

Student Mental Health and High School Achievement and Completion: Executive Summary

Mental disorders that develop by adolescence are associated with diminished academic achievement and lower rates of high school graduation. Students who dropout of school face negative socioeconomic outcomes, such as limited job opportunities and financial insecurity, that inhibit their ability to have a desirable quality of life. Providing students with increased access to mental health resources and implementing programs and interventions that promote the development of cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social skills can help at-risk students succeed both academically and after graduation. It is estimated that 40% of adolescents have at least one class of mental disorder; 31.9% have anxiety disorders, 19.1% have mood disorders, 12.6% have oppositional defiant disorder, 11.4% have substance use disorders, 8.7% have attention disorders, 6.8% have conduct disorder, and 2.7% have an eating disorder.

Minority and low-income students are most at risk of developing disorders that may lead to dropping out of school. Research shows that black and Hispanic adolescents have higher rates of disorder than whites, especially black males and Hispanic females (McLaughlin, Hilt, and Nolen-Hoeksema 2007) and that children coming from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are at greater risk of developing behavioral and emotional disorders (Catron and Weiss 1994). Externalizing disorders are strong predictors of school dropout and associated with poor social adjustment, attention problems, and disruptive behavior (Esch, Bocquet, Pull, Couffingnal, Lehnert, Graas, Fond-Harmant, and Ansseau 2014; McLeod, Uemara, and Rohrman 2012). Behavior problems associated with externalizing disorder may result in students being disciplined in a way that removes them from the classroom, negatively impacting their academic achievement and subsequent educational attainment (Moon, Williford, and Mendenhall 2017). Another serious issue low-income and minority students face is lack of access to mental health resources; while almost 80% of students do not have access to the mental health resources they need, Latino and uninsured students are least likely to access these resources (Kataoka, Zhang, and Wells 2002).

A wide variety of school-based mental health services and programs can be incorporated into the school setting in order to better serve students with mental disorders, at-risk students, and the general student body. Universal programs and those that target children with specific needs (selected/indicated) are most effective at decreasing aggressive and disruptive behaviors associated with dropping out of school. Students that benefit most from these programs are those from more disadvantaged backgrounds and those already exhibiting problematic behavior (Wilson and Lipsey 2007). Programs most effective at providing students with access to mental health resources are those such as the Vanderbilt School-based Counseling Program that refer students to trained and licensed mental health professionals providing services on campus (Catron and Weiss 1994).

Funding for mental health programs is available through The Mental Health in Schools Act of 2017 and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has already put forth a framework that calls for a multilevel system of supports that seeks to (1) develop the healthy emotional and social behavior of all students, (2) target the needs of at-risk students or those with mild mental health issues, and (3) use intensive strategies that include ongoing support for those with significant needs (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2018).

It is estimated that 10.2% of the 4,445 high school students and 3.8% of the 586 middle and junior high school students that dropped out during the 2016-2017 school year in Wisconsin had at least one mental disorder (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2018, Breslau, Miller, Breslau, Bohnert, Lucia, and Schweitzer 2009). By implementing effective mental health programs in Wisconsin schools, dropout rates for high school and middle and junior high school could decrease by about 10% and 4%, respectively.

In order for at-risk low-income and minority students to succeed both socially and academically it is imperative that adequate mental health resources be made available to them and that programs preventing and targeting problems associated with mental disorder be implemented throughout the education process.