



Rhode Island Needs More School Social Workers: An Interactive Data Story

September 2026

Overview

A growing number of children in Rhode Island are struggling with mental health conditions. Schools serve as a vital access point to provide mental health services, especially for children from low-income families and living in under-resourced communities. However, school-based mental health professionals' capacity is limited. Increasing the number of social workers in schools is one way we can make mental health supports more accessible to children.

Children's Mental Health

Mental health in childhood and adolescence is defined as the achievement of expected developmental, cognitive, social, and emotional milestones and the ability to use effective coping skills.¹ Like physical health, "mental health is a continuum from positive mental wellbeing to mental illness."² Mental health influences children's health and behavior at home, in school, and in the community.³ Mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, prevent or affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, and increase the risk for suicide.⁴

Prevalence of Children with Mental Health Conditions in Rhode Island

Many children in Rhode Island, from birth through age 17, struggle with mental health conditions. In Rhode Island, from 2023-2024, 29% of children age three to 17 had a mental, emotional, or behavioral health problem, compared to 26% nationally.⁵

Nearly 1 in 3



children in RI have a mental, emotional
or behavioral health problem

In 2025, more than one in five (22%) children under age six who were enrolled in Rhode Island's Medicaid program were recognized to have a Serious Emotional Disturbance that limited their ability to function at home, school, or in the community, up from 10% in 2017. This increase is likely due to a combination of increased family and community stress and an increase in awareness about the mental health challenges of infants and young children.⁶

