2024

Advancing Health Equity Among Youth in Eau Claire County

Project Overview

Background

In 2023, the Eau Claire City-County Health Department was awarded an 18-month Advancing Equity in Maternal and Child Health grant through the Wisconsin Department of Health Services Division of Public Health. The grant was a partnership effort between Eau Claire County youth serving agencies including:

- Boys & Girls Clubs of the Greater Chippewa Valley
- City of Eau Claire
- Eau Claire Area School District
- Eau Claire City-County Health Department
- Eau Claire County Department of Human Services
- United Way of the Greater Chippewa Valley

The goal of this grant was to 1) develop a comprehensive understanding of available local data that focuses on child health equity issues, 2) assess data, 3) implement an organizational or system-level change based on data, and 4) use this learning to consider sustainable ways to continue to improve child health equity outcomes in Eau Claire County.

Local Child Health Data Indicators

To develop an understanding of local child health data, grant partners reviewed data indicators that are publicly available as well as data collected by their own agencies. To help organize the data indicators, the team reviewed existing data frameworks. A data framework offers evidence-based, predetermined domains and indicators to identify where to focus efforts.

From our review, we developed a data framework for this project based on state, national, and international frameworks. The framework organizes data into five domains, each of which plays an important role in child health outcomes. The five domains and sample indicators include:

Economics	Education	Environmental Health & Physical Safety	Mental, Emotional, & Social Health	Physical Health
Children enrolled in free or reduced-price lunch	Advanced placement enrollment	Bullying	Considered suicide	Alcohol use
Children living with a non-parent	Child literacy	Child housing problems	Extracurricular participation	Immunizations
Food insecurity	Child numeracy	Incidence of abuse or neglect	Feeling sad or hopeless	Obesity
Foster care placements	High school graduation	Injury deaths	School connectedness	Physical activity
Homelessness	School attendance	Juvenile arrests	Serious emotional & behavioral difficulties	Sexual activity
Uninsured children	School suspensions	Sexual violence	Trusting adult relationship	Tobacco use

Using Data to Identify a Priority Focus Area

Data Review

After creating a framework of available indicators organized into 5 domains, the team formed a Data Subgroup Committee to collect, analyze, and interpret the data. The committee analyzed a robust set of over 50 available data indicators. The committee also identified health disparities by analyzing data indicators by sex, gender identity/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, grade level in school, and grades obtained in school.

Next, the team selected a focus indicator for the next phase of the project using a four-step prioritization process:

- **Step 1:** Removed indicators that were outdated, had a small sample size, or included other concerns.
- **Step 2:** Used a set of questions to identify six indicators that represented the greatest disparities and could be impacted in the pilot phase of the project.
- **Step 3:** Ranked six indicators in order of priority.
- **Step 4:** Voted on the top priority focus area.

Priority Focus Area: School Connectedness

From the prioritization process, grant partners identified **school connectedness** as the indicator of focus. School connectedness was selected as the indicator of focus for this project due to the data showing a large disparity among certain populations, as well as the ability to impact within the project period.

In this pilot project, we focused on school connectedness as a community problem, not just a school problem. Our future work hinges on this approach – that the challenges our youth face, whether they be mental, emotional, or physical health are best addressed at the community level.

To measure school connectedness, we looked at Eau Claire County middle and high school students' sense of belonging in school (Youth Risk Behavior Survey). School connectedness is when students feel that adults and peers in school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. This includes a sense of being cared for, being supported, and belonging at school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). School connectedness is an important protective factor that promotes students' health and well-being.

Students who feel more connected in school are:

Less likely to engage in risky behaviors *(violence, unsafe sexual behaviors, and substance use)*

