to represent the range of resources and supports available to support mental health and wellbeing at their school. In most cases, they felt there were several key tools missing that made the entire system less effective, which will be detailed throughout this Findings section.

TEACHERS AND STAFF

Teacher and Staff Mental Health

Teacher and staff mental health is vital for creating an effective and supportive learning environment. Their individual mental health influences the quality of their teaching, and capacity for classroom management and student relationships, which ultimately impacts staff retention rates and the overall health of the school culture.³

Teachers’ mental health suffers due to a lack of accessible resources, especially in classroom settings. Teachers cannot just leave their class when they are having mental health challenges, and it is very difficult to take time off. Inadequate mental health support results in heightened levels of stress and fatigue, leaving staff ill-equipped to assist their students effectively. One support staff expressed concern:

“I just worry that our staff doesn’t feel like they have enough tools in their toolbox and enough supportive things in place to support their mental health and wellbeing while we are helping support students whose mental health and behavioral dysregulation is so significantly impacted by their own conditions and disabilities. I can see the stress and anxiety on the staffing.” (Support staff).

Many staff noted the importance of leadership in shaping staff attitudes. Changes in leadership can negatively impact staff morale and contribute to increased turnover rates. One teacher shared: *“We’ve gone through a couple different leadership teams and the last couple were pretty traumatic in how things were run here and the relationships between administration and staff. Staff is wary of things and that makes it hard to feel good about things.” (Teacher).*

Issues surrounding pay disparities further compound the challenges faced by teachers and staff. Respondents reported discrepancies in compensation based on factors such as tenure and professional background, coupled with uncompensated preparation time, contribute to financial strain. Additionally, the increasing workload and lack of sufficient resources lead to staff burnout and higher turnover rates. As one teacher highlighted: *“Teachers wear so many hats, and it’s hard to be so many people and deal with every student’s different needs. It’s a challenge. And they can’t leave it at 3:30 when their day ends or whatever. They can’t leave it at school either, so it’s wearing on teachers, just as the wellbeing of their kiddos.” (Teacher).*

³Gray, C. (2017). Teacher Mental Health, School Climate, Inclusive Education and Student Learning: A Review. Canadian Psychology 58. 203-210. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318829464_Teacher_Mental_Health_School_Climate_Inclusive_Education_and_Student_Learning_A_Review

Recommendations from respondents for improving support include implementing consistent practices such as trauma-informed training, which has been highlighted as an effective measure. Mindful changes made by school administration have shown positive impacts on teacher mental health and overall school wellbeing. One teacher emphasized: *“Re-evaluating the professional day in general and figuring out creative ways to increase collaborative time amongst teachers would help a lot.”* (Teacher).

In summary, addressing teacher and staff mental health requires comprehensive strategies, including improved resource access, effective leadership, fair compensation, and supportive professional practices.

Teacher and Staff Access to Mental Health Resources

Access to mental health resources is an essential element in creating that supportive and productive school environment. However, there is a notable disconnect between the districts’ mental health resource offerings and what staff and teachers understand to be available and find useful. Despite the district providing resources, barriers to access persist, leading to a discrepancy between what is offered, what is effective, and what teachers and staff need. One respondent highlighted this disconnect. *“There is a difference between what the district advertises and then what people on the ground feel.”* (Support staff).

Staff expressed an increased need for more mental health support beyond self-care initiatives. They feel that while self-care is encouraged, additional responsibilities are continuously added to their workload, exacerbating stress. One teacher stated, *“They say things like, ‘try to do self-care’, but then they just keep adding things to our plates.”* (Teacher).

Moreover, the current provision of four free therapy sessions is deemed insufficient. As one support staff noted: *“We can get four free therapy sessions, but no long-term, or even medium-term, issues can really be solved or handled in four sessions... I’ve considered therapy but opted to just not, because I know how expensive it is and that’s such a weird position to be in as a counselor.”* (Support staff).

Teachers and staff conveyed that these barriers to accessing mental health resources limit their ability to obtain support for their own mental health. One respondent illustrated this challenge: *“It’s a lot easier to know about it than to be able to access it easily during a day, especially for teachers who have 25 to 28 students in their classroom. They can’t just like stop teaching because they’re having their own struggle and go call whoever they need to call.”* (Support staff).

Additionally, staff mental health significantly affects their ability to support students. One respondent emphasized this impact, stating, *“Staff have access to resources, but I do not think it is anywhere near enough. I think a lot of our staff struggle a lot with their mental health and don’t have the opportunity to access enough support for them to be healthy and well for our students.”* (Support staff).

Teacher and Staff Trainings

There are varied and inconsistent responses regarding the types of trainings that would be beneficial for teachers and staff. Opinions on the necessity of additional trainings are divided. 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, and thus oppose additional sessions; others express a desire for more training opportunities.

One respondent highlighted the need to prioritize teachers' mental health by reducing the number of mandatory trainings: *"I think staff would benefit most if we could pull back on some of the other trainings and focus on giving back time, which I think would be a focus on their mental health."* (Support staff).

Another noted the resistance among teachers to required trainings that are not perceived as immediately useful: *"To force any sort of training on a teaching staff, they are kind of protective of their time, and if they don't see it as being immediately useful to them, a lot of teachers will push back and say 'this is a waste of my time.'"* (Teacher).

Respondents expressed the training they receive can depend on an individual's role in the school. For instance, a teacher mentioned not receiving any trauma training, whereas the school counselor did. *"I'm assuming the mental health provider, so social workers and counselors, do get some kind of training on how to support students in trauma. I do not."* (Teacher).

An administrator elaborated, *"If it aligns with your position, such as a mental health position or a social worker, then yes. But if that's not your scope during your daily work, then no."* (Administrator).

Respondents also identified challenges in the effectiveness of training programs, most especially the lack of follow-up support and sustainability. An administrator remarked, *"They present the training materials, and then ... do we just forget about it? What are the actionable, tangible items to keep it sustainable and relevant?"* (Administrator).

Respondents also noted that some training content can be outdated, especially courses on bullying. Bullying, especially cyber-bullying, remains a significant issue among students. Respondents said teachers often address it informally rather than through a specific curriculum. *"I would say probably a lot of it falls informally on teachers to address, rather than a specific curriculum."* (Teacher).

The timing of trainings is another concern. Trainings scheduled at the beginning of the school year can be particularly challenging as teachers are busy preparing for the new academic term. As one teacher observed, *"Every year, at the beginning of the year, the district asks us to do a bullying course. I don't think it's very effective because at the beginning of the year, teachers are just trying to get everything set up."* (Teacher).

Additionally, there is a need to balance external support with internally led training sessions. However, trainings conducted by support staff may not always be well received, and social workers

⁴ Nursing Mothers, Lactating Employees, and Pregnancy Accommodations. Minn. Stat. § 181.939. (2024).

often must plan and lead these sessions while also providing direct assistance to students. As one respondent stated, *“We’ll have a staff PD [professional development] for an hour here or there, but usually it’s led by our own mental health team. So, it’s not necessarily someone coming in and training us, but we are training ourselves.”* (Teacher).

Overall, there is not consistent guidance on what trainings would be useful or effective to support staff and student mental health and wellbeing.

Teacher and Staff Maternity and Lactation

Minnesota has a law that requires workplaces to provide a space (that is not a bathroom) and adequate time for employees to lactate/pump while at work.⁴ In addition, the U.S. Department of Labor’s 2022 Federal PUMP Act made federal remedies (such as compensation) available to workers whose employers have denied them reasonable break time and space to express milk.⁵

However, the school schedule is not conducive to maternity leave and there is no formal process in place to support staff pregnancy and lactation needs. Respondents expressed concerns regarding the expectations placed on teachers when they take sick or maternity leave. Respondents said that teachers are expected to provide all the lesson plans for the long-term substitute teacher while they are on leave and do not get compensated for this work. When teachers return from maternity leave, there are no accommodations for pumping; they must find their own coverage and leave time.

None of the 80 respondents said that their school has an official policy for teacher maternity leave or a formal process to transition back when returning from leave. Some school administrations are supportive, and some are not. Additionally, 26 respondents from 10 schools said their school does not have a lactation room.

“Our school is pretty good about making sure that a teacher’s schedule works with their pumping schedule, but I would say that’s something that could be standardized as a policy or a rule, because if we had a change in administration [this could also change] ... Right now, we rely on our principal to be like ‘okay, we’ll give you prep at this time,’ versus having a policy.” (Teacher).

Respondents suggested a few ideas that could help schools and/or districts better support staff maternity and lactation needs. First, create a system for staff coverage, possibly utilizing parents and families of students to provide coverage on demand for staff who need support. Second, change the teacher’s contract language to provide more guaranteed support for teachers who are pregnant or lactating. Third, be creative with how to provide coverage and where to establish a makeshift lactation room, without it being a bathroom or a staff car in the parking lot.

STUDENTS

Student Behavior

According to the MSS 2022, 21% of students report being bullied or harassed on a weekly basis

⁵ PUMP for Nursing Mothers Act. Public Law § 117-328. (2022).

over the past 30 days. The MSS 2022 findings also reveal that 25% of eighth grade and 22% of ninth grade students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer plus other identities (LGBTQ+) students feel unsafe at school. Additionally, 40% of economically disadvantaged students and 31% of LGBTQ+ students reported higher bullying rates (MSS, 2022). Respondents reported a noticeable increase in student absences and skipping class. Guidance on implementing absence policies is inconsistent, and respondents feel that suspensions as a primary consequence for various student behaviors are not effective and only serve to alienate the student further.

The increase of severe student behaviors has created a disruptive learning environment and distress for both teachers and students. A teacher states:

“In the last couple of years especially, we’ve had some really big behaviors. We have kids who are out of the classroom, running in the hallway, swearing, and being physical with classmates and staff. When you’re trying to teach and establish guidelines for your classroom, and someone is yelling outside your door, it’s unsettling. It’s unsettling to me as an adult. So, how do my 4th graders feel when I’m trying to say, ‘focus on your fractions?’ The large behaviors that we’re having are a concern, and I think they affect everybody’s wellness—staff and students.” (Teacher).

Another staff member notes, *“I’m not exaggerating when I say there are three to five full-blown fights daily in our building. So, we’re not doing a good job of peer conflict mediation.”* (Support staff).

The prevalence of online or social media bullying is a significant problem. *“The thing that throws a wrench in all of it is online or social media bullying and just the vast amount of it that is happening outside the school setting. But then, by nature, it has a ripple effect during the school day, creating a very large problem district wide.”* (Support staff).

Inconsistent consequences for bullying further complicate the issue. *“We do not have a preventative approach, and the consequences for bullying are sort of inconsistent.”* (Teacher). Students report to staff that their complaints of bullying are often ignored and follow-up on bullying incidents is lacking. *“The follow-up piece is really lacking in the school. You talk to a kid on Monday about bullying, and then the kid has to wait another two weeks to meet with somebody about the same incident.”* (Support staff).

Educators express a sense of hopelessness regarding bullying prevention. *“I feel a little hopeless, like I can do these lessons, but I think kids get these bullying lessons every year. So, I sometimes have to change my language and call it harassment, educating them from an adult or high school lens.”* (Support staff).

Some students find the bullying curriculum triggering, which can cause disruptions in the classroom. One teacher described the issue: *“When you have a kid that is a target and they have to read this thing about a bully picking on another kid, that doesn’t help; that triggers. So, then I’m needing to call the social worker ... [it] is interrupting and upsetting.”* (Teacher).

⁶ School Cell Phone Policy Act, Minn. Stat. § 121A.73 (2024).

Limiting access to cell phones in the classroom is one strategy to limit cyber bullying during the school day, and to encourage more active participation in the classroom. In 2024, the Minnesota Legislature passed a law that requires all school districts and charter schools in the state to adopt a cell phone policy by March 15, 2025.⁶ The law requires the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association (MESPA) and the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) to co-develop recommendations for schools to minimize the impact of cell phone usage on student behavior, mental health, and academic performance.

While student behaviors are increasingly challenging and staff struggle to manage them, there are also few good answers when it comes to corrective actions. Reliance on punitive measures like suspension, contributes to students' lack of trust in the system, creating a vicious cycle of negative outcomes. Students are denied the chance to take responsibility for their actions and to learn from their mistakes in a supportive environment. This in turn can deepen their sense of social isolation, exacerbating behavioral issues and hindering personal growth. One teacher expressed:

"I don't like the way that we police our kids, and we don't trust them to take the space they need. If there's a student who's really had a hard time and he kept getting suspended every week for a few days at least and has some issues related to attachment from his upbringing. And then he's constantly getting suspended and told 'you can't come to the place where you're supposed to be forming healthy attachments,' you can see how this cycle just repeats itself." (Teacher)

Respondents feel a more effective approach would be to find solutions that involve fostering a culture of trust and support, where students are given the space to learn, grow, and develop healthy relationships within the school community.

Student Access to Mental Health Resources

Respondents from every school expressed a significant need for more mental health support staff and resources for students. Multiple respondents highlighted the insufficient ratio of support staff to students. One respondent stated: *"Right now, at both the schools I'm at, there's only two social workers for like 2,000 kids. It's too much on both the students and the staff."* (Support staff).

Students face significant challenges in accessing mental health support in a timely manner. One respondent explained that students need to set up an appointment if they require support, which can be problematic in a crisis.

"Right now, if a kid needs to meet with their counselor or social worker, they're supposed to set up an appointment. That's really hard when you're in crisis in middle school or it's like, 'hi, let's take out our iPad and scan this QR code and set up an appointment.' And that, I mean, no, I need to talk to someone now." (Teacher).

Teachers also face difficulties in supporting students with mental health issues due to regulations such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which limits their access to relevant information. While these protections are in place to protect the student's privacy, it can also

hinder the staff's ability to provide effective support. As one support staff noted, *"I've had kids this year that I didn't even know were on a 72-hour hold in the hospital ... The kid just appeared and had been gone a few days. I feel like how [can we] address that so we can better support kids in those situations?"* (Support staff).

Mental health support for students tends to be reactive, rather than proactive. Due to the lack of resources and support staff, schools face challenges in implementing proactive support measures for students. One respondent stated: *"I don't think there's enough people in our school in particular that can help with putting out the fires. We're all in reactive mode; we just don't have the manpower to be able to be proactive and really put plans into place for particular students."* (Support staff).

In summary, while there is a clear recognition of the need for mental health resources for both staff and students, significant barriers and insufficient staffing levels prevent effective and timely utilization. These challenges highlight the necessity for improved accessibility and a more comprehensive support system for staff, as well as the need for more proactive and accessible mental health services for students, especially students of color and LGBTQ+ students.

Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) can result in positive outcomes in social and emotional skills, academic performance, mental wellness, healthy behaviors, school climate and safety.⁷ Respondents reported various SEL curricula are used across different schools, such as Sown to Grow, Second Step, Better Together, and Zones of Regulation. However, the application of SEL curricula varies by school and is optional for teachers.

All respondents recognized the importance of SEL for students and feel that SEL curriculums with surveys are especially beneficial in identifying students' needs. One respondent shared, *"I do experience a lot of young people that are struggling, and we've been doing some surveys around SEL one of the things that we learned through those surveys is that a lot of students here do lack a sense of belonging."* (Support staff).

Furthermore, many respondents expressed concerns about students lacking adequate social emotional skills. One teacher expressed: *"I think that's where students are struggling the most coming out of the pandemic is the social, emotional part, with just anxiety and on socializing and those types of skills."* (Teacher).

However, several issues with SEL lessons were also identified. Teachers report insufficient time for SEL lessons, with one stating, *"We've done Sown to Grow ... I am unsure how successful it is, because I have not found time in my classroom to do that ... which maybe makes me a bad teacher, but I am surviving."* (Teacher).

In addition, the effectiveness of SEL lessons depends on student engagement. One respondent observed, *"What's unfortunate is, it seems like the students that are struggling the most in ... doing*

⁷ Morse, Tina. (2021). Perceptions Regarding the Benefits of Social and Emotional Learning. (Publication No. 28322268). [Doctoral Dissertation, Lindenwood University.] Proquest Dissertations and Theses. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2507509995?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview>

the SEL lessons, are probably the students who need that SEL learning the most.” (Teacher).

Finally, some respondents highlighted that the SEL curriculum is not always culturally relevant. A teacher stated *“We have a curriculum for social emotional support. However, the curriculum I find to be painfully not relevant. It just isn’t hitting the mark like it might have 20 years ago.” (Teacher).*

Given the importance of SEL to young people’s development, there is a need for additional support and training to effectively develop and implement SEL lessons, and updates to the curricula to increase cultural relevance.

Conflict Resolution

Teachers and staff feel there is a lack of adequate support and training to address student conflict, facilitate restorative practices, and apply trauma-informed approaches. Respondents feel insufficiently prepared to handle student conflict situations, which affects the overall school environment. One staff member highlighted, *“If people came in and told us, ‘This is what you do with a behavior like this. This is how you handle it,’ and walked us through a lot of that, it would be highly beneficial for teachers, who sometimes lack the necessary tools.” (Support staff).*

Respondents conveyed it is especially important to apply holistic and non-punitive approaches to conflict resolution. Schools employing restorative practices and restorative chats are more in tune with the dynamics of student conflicts, aiming to teach rather than punish. One respondent noted, *“We do restorative practices, restorative chats. I think we are really attuned to what’s going on with kiddos when there are peer conflicts. These practices are less punitive and more restorative in nature.” (Support staff).*

Disruptive behaviors are often viewed as flaws in the student, but a trauma-informed approach is necessary to understand the underlying reasons for such behaviors, which may stem from adverse childhood experiences or unmet needs at home. One administrator emphasized, *“Until we help students understand what they’re feeling... we will address the bullying itself, but that is a symptom of something bigger that a student is experiencing.” (Administrator).*

Respondents highlighted the importance of a holistic approach to conflict resolution and the significance of restorative practices. Some schools already utilize restorative practices, while others express a need for training in this area. Breathing techniques are highlighted as a valuable strategy for emotional regulation. One participant expressed, *“I wish we had restorative practices, which some schools in our district do have, where they have a person whose job it is to deliver professional development to the staff, lead restorative circles for students, and be preventative and also try to restore harm when it has been done between students.” (Teacher).*

The Dean Model is mentioned as an effective strategy for ensuring direct meetings with students on an organized basis, building connections, and holding students accountable. One respondent shared, *“Our Deans meet with each student ... throughout the year, to check in... Overall, that process supports and maintains a healthy balance within our schools.” (Administrator).*

Trauma Informed Principles

Trauma Informed Principles are defined as: a strengths-based service delivery approach that is grounded in an understanding of, and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

The implementation of trauma-informed principles (TIP) in schools is essential for fostering a supportive and empathetic environment for both students and staff. However, the findings from our research indicate several areas where the current approach to TIP training and implementation could be improved.

Despite the provision of TIP training by the mental health team, there is a notable lack of support for practical implementation. The training focuses more on theoretical knowledge rather than practical application in classrooms or school environments. A support staff shared, *“Practice isn’t always the same as what you’ve been taught.”* (Support staff).

All schools reported some form of TIP training, but there are inconsistencies in who receives the training and its depth. Some teachers and staff did not receive any training, especially if it was not considered within the scope of their roles. One teacher mentioned, *“I would say no, [we do not receive TIP training] from a teacher’s perspective, I’m not sure about our counselors or Deans, but the teachers do not go through that training.”* (Teacher).

The distribution of who receives TIP training among the staff is not standardized, which contributes to inconsistencies in application across schools. When staff do receive TIP training, it often consists of introductory or summary courses lacking in-depth content or sufficient guidance to implement it in the classroom effectively. Thus, the current approach to TIP training does not adequately prepare staff to address trauma in educational settings effectively.

Some respondents find TIP training to be outdated and not relevant, which limits students’ engagement and teachers’ willingness to apply TIP in the classroom. As one respondent noted, *“If we don’t have staff that can even understand and recognize what trauma looks like, or how trauma can show up in their classroom if they don’t even understand it themselves, then how can they be empathetic to it?”* (Support staff).

Additionally, some individuals seek TIP training outside the district’s provision, indicating a perceived need for more comprehensive or up-to-date training options. One support staff shared, *“I did my own training outside of the district. Schools and most of our workers have had ongoing training around that.”* (Support staff).

These findings underscore the need for improved support, standardization, and depth in TIP training to ensure that all staff are adequately prepared to address and support trauma in the school environment.

Commercial Tobacco and Substance Use

Commercial tobacco free living is one of SHIP's context areas and substance use, especially vaping, is common among students. The MSS 2022 reports high levels of vaping: 89% of eleventh graders, 88% of ninth graders and 86% of eighth graders reported vaping in the past 30 days. Most students who vaped reported using a flavored commercial tobacco product and getting the vape from their friends (MSS, 2022).

Respondents mentioned vaping as a big problem in the schools, especially the bathrooms, but were not able to identify many ways to address them beyond suspension for the students who are caught. The lack of a clear consequences for students caught vaping was mentioned as a frustrating point for teachers and staff when addressing the issue: *"...having straightforward consequences for vaping because I know we have incidences and we have repeat offenders, and it almost feels like not a whole lot is getting done."* (Support staff).

Education for students and families was mentioned as a possible solution. Respondents feel it should not fall on the teacher to be the one conveying the message. Having external messengers, an expert on the subject, helps students to be more receptive and alleviates pressure on the teacher to facilitate the conversation.

"You're relying on a teacher clicking on seven different things to get to the folder where that slide show is, and then being capable to do the slide show in an engaging way. If we had trained people coming in or people that knew this stuff and not just a teacher... then I think it would be [more] effective." (Teacher).

During the interview, research team did not directly ask elementary school respondents about tobacco initiatives (please see [Appendix D](#) for the interview questions). However, respondents suggested that starting education as early as fourth grade would be beneficial for students and their families. The addition of a chemical dependency staff into the school was mentioned as a positive addition, but the current coverage is not sufficient to cover the demand for student intervention.

Social and Physical Activity

Physical activity is a SHIP context area and another important component of health and wellbeing. Regular physical activity can help to prevent various health conditions, improve cognitive performance, and reduce anxiety and depression symptoms (CDC, 2022). The MSS 2022 revealed that few students are meeting the recommended daily level of 60 minutes of physical activity, as set by the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS, 2018).

For elementary school students recess and gym class are the main source of physical activity during the day. Recess is not required for students after elementary school; for middle and high school students, gym class is the only option for physical activity during the day and it is an elective course. This means that many students in middle and high school depend on extracurricular school offerings for their physical activity and social enrichment.

Having partnerships was mentioned as positive to encourage and maintain after school programs. Some of the partner organization mentioned included PlayWorks, FlipSide, Irreducible Grace Foundation St. Paul, and MeMoves (formally known as Calm Connect). However, some respondents mentioned there is a lack of physical space in the schools to offer recess safely.

Brain Breaks are defined as: quick, free time for students during the school day.

While many teachers promote breaks in the classroom, brain breaks implementation varies, is not standardized and depends on time limitations and school schedules. Respondents mentioned the need for training to help teachers identify strategies to implement unstructured time in the classroom. *“We don’t really have a structured, supportive, holistic way of giving kids breaks for whatever they need. So, it ends up being this piecemeal thing.”* (Teacher).

While the offering of after school activities is available for students several barriers, including transportation, lack of interest, budget, and teacher/staff champions to run programs, can hinder the participation.

“There are a lot of after school programs that the students that that are just across a whole range of areas of interest of students, and so I think we have them and during the day and also after school and even though we have so many different activities, some of them are not accessible to students because they don’t have transportation home. Or because they have other responsibilities at home that they have to complete when the school day is over and they need to get home. So those can be some barriers for students.” (Support staff).

Healthy Eating

Food insecurity is defined as: a condition of limited access to healthy, culturally connected, and medically appropriate food to support an active and healthy lifestyle.

Health Eating is a SHIP context area and an essential element in promoting student development, learning and attention in the classroom. Starting with the 2023-24 school year, all Minnesota public schools had Universal Free School Meals, including guaranteed breakfast and lunch for all students, every school day. Staff reported this change has made a huge impact on schools’ capacity to ensure students have sufficient access to healthy foods. *“The universal free meals is a game changer. The fact that we can provide breakfast, lunch, a free snack and then... a super snack...it’s like a small meal, a substantial amount of food.”* (District staff).

Beyond the Universal Free School Meals program, all schools reported another form of direct food assistance: nine have a snack program in the afternoon, nine have a food shelf, share table, or other pick-up meal program on site, and staff from 12 schools reported their school has a backpack

⁸ Klump, Dr. Kelly. (2013) “Puberty as a critical risk period for eating disorders: a review of human and animal studies.” *Hormones and Behavior*. 64(2):399-410. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3761220/#:~:text=Puberty%20is%20one%20of%20the,of%20pubertal%20development%20in%20girls>.

program to send kids home with shelf-stable food items. In a few cases, the school has a program where families could select culturally appropriate food choices with access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

“One of the things that is great about this [backpack] program is the parents can pick the palette of the food. So, like if your family’s Latino, you can have the Latino bag, if you’re Asian, you can have the Asian bag. That is really special because we all have what we [want to] eat at our own house, right? So, I feel like the efforts to make it match what is best for the family is a really unique part and kids really rely on the food.” (Administrator).

Respondents spoke about the importance of food partnerships to support this effort. They identified various partners, including Every Meal, Ralph Reeder, Second Harvest, the Emily Program, Neighborhood House, and other community-based donations, including local churches and an “angel fund” to pay for Cub gift cards. But there is no evidence of a sustainability plan or long-term commitment to support this work. A couple of schools reported they link families to local food shelves, rather than offering on-site food distribution. Several staff said that there is a need to promote more awareness of food resources that are already available to the community, especially in languages other than English.

“I think just maybe more student awareness of resources in the community, more staff awareness as well, so that we can help make the students aware. Maybe more partnerships to get more resources in the schools when it comes to food, whether that’s like a food shelf or a food truck coming by, things like that I think would be great.” (Support staff).

Some respondents said they face challenges in trying to accommodate students who are having social emotional challenges with their peers and wish to find alternate (i.e., safe) spaces to eat lunch outside of the lunchroom. The MSS 2022 reported that 15% of eighth graders, 16% of ninth graders, and 13% of eleventh graders report skipping lunch, and this practice is more common among females. As puberty is a crucial time to prevent and address eating disorders in adolescents,⁸ schools could explore alternative spaces to ensure that students who are being bullied or facing disordered eating issues can feel safe while eating lunch.

Finally, some respondents were concerned about the quality of students’ nutrition. The MSS 2022 reports that fewer than 15% of eleventh graders consume five servings a day of fruits and vegetables. Some staff expressed concern about allowing students to eat junk food like Takis and other non-nutrient dense foods in the classroom. There was also concern about the quality of the school breakfast including too much sugar, which negatively impacts student behavior and attention span for learning.

“It is infuriating that we are giving our children sugary cereal and glazed sweet buns for breakfast. And then we wonder why they act like jerks 90 minutes later because their blood sugar has just physiologically just spiked. And then it’s gonna crash and they are sleeping in the afternoon.” (Support staff).

Recommendations from teacher and staff respondents included:

- Create more access to community and urban gardens and produce that is affordable. Teach kids how to grow the food and cook it.
- More diverse food offerings at school-based food shelves and backpack programs that incorporate fresh foods and culturally connected foods.
- Expand awareness of existing food resources, especially in languages other than English.
- More delivery and visits from mobile markets to schools for parents to pick up free food.

DISTRICT SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

In general, school district offices provide support for food access, trainings, policies, and complaint responses (such as an anti-bullying policy), transportation, chemical health counselors, and a TIP team for when big school-wide incidents happen. Also, districts currently provide COVID relief funding, which will end soon. This funding helped fill gaps to support students and families and the need for additional funding remains, often without a clear plan in place to replace it.

“We do many of the same things we did prior to COVID. They just don’t work the same way. That’s the challenge right now, is that individuals know they’re hurting in some fashion, but they don’t necessarily know what will help it. It’s hard for us to respond to that because we don’t know either.” (District).

There is consensus among respondents that they need more support to enforce current policies consistently, such as knowing what their roles are. Updates to policies are not always supported with training so it is unclear to teachers and staff on how they are supposed to be enforced, which can create doubt, uncertainty, and lack of follow-through. Also, there is concern about punitive policies, such as students getting suspended when caught vaping. Educators would like to see punitive policies be reexamined or reevaluated for effectiveness because there is a need for policies that are more inclusive, less alienating, and more trauma informed. *“I think more structure in place with clear communication and clear reasoning and staff and student input, I think could be really valuable because it feels a little bit like the Wild West.”* (Teacher).

Additionally, it would be helpful if the districts provide support in the form of funding and logistics for more substitute teachers to reduce and address staff burnout. Investing in technology to help teachers work smarter, not harder, would also be appreciated. For example, the parent teacher conference scheduling system needs to be updated to where teachers can press a button and reminder emails will be sent to all parents who are signed up for conferences that day instead of having the teacher manually check who is scheduled and sending out individual emails. Some schools are dealing with the lack of safety such as not having smart pass keys for students to get in and out of bathrooms and other communal spaces. Another example is not having magnetic external doors so students could leave the building unnoticed.

Ultimately, the nature of the school day does not provide sufficient space or time for students to interact, socialize or have unstructured time during the school day to support wellbeing. As noted by one administrator:

“Wellbeing can always be enhanced [but] finding the time to do that in the day, I think is the biggest challenge because you know as a school and also as a district, there’s certain parameters that we have to follow in terms of meeting curriculum needs.” (Administrator).

In summary, continuing to operate as districts have pre-COVID is no longer meeting the increased needs of students’ and staff’s mental health and wellbeing. There are many areas where districts can explore to alleviate staff burnout and improve wellbeing in the classroom setting.

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.

The support from families is an essential element in the success of a student, but it can also be a challenge to keep families engaged in school activities. Parents may be working more than one job, juggling economic struggles and personal lives, so they do not have as much time to commit to supporting the school and their children as they would wish. However, respondents said that schools struggle to engage parents and families in this effort. As one support staff said: *“We just do not have the participation that we would like from families, not just to make the event successful but to support their kids and their students.” (Support staff).*

Another challenge is that some families may lack confidence in the school system due to past harm and trauma they or their relatives experienced. There is a role for schools to play in rebuilding that trust. As support staff shared:

“I really would wish that we would be more intentional and have more partnerships with our families, creating more life partnerships with families. There’s been a lot of communities that have been harmed by the school system, like our American Indian or Native American families ... honestly, almost any minority group.” (Support staff).

However, some families are facing their own social-emotional challenges, especially post-COVID, and look to the school system as a source of support and stability for their children. As one administrator shared,

“We’ve got students and families that are showing up to where our students are in need of levels of service that could be even considered therapeutic. In a traditional middle school such as ours, we don’t offer those services ... And families will call and sometimes even be in tears because they are struggling to get that connection for their child.” (Administrator).

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

opportunities for engagement. This involvement is a crucial component in supporting a healthy and vibrant school community. As one support staff observed,

“There are lots of different wellbeing issues that we have ... It all depends on things that are going on at home, as well as things that are going on in the community. So, it depends on communities’ wellbeing and families’ wellbeing – it has a dramatic impact on our students’ wellbeing.” (Support staff).

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.

Appendix A. Works Consulted

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Appendix B. Review of Existing Data

Task: Search for and review any available literature that will inform the development of the school wellbeing assessment. Identify and document the source, write a short summary of what it contains, including any data that may be useful to inform our effort.⁹

Resources from SHIP's Assessment Toolkit

Contextual Determinates of Health

Minnesota Student Survey

BRFSS (Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System)

Minnesota Youth Tobacco Survey

Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS)

Minnesota Report Card

Measuring Well-being: neweconomics.org/uploads/files/measuring-wellbeing.pdf

School Health Index (SHI) cdc.gov/healthyschools/shi/index.htm

School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation (SHAPE) theshapesystem.com

Saint Paul Public Schools Data Center spps.org/datawilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/east-metro-mental-health-roundtableccmhc.org/the-need

Parent Mental Health survey

Ramsey County's Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (RC SHIP) team plans to conduct an assessment to determine how RC SHIP can invest resources to support public schools' students, faculty, and staff to enhance their wellbeing and mental health. SHIP focuses on policy, systems, and environmental changes to reduce chronic diseases through healthy eating, active living, commercial tobacco-free living, and wellbeing.

Community wellbeing encompasses a combination of social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors that are essential for communities and individuals to reach their full potential. The SHIP Community Wellbeing Model consists of four categories of wellbeing protective factors: healthy environment, inclusion, basic needs, and opportunity. Schools are an important environment to promote protective factors of wellbeing for youth and adolescents. The majority of the available Ramsey County student data relevant to this topic was collected through the Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) for 2022, which is administered every three years to students in fifth, eighth, ninth, and eleventh grades to capture insight into the lives and experiences of students. All MSS data stated refers to Ramsey County public school students.

This document summarizes the results of a deep review of desktop data conducted in Summer 2023. At the time of this review, RC SHIP has also drafted an initial approach to the planned school needs assessment, including research questions we seek to answer in the needs assessment to be gathered through in-depth interviews with teachers and school staff in the five school districts within Ramsey County. These research questions will be introduced in this document in bullet-point format at the end of each focus area discussion, after the existing data on each topic has been considered. These questions have been crafted in partnership with the RC SHIP Advisory Team; this group is comprised of 12 individuals who are either Ramsey County public school staff or parents of Ramsey County students.

⁹This document was written in mid-2023 as the school assessment was being planned.

Healthy Eating

Nutritious foods are an essential component to the basic needs and health of youth and adolescents. Healthy eating can help prevent chronic disease and promote sustainable energy for learning (CDC, 2022). Ramsey County public school students' responses from the Minnesota Student Survey related to daily fruit and vegetable consumption in the past seven days indicate a decrease from 2019 to 2022, exhibiting the concerning nutrition patterns present among students. 82% of eighth graders and 87% of eleventh graders reported consuming fewer than five servings of fruit and vegetables per day in the past seven days. The majority of students reported not meeting the 2 ½ servings of vegetables and two servings of fruits that are required per day (USDA, 2020).

The majority of students from all grades surveyed in Ramsey County reported they got their lunches from schools, emphasizing the importance of schools' role in promoting nutrient dense meals and enough time for students to eat. Additionally, 15% of eighth graders, 16% of ninth graders, and 13% of eleventh graders reported they usually skip lunch. This highlights the concern that children are not obtaining adequate nutrition during the school day. More specifically, female students were more likely to skip lunch than males (Minnesota Student Survey, 2022).

To effectively assist schools and students in consuming sufficient proportions of fruit and vegetables, it is necessary to understand any barriers or lack of knowledge students have related to fruit and vegetable consumption. Not eating lunch could be due to a variety of factors such as short lunch periods, eating disorders, bullying, lack of social connection, or meals not reflecting students' food preferences and culture. RC SHIP's proposed needs assessment would capture valuable inputs from the perspective of school staff on the barriers to encouraging students to consume more fruits and vegetables and provide some insight from their observations about why students are skipping lunch and ideas for how to address this challenge. Additionally, information is lacking on how schools work to educate and promote healthy food choices among students.

To gather information on this topic, school staff would be asked:

- Does your school environment impact students' ability to eat healthy during the school day?
 - **Key interview topics could include:** Amount of time kids have to eat, learning opportunities around healthy eating including food growing, addressing external factors related to students' comfort levels.
- Is there any other support needed in lunchrooms that would be useful to your school?
- Are students provided with education surrounding eating disorders? Are there more effective strategies to address this topic with students?

Active Living

Physical activity is another important component of health and wellbeing. Regular physical activity can help to prevent various health conditions, improve cognitive performance, and reduce anxiety and depression symptoms (CDC, 2022). Ramsey County MSS 2022 student responses revealed few students are meeting the recommended daily level of 60 minutes of physical activity, as set by the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS, 2018). The state of Minnesota requires that grades K-8 teach physical education every year, whereas high school students only must take a physical education class once throughout high school (MDE, 2023). In the past seven days, only 14% of eleventh graders, 17% of ninth graders, and 20% of fifth and eighth graders reported meeting the physical activity recommendation (MSS, 2022). There is insufficient data, other than the physical education requirements set by the Minnesota Department of Education, on how schools in Ramsey County are promoting physical activity and if they are providing students the opportunity

to be active, especially among grades that do not have facilitated recess times. To increase physical activity among students it is important to gather information about any barriers or opportunities.

To gather information on this topic, school staff would be asked:

- Does your school offer opportunities for students to be physically active during the day? If so, how?

Additionally, it is not known if schools are providing students with information about enrichment activities/programs that are offered outside of schools. Enrichment activities and programs outside of school can encourage students to be physically active and build connections with their peers that can enhance mental health. Opportunities for students to participate in activities that foster growth and learning is an important component for wellbeing. Low levels of participation in outside school environment activities were reported among all grade levels surveyed in Ramsey County. Furthermore, 25% of students among each grade reported not knowing about available enrichment programs in their communities (MSS, 2022). It would be beneficial to obtain data among schools about promoting and informing students of the variety of enrichment activities available to them in their community. This will aid the SHIP team in determining needed resources or assistance. This could also be useful in encouraging youth to be more physically active due to students' low levels of meeting the recommended daily physical activity guidelines.

To obtain this information, school staff would be asked:

- Does your school encourage students' physical activity outside of school hours? If so, how?

Commercial Tobacco-Free Living

E-cigarettes are the most used commercial tobacco product among youth in the US since 2014 (CDC, 2022). The majority of e-cigarettes, commonly known as vapes, contain the highly addictive chemical, nicotine. Nicotine can damage areas of the brain that control attention, mood, and learning, therefore impacting students' ability to thrive in school. Nicotine use among youth can also increase the risk of adolescents developing addiction to other drugs in the future (CDC, 2022). Ramsey County public school students reported high levels of vaping in the past 30 days: 89% of eleventh graders, 88% of ninth graders and 86% of eighth graders. Most students who vaped in the past 30 days reported using a flavored commercial tobacco product and reported getting a vape from their friends (MSS, 2022). The CDC states: youth who use two or more types of commercial tobacco products are at higher risk for developing a nicotine dependence. 59.9% of students who currently use more than one type of tobacco reported experiencing a strong tobacco craving in the MN Youth Tobacco Survey in 2020. Furthermore, Minnesota's Youth Tobacco Survey in 2020 reported two third of students were unsuccessful in quitting vaping and more than half of students wanted assistance to quit. It has been documented that e-cigarette use can be associated with mental health symptoms, like depression and anxiety among youth, which can make it even more challenging to quit e-cigarette use.

Schools are a good environment to educate youth and adolescents about the harms of commercial tobacco use and can provide a delivery method for assisting students in stopping e-cigarette usage. In order to support these efforts more effectively, SHIP's assessment would gather information from schools about what steps they are taking to decrease e-cigarette use and how to support them.

To obtain this information, school staff would be asked:

- What type of support would be useful for your school to reduce the use of vaping?
 - o What is helpful to change social norms and increase awareness around the health risks of commercial tobacco use of students and parents?

WELLBEING

Mental Health and Social Connection

Mental health is a significant component of wellbeing. Youth and adolescents with poor mental health are more likely to experience health and behavior risks related to drug use, sexual behaviors, and violence (CDC, 2022). Relationships with adults and friends help to build a sense of connectedness and can be a protective factor against poor mental health. It has been well-documented that students in Ramsey County Public Schools are struggling with mental health challenges. In 2021, Ramsey County Children's Mental Health Collaborative Survey reported 77% of youth were struggling with their mental health (Minnesota Department of Health, 2021). 29% of students who completed the MSS reported long-term mental health problems (defined as six months or more); furthermore, 45% of students identifying as female at birth reported long-term mental health problems. In particular, eleventh grade students had poor results of emotional wellbeing and distress, as compared to other grades: 29% of eleventh graders in Ramsey County reported seriously considering suicide (MSS, 2022). LGBTQ+ students in Ramsey County were three times more likely than heterosexual students to seriously consider suicide and four times more likely to attempt suicide (MSS, 2022).

Survey results also identified that from 2019-2022, there was a decrease in health status among students, especially among female students. There was also a decrease in students' feelings of being valued and appreciated among all grade levels from 2019-2022 (MDH, 2022). More specifically, 30% of eleventh graders and 32% of ninth graders disagreed that their teachers care about them as a person. This data exhibits concerns about the lack of protective factors students in Ramsey County are displaying. The long-term mental health impacts of the COVID pandemic are still being understood and the RC SHIP assessment will help to support more effective service provision for these young people.

In addition, there is a drastic lack of information related to the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and school staff. It is imperative to support teachers' wellbeing and mental health as they hold influential roles for students in fostering a positive learning environment. Therefore, it is important to provide teachers with adequate training and resources for possible mental health assistance. Mental health support for students falling on teachers can also produce negative impacts on teachers taking on additional roles in schools. It would be beneficial for students, teachers, school staff, and school environments to obtain information on a spectrum of topics related to mental health.

To obtain this information, school staff would be asked:

- How would you describe the overall wellbeing of your school?
- Does your school offer wellbeing (or mental health) related training for staff? For students?
 - PBIS, SEL, trauma-informed, etc. If so, how?
 - Is there any support that would be useful for your school?
- Does your school practice trauma informed principles? If so, how?
- Does your school incorporate mental health or wellbeing principles into a physical activity space? If so, how?
 - Are "brain breaks" or other mental health breaks implemented in your classroom?
- Does your school offer recreational social gatherings for students?
- Are there policies - either that are or are not in place- that limit wellbeing of students and/or staff in the school?
- Do you see any additional areas where wellbeing can be enhanced?

Safety and Bullying

Safety within schools is an important component in fostering a safe and accepting learning environment for students. It is important to protect youth from experiencing violence because it is an adverse childhood experience (ACE) and can cause long-term negative impacts on health and wellbeing. Sexual minority (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer) teens and Black or African American youth and adolescents are at a higher risk of experiencing violence (CDC, 2022). The MSS responses from 2019-2022 reported an increase of Black, African, or African American students who do not feel safe at school. Specifically, between 2019 and 2022, the rate of Black, African or African American students in eighth, ninth, and eleventh grade who disagreed with the statement that they felt safe in schools increased from 10% to 17%. There was a similar increase in negative perceptions of safety within schools in this period among Asian, South Asian, and Asian American students. Students who identify as gender and sexual minorities reported even higher levels of feeling unsafe in schools in 2022. For example, 25% of eighth grade gender minority students and 22% of ninth grade sexual minority students reported feeling unsafe at school (MSS, 2022). Ensuring students feel safe at school is critical in promoting health and wellbeing.

Bullying is another important aspect of wellbeing among students. The CDC categorizes bullying as a form of youth violence that can occur in a variety of forms, such as physical, verbal, social, and cyberbullying. Bullying in schools can result in physical injuries, self-harm, social stress, and emotional trauma. Additionally, bullying can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and academic problems (CDC, 2022). Ramsey County student responses for the MSS revealed an increase in weekly bullying among all grades surveyed and an increase in cyberbullying among fifth and eighth graders from 2019-2022, demonstrating that as students have progressed through grades over the past three years, they have felt less safe. Additionally, 40% of economically disadvantaged students reported higher bullying rates, 31% of LGBTQ+ students reported higher bullying rates, and 21% of students reported being bullied or harassed on a weekly basis in the past 30 days (MSS, 2022). Ramsey County students displayed an increase in bullying and increase in poorer mental health which has the potential to be correlated as both factors can impact each other. It is crucial to address the increase of bullying in schools of Ramsey County to protect students, ensure a safe environment, and reduce any burden on students' mental health.

To obtain this information, school staff would be asked:

- Does your school offer training or support to address bullying issues?
- Are there ways in which RC SHIP can offer support to address school bullying issues?

Saint Paul Public Schools

Saint Paul Public School (SPPS) district did not participate in the Minnesota Student Survey in 2022, creating challenges in assessing the wellbeing of students in the second largest school district of Minnesota. Due to this, 2019 is the most recent data collected among students in this district. Since then, COVID has had a drastic impact in the multiple areas of wellbeing for students and families. Available data on SPPS website do not provide any details on students' wellbeing; most of the publicly available information is related to state/district mandated assessments, academic performance, and school demographics. Collecting information on staff and student wellbeing will allow for proper understanding of the needs of SPPS so that RC SHIP can allocate resources to address them.

SPPS conducted a staff safety survey at the end of February 2023 to collect feedback about school safety plans and procedures. One in three staff reported feeling unsafe or very unsafe in schools. Staff feelings of unsafety increased with grade level, and staff perceived students as being more

unsafe than themselves. Top safety concerns among staff included weapons, and student-on-student and student-on-staff violence, with 65% of staff reporting they have either witnessed or experienced physical violence in SPPS district. Majority of staff disclosed that they felt not properly equipped to deal with the situation and felt unsupported by their building administrators after incidents of physical violence. Staff survey results are alarming as they highlight the unstable environments in St. Paul Public Schools and display urgency to support school staff (SPPS, 2023). Witnessing violence can be harmful for students and staff as it can impact their mental health, learning environment, and their ability to thrive. This further demonstrates the necessity to gather information from SPPS as the data available is concerning to the wellbeing of students and staff.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge the intersection of wellbeing factors that create unique experiences for staff and students. Given the recent COVID pandemic, which disrupted the learning, health, and wellbeing of students and staff, several protective variables to student's overall wellbeing have declined. Furthermore, there is a lack of qualitative and quantitative analysis on the satisfaction of staff in schools. Evidenced-based change is the most effective way to support staff in the schools, therefore a study that asks questions about staff's needs is desirable. The Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) has access to funds distributed by the Minnesota State Government to improve health outcomes and decrease chronic diseases by targeting healthy eating, physical activity, commercial tobacco, and wellbeing.

Appendix C. Methodology

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? Data for this assessment were collected between September 2023 and March 2024, and include semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 80 teachers and staff from four of the five public school districts in Ramsey County, Minnesota.

The RC SHIP team was made up of five members, including Pa Shasky (SHIP Grant Coordinator), Sarah Auten (Planning and Evaluation Analyst), Himali Patel (Health Educator), Andrea Flores-Hernández (Health Educator), and Annie Twiss (SHIP Intern).

Each SHIP grantee organization is required by the MDH to have a Community Leadership Team (CLT). This group is made up of community-based advisors that provide guidance to the SHIP office; RC SHIP's CLT is school-focused, so its members are staff and parents of RC public schools. This group was instrumental in advising the RC SHIP team through development and implementation of this assessment; their contributions are identified throughout this methodology.

Background Document Review

At the outset of this assessment, the RC SHIP team had intended to review a range of “off-the-shelf” school assessments, to determine which one to offer in support of the public schools. As a result, the first step in the process was a review of these documents. When it was determined that these off-the-shelf assessment tools were not a good fit for this funding opportunity, the background document review process expanded to a fuller review of what data were available on status of mental health and wellbeing in Ramsey County public schools. The results of this desktop review, including a list of works consulted and the analytical document that summarized the findings, can be found in Appendices A (Works Consulted) and B (Review of Existing Data).

From this analysis, the RC SHIP team decided that it was necessary to gather information from the schools themselves about what they need to enhance their mental health and wellbeing for staff and students. As it is extremely difficult to gather data from students directly, the RC SHIP team developed the following approach to gathering information solely through staff. The next section describes the selection process for the schools and individuals to be engaged in this effort.

Selection Process

Initially, the RC SHIP team planned to collect data from a sample of 20 schools. Selection of these schools was made according to the following parameters, and then vetted with the CLT to ensure selections were appropriate and timely.

- One elementary school, one middle school, and one high school (i.e., three schools total) from each district, except for Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS). The sample for SPPS was increased to eight schools total, to reflect the larger number of schools and students in this district overall (i.e., two elementary, three middle, and three high schools).
- From the above structure, the RC SHIP team purposively selected schools based on the percentage of the schools' student population who identified as Students of Color or American Indian, and the percentage who were eligible for Free or Reduced-Priced Meals (prior to the start of the Universal Free School Meals program in the 2023-24 school year). These data points were chosen as proxies to represent diversity within a school population.

- RC SHIP team sampled schools that trended higher on these indicators, but not the highest rates, so that schools selected were more likely to represent an average student experience.
- Researchers excluded schools that had experienced student violence or other security incidents in recent months. This was done in part to reduce the burden on potential respondents and decrease the risk of emotional harm to staff being interviewed, but also to increase the likelihood that the findings are generalizable to any school in the county.

Interview questions were organized around the four SHIP context areas and developed with inputs from the CLT before being finalized. The CLT also helped to pilot-test the qualitative instrument by answering the questions in small group discussions prior to starting interviews with the wider respondent pool. This pilot-test helped to ensure the questions flowed well in conversation and to identify any ambiguous terms that required clarification or definition (which were then added to the interview protocols).

After any necessary permissions had been obtained from the school district, RC SHIP team contacted the school principal via email and telephone to introduce the assessment (using a set of standard template emails and processes that were developed to ensure consistency in all assessment communications across schools). Principals could elect to participate on behalf of the school. When a school principal did not respond after three attempts to engage them, or declined to participate, the RC SHIP team chose an alternate school to replace it. Schools that did complete five interviews were eligible for a SHIP Wellbeing incentive.

When a principal consented to participate, they were offered an opportunity to be an interviewee themselves (which most did participate in). They were also asked to nominate up to five staff members who would be informative respondents to contribute to the data set. RC SHIP then added to this list five additional names of individuals selected from publicly available staff rosters based on their job titles. From this list of ten people, RC SHIP randomly selected up to five individuals to invite to an interview and contacted them (using the established template emails and protocols). When an individual did not respond to three attempts to engage them, or declined to participate, RC SHIP team chose an alternate individual to replace them from the list, until a total of five individuals had completed interviews from that school.

Interviews were conducted virtually using Ramsey County's Microsoft Teams platform that offers data protections for the virtual conversation to protect respondents' identities. Respondents were read a protections statement before the start of the interview and could elect not to participate (see [Appendix D: Informed Consent Statement](#), for a copy) and/or not to use video. The meetings were recorded (with respondents' consent) and transcribed digitally. Conversations were semi-structured to allow the interviewees to pursue topics of interest in more detail while also providing a structure to the conversation to ensure that key topics were covered in all interviews. An alternate data collection protocol for district office staff was developed as a complement to the school interview questions. Both instruments are included in [Appendix D: Data Collection Protocols](#).

A total of 80 individuals participated in interviews, including 21 school administrators (principals and assistant principals), 26 classroom teachers, and 33 staff members (including district staff, school psychologists, social workers, nurses, and counselors, among others). A total of 71 additional individuals were invited to complete interviews, but either declined or did not reply to the invitation (21 of these were teachers). Respondents were offered a choice between meeting during the school day (uncompensated beyond their regular pay) or after work hours (for which they were paid a stipend for their time). Interviewers found that the conversations that were hosted after work hours tended to be less formal in tone and respondents were more likely to speak candidly than those who completed the interview while they were in the school (in general).

Table 1 below identifies the key respondent groups and how many respondents participated within each category.

Table 1. Number of respondents by type of respondent

Respondent Group	# of Respondents
Administrators (Principals/Assistant Principals)	21
Teachers	26
Staff (District staff, psychologists, social workers, nurses, counselors)	33
TOTAL INTERVIEWS	80

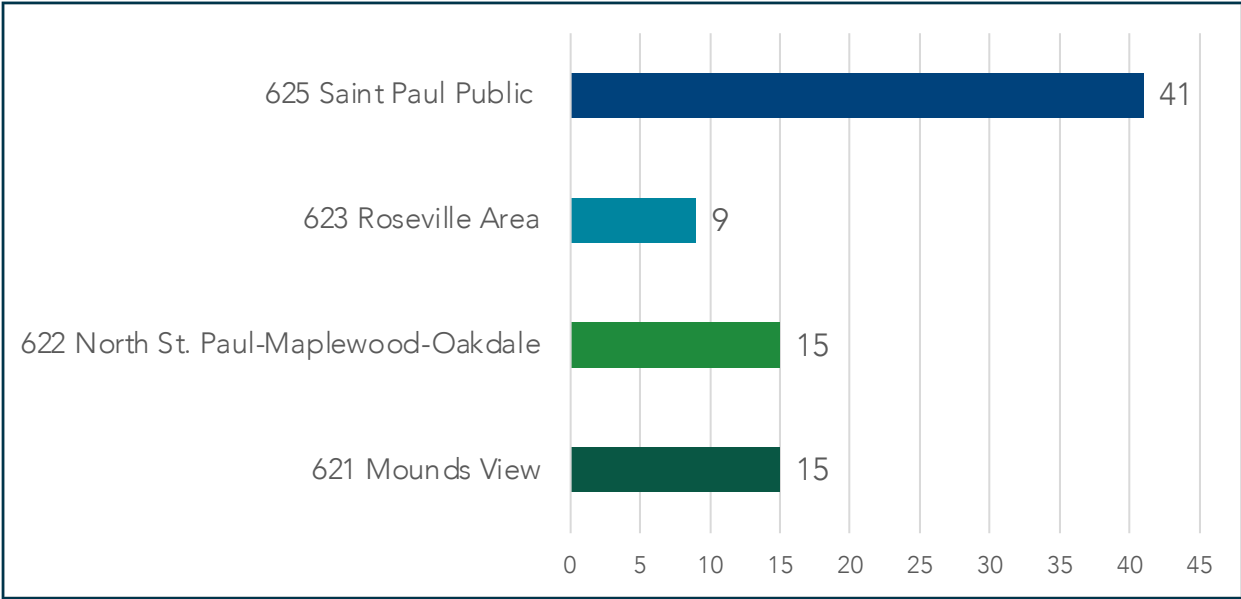
A total of 15 schools participated in the assessment, including 20 individuals from four elementary schools, 27 individuals from five middle schools, and 29 individuals from six high schools; there was also one district office that participated. Table 2 below shows this breakdown.

Table 2. Number of schools and respondents by school level

School Level	# of Schools Participating	# of Individuals Interviewed
Elementary	4	20
Middle	5	27
High	6	29
District	1	4
TOTAL	15 + 1	80

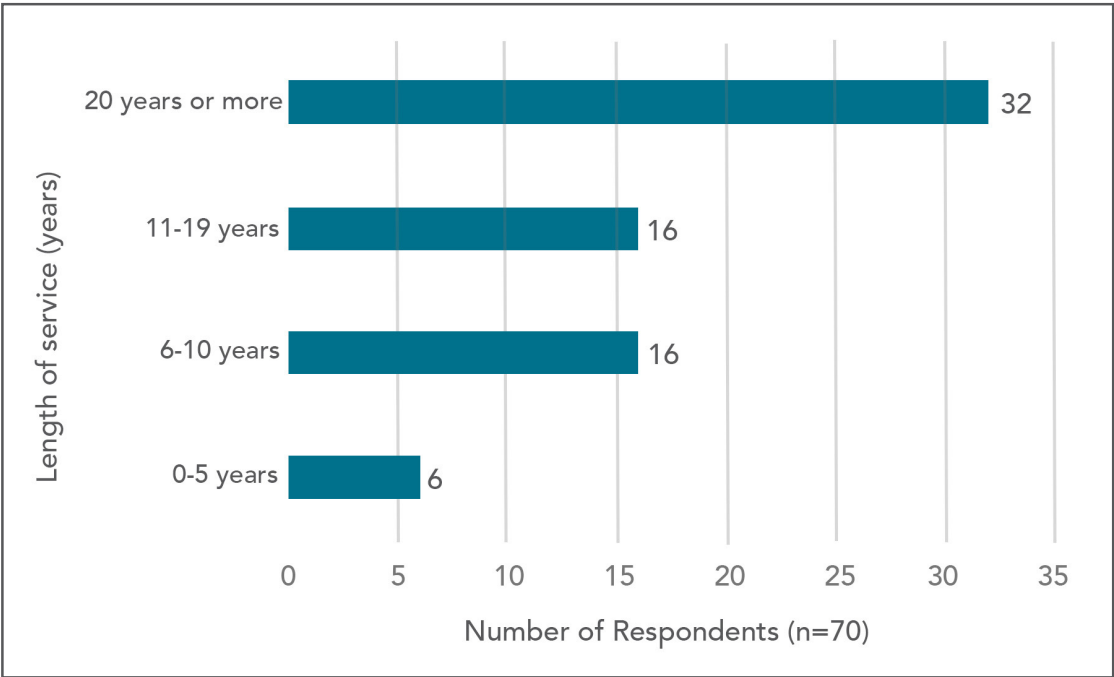
Four school districts participated in the assessment: Saint Paul Public Schools (District 625), Roseville Area Schools (District 623), North Saint Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale (District 622), and Mounds View (District 621). One district, White Bear Lake (District 624) declined to have any of their schools participate in the assessment. Graphic 1 demonstrates this distribution of interviews by district.

Graph 1. Number of respondents by school district



Respondents were generally experienced in their role as educators: the average length of service was more 17 years, with the shortest tenure being three years' experience and the longest being 41 years. The suburban schools tended to have more experienced teachers, at 18.2 years on average, versus SPPS average tenure of 16.5 years. Graphic 2 below shows the length of respondents' tenure in the field of education by year category: nearly half had 20 years or more of experience.

Graph 2. Respondents' self-reported length of tenure in education



Data Analysis

The team used Dedoose, an industry-standard qualitative analysis software, to code the qualitative data. All RC SHIP team members were involved in the data coding process, so it was essential to have an agreed-upon list of codes, for which a common definition/application was understood by all team members. Thus, near the end of the data collection period, the RC SHIP team conducted a collaborative exercise to develop a list of codes to apply to the qualitative data during the analysis process. As the final interviews were completed, the RC SHIP team made minor additions and refinements to this code list.

After finalizing the code list, the RC SHIP team test coded a couple of transcripts and compared the results to promote inter-rater reliability. Then, all transcripts were coded and the results extracted by code into a Word document that was shared among all team members. The full data set was divided up by topic area amongst the team, and each researcher analyzed their assigned part of the data set with the objective of identifying the most common answers the research question about how to allocate SHIP resources to the greatest effect.

The results of this individual analysis process were brought together and agreed upon by the team in two all-day, retreat-style analysis sessions. Through this collaborative process, the team developed a Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations (FCR) Matrix that identified the key findings by interview question and analytical code/theme, along with evidence from the data set to support the finding. Developing the FCR Matrix as a team ensured that all team members agreed with each of the findings from their own experience/perspective in the research, and that there was no overlapping of topics between the researchers.

Reporting

After conducting this analysis process, the RC SHIP team presented the initial findings to the respondents through a series of listening sessions to which all respondents were invited. This presentation was also given to the CLT. The objective of these listening sessions was to share out the initial findings, ensure they were an accurate reflection of the respondents' viewpoints and offer an opportunity for clarification and/or correction if the team had misunderstood something or there were contextual issues that had not been captured in the initial data set.

As it was essential to protect the anonymity of the respondents, RC SHIP hosted those listening sessions virtually, so respondents could attend anonymously and submit feedback through an online polling system. The presentation to the CLT was facilitated during their regular monthly meeting and that group provided feedback to the polling questions in hard copy. All participant and CLT feedback from these listening sessions confirmed the validity of the initial findings and offered clarification that was incorporated into the initial findings data set.

Following these listening sessions, RC SHIP prepared a series of individual one-pagers to summarize the key findings for each participating school. These were shared solely with the principal of each participating school, but they could share them with others at their discretion. These one-pagers were intended to identify areas in which that school was in front of, or behind, the curve in comparison to this overall assessment report.

Limitations of the Data

Timing of the data collection: The data collection period took a long time to complete, so interviews stretched between November 2023 and March 2024. During this time, SPPS were negotiating to avoid a teacher's strike.

Sample Size: The sample size is limited – we did not reach the targeted number of 100 respondents and it is not a representative sample (nor a quantitative study) so the extent to which these findings are generalizable to the overall population is limited.

Students Not Represented: It is exceptionally difficult to gain approval to conduct research with human subjects under the age of 18 within any setting, but especially a school setting. Therefore, the assessment was limited to only interviewing adults (i.e., teachers and staff). While it would have been beneficial to include the voices of parents and community members in the research, the cost and time associated with this effort put it beyond the scope of this study.

Districts and Schools Not Represented: White Bear Lake declined to participate. Another district, Roseville, approved data collection only in the high school.

Respondent Bias: Respondents want to say things that researchers find interesting and want to hear. Respondents also had strong feelings and emotional responses to the issues discussed in the interviews, because working in the schools can be a stressful work environment. In addition, the SPPS district was going through the threat of a teachers' strike during part of the data collection period, so that context was in the background of the conversation in the interviews.

Interviewer Bias: Researchers can interpret things incorrectly, reward responses that confirm preconceived assumptions, and focus analytical findings to match personal opinions about the research. The methodology promotes interrater reliability and grounds the findings in the qualitative data to mitigate this tendency.

Appendix D. Data Collection Protocols

Introduction

- How long have you been in your profession?
- How long have you been working for the district?
- What other roles have you taken in the field of education? Where? Please share details?

Teacher and Staff Interview Questions

WELLBEING

1. How would you describe the overall wellbeing of your school?
Wellbeing: wellbeing is defined as activities and policies that promote a sense of social belonging, opportunities for healing, and increase of mental health. This includes active living, healthy eating and extracurricular activities offered outside of traditional school hours for students and/or school staff.
2. Does your school offer wellbeing (or mental health) related trainings for staff? For students? If so, how?
 - a. Is there any other support that would be useful for your school?
 - b. Does your school use any standard school health assessments?
3. Does your school practice trauma informed principles? If so, how?
TIP: strengths-based service delivery approach that is grounded in an understanding of, and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.
4. **For social workers or peer counselor respondents ONLY:** Does your school offer support to students needing peer conflict-resolution? If so, how?

MOVES

5. Does your school offer opportunities for students to be physically active during the school day? If so, how?
 - a. Is there any support that would be useful to your school?
6. Does your school incorporate mental health or wellbeing principles into a physical activity space?
If so, how?
 - a. Are “brain breaks” or other mental health breaks implemented in your classroom?
Brain breaks: Free time for students during the school day (free unstructured time, gym library time)
 - b. Is there any other support that would be useful for your school?
7. Does your school encourage students’ physical activity outside of school hours? If so, how?
8. Does your school offer recreational social gatherings for students? If so, how?

BREATHES

9. **Middle and High School Respondents ONLY:** What type of support would be useful for your school to reduce the use of vaping?
 - a. What is helpful to change social norms and increase awareness around the health risks of commercial tobacco use to students and parents?
10. Does your school offer training or support to address bullying issues?
 - a. Is there any other support that would be useful for your school?

EATS

11. Does your school work to combat food insecurity among students?
 - a. Is there any other support that would be useful for your school?
Food insecurity is a condition of limited access to healthy, culturally-connected and medically appropriate food to support an active and healthy lifestyle.
12. **Middle and High School Respondents ONLY:** Does your school have a process to support pregnant students? If so, what is it?
13. How are students and staff supported when they return from maternity leave?
 - a. Does your school have a lactation/mother's room?
 - b. Do you have ideas for improvement to support pregnant people and those who provide care for young children while they are in school?
14. Does your school environment impact students' ability to eat healthy during the school day?
 - a. Is there any other support that would be useful for your school?
15. Are there policies – either that are or are not in place – that limit wellbeing of students and/or staff in the school?
 - a. Is there any other support that would be useful for your school?
16. Do you see any additional areas of where wellbeing can be enhanced?

District Representative Interview Questions

WELLBEING

1. How would you describe the overall wellbeing of the schools within your district?
Wellbeing: wellbeing is defined as activities and policies that promote a sense of social belonging, opportunities for healing, and increase of mental health. This includes active living, healthy eating and extracurricular activities offered outside of traditional school hours for students and/or school staff.
2. How does the district support schools with regards to mental health and wellbeing training?
Is there any other support that would be useful for your district?
3. Do your schools complete any specific standardized assessments like SHAPE, WCWH?

4. Do the schools in your district practice trauma informed principles? If so, how?
TIP: strengths-based service delivery approach that is grounded in an understanding of, and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.
5. How does your district address bullying issues?
6. Is there any other support that would be useful for your district?

EATS

7. What does your district do to combat food insecurity among students?
 - a. Is there any other support that would be useful for your school?
Food insecurity is a condition of limited access to healthy, culturally connected and medically appropriate food to support an active and healthy lifestyle.

MOVES

8. How does your district encourage students to be physically active?
 - a. Is there any support that would be useful for the district?

BREATHES

9. What type of support would be useful for your district to reduce the use of vaping?
10. Are there policies – either that are or are not in place – that limit wellbeing of students and/or staff in the district? (i.e. NOT having an anti-bullying policy)
 - a. Is there any other support that would be useful for the district?
11. Do you see any additional areas of where wellbeing can be enhanced?

Appendix E. Informed Consent Statement

Note to interviewer: Please read the full consent statement out loud to ALL interviewees and offer to provide a copy of this statement via email after the interview.

My name is _____, and I work with Ramsey County's Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) team. SHIP works through policies, systems, and environmental changes to reduce chronic diseases with active living, healthy eating, commercial tobacco-free living, and mental health and wellbeing activities.

Ramsey County's SHIP team is seeking to collect information about mental health and wellbeing among students and staff in Saint Paul and Ramsey County public schools. We will use this information to make programming choices for SHIP over the next few years and may also share this information with appropriate governmental and non-governmental professionals who are also working to promote enhanced mental health and wellbeing in public school settings.

This interview is one of about 100 interviews we are planning to conduct with adult staff representing 20 schools throughout the Saint Paul and Ramsey County public school districts. This interview will last about one hour. Your candid responses will help Ramsey County SHIP understand the status of mental health and wellbeing in your school and throughout the public school system more broadly. After the data collection and analysis has been completed, we plan to host a data sharing session to report back our initial findings and recommendations, to validate them or refine as needed to ensure they reflect the interviewees' inputs accurately.

Your responses to the interview questions are anonymous. Your individual name and other identifying characteristics will not be connected to any information you provide in this interview nor the assessment overall. Your responses will be compiled with all other responses to provide data for a report to be shared with Ramsey County leadership for decision making, and with the Minnesota Department of Health to document our work. It could be made publicly available on Ramsey County's website or shared with other residents and partners. No information in this report will be associated with you as an individual, but a list of all schools participating in the study will be included as an appendix to the final report.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can decline to answer any question without reason and/or leave this meeting at any time without consequences. If you have any follow up questions, please contact Pa Shasky, Ramsey County SHIP Coordinator at pa.shasky@co.ramsey.mn.us

Are you willing to participate in this interview? Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Consent to Record Interview

Can I record this session? I will not share the recording with anyone, it will be used only to ensure I have accurate notes of our discussion. The audio file is captured and stored on a secure server, and it will be deleted after I finish transcribing the interview. [IF PARTICIPANT CONSENTS, START THE RECORDING. IF THE PARTICIPANT DOES NOT CONSENT, TAKE NOTES MANUALLY.]

Appendix F. List of Participating Schools

District	School Name
District 621 Mounds View Schools	Sunnyside Elementary
	Edgewood Middle
	Irondale High
District 622 North Saint Paul/Maplewood/Oakdale Schools	Justice Allen Page Elementary
	John Glenn Middle
	North High
District 623 Roseville Area Schools	Roseville High
District 625 Saint Paul Public Schools	Mississippi Creative Arts
	Bruce Vento Elementary
	Hidden River Middle
	Murray Middle
	Battle Creek Middle
	Central High
	Humboldt High
	Washington Technology Magnet High
District Offices	District staff of Roseville Area Schools



For more information:

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Visit Healthy Schools at
ramseycounty.us/SHIP