Have lower instances of emotional distress and thoughts of suicide

More likely to engage in positive health behaviors *(physical activity and healthy eating)*
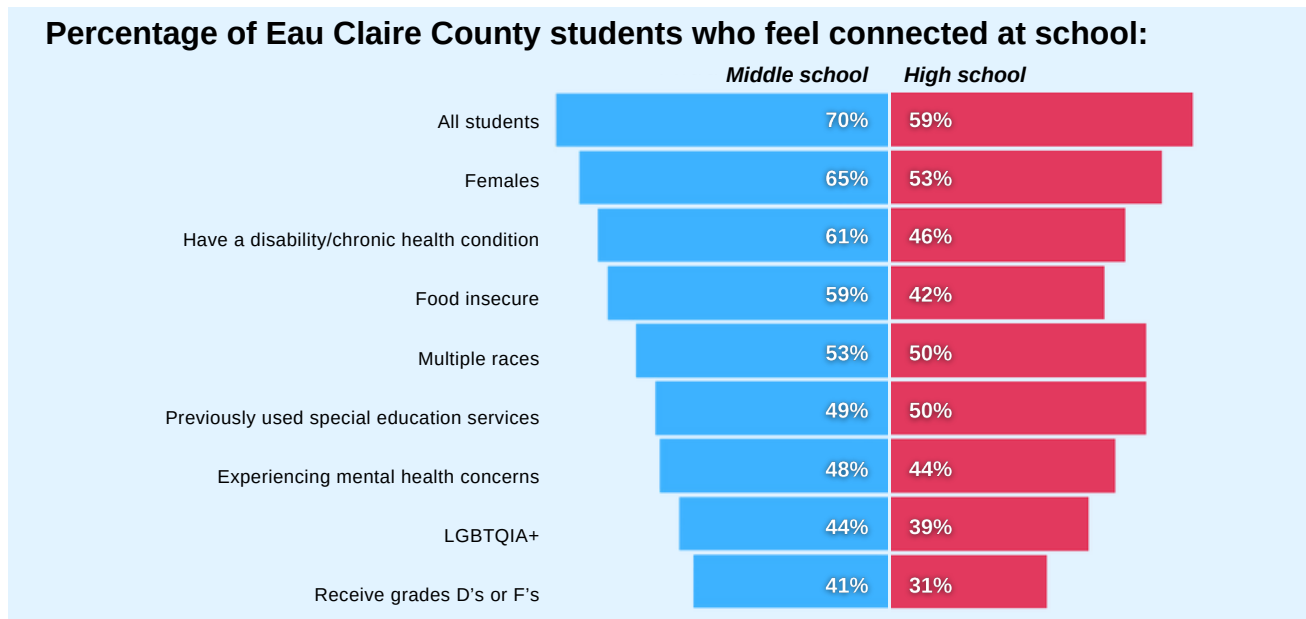
More likely to have higher grades and test scores

More likely to have better school attendance and graduate high school

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022

School Connectedness Disparity Data

Disparities in Data

School connectedness benefits all students, but not all students feel connected.

Local data show that female students, students with a disability or chronic health condition, students who are food insecure, students of multiple races, students who previously used special education services, student experiencing mental health concerns, LGBTQIA+ students, and students receiving low grades are all less likely to feel like they belong at school than their peers.

Percentage of Eau Claire County students who feel connected at school:

	Middle school	High school
All students	70%	59%
Females	65%	53%
Have a disability/chronic health condition	61%	46%
Food insecure	59%	42%
Multiple races	53%	50%
Previously used special education services	49%	50%
Experiencing mental health concerns	48%	44%
LGBTQIA+	44%	39%
Receive grades D's or F's	41%	31%

Source: Eau Claire County Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2021

Gathering Voices from Youth

In October 2023, six community agencies including Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Inc., Eau Claire Area School District, Eau Claire County Restorative Justice Program, Family Resource Center, Neighbor to Neighbor Ministry, and Power of Perception surveyed and interviewed at-risk youth ages 11 through 18 about their sense of school belonging. A total of 79 students were surveyed and interviewed. In total, 72% of interviewed students agreed with the statement "I feel like I belong at school."

Of the remaining 28% of students who did not feel like they belong at school:

- **85%** were not happy at school

- **78%** could not be themselves at school

- **58%** did not feel safe at school

- **47%** did not feel teachers cared about them

What students said during interviews about what belonging at school means to them:

- 📣 "Having an active place and voice and participating in discussions in the classroom."

- 📣 "Feeling like you deserve to be here."

- 📣 "Being able to feel safe with the people you are around, the community you are around, and being able to be yourself."

Pilot Projects & Next Steps for Collaboration

Community Pilot Projects

In February 2024, nine community agencies in Eau Claire County were awarded grant funding through this project to implement new or expanded community improvement initiatives that address school connectedness for Eau Claire County at-risk youth in middle and/or high school. These community agencies and their initiatives included:

After-School Programming

- At The Roots, LLC.
- BaredFeet
- Boys & Girls Clubs of the Greater Chippewa Valley
- Chippewa Valley LGBTQ+ Community Center
- Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Inc.
- Power of Perception

In-School Programming

- Eau Claire Area School District
- Eau Claire TreeHouse
- JONAH

Developed a Learning Community: To provide learning opportunities to the above community organizations a learning community was developed. The learning community included group sessions and one-on-one technical assistance related to grant writing; collecting and understanding program-level data; growing, expanding, and sustaining programs; and building relationships and trust.

Next Steps: Preparing for Future Collaboration

One overarching goal of this grant project was to create a foundation of knowledge, understanding, and evidence-based practices to continue working to improve child and youth health inequities past the end of the grant period. We coordinated with experts in the field to help with these next steps:

- **Monitor Youth Health Disparities as a Community:** Investigate and develop a list of appropriate and available countywide data indicators and establish a yearly report on child and youth health equity.
- **Convene a Child & Youth Health Equity Collaborative:** Pilot a model to regularly review data and take collaborative action at the county level to improve child and youth wellbeing.

This grant gave us an opportunity to work and learn in a new way as a community collaborative on one particular challenge we are seeing impacting our youth. Our future work as a community will be to continue to monitor child and youth health data to determine what changes at the policy, system, and/or environmental level we can implement together to improve the lives of our next generation.

Thank you to all grant partners for your active participation, expertise, and contribution to this project addressing health equity among youth in Eau Claire County.

We are grateful for your continued support in our efforts to improve the health of youth in our community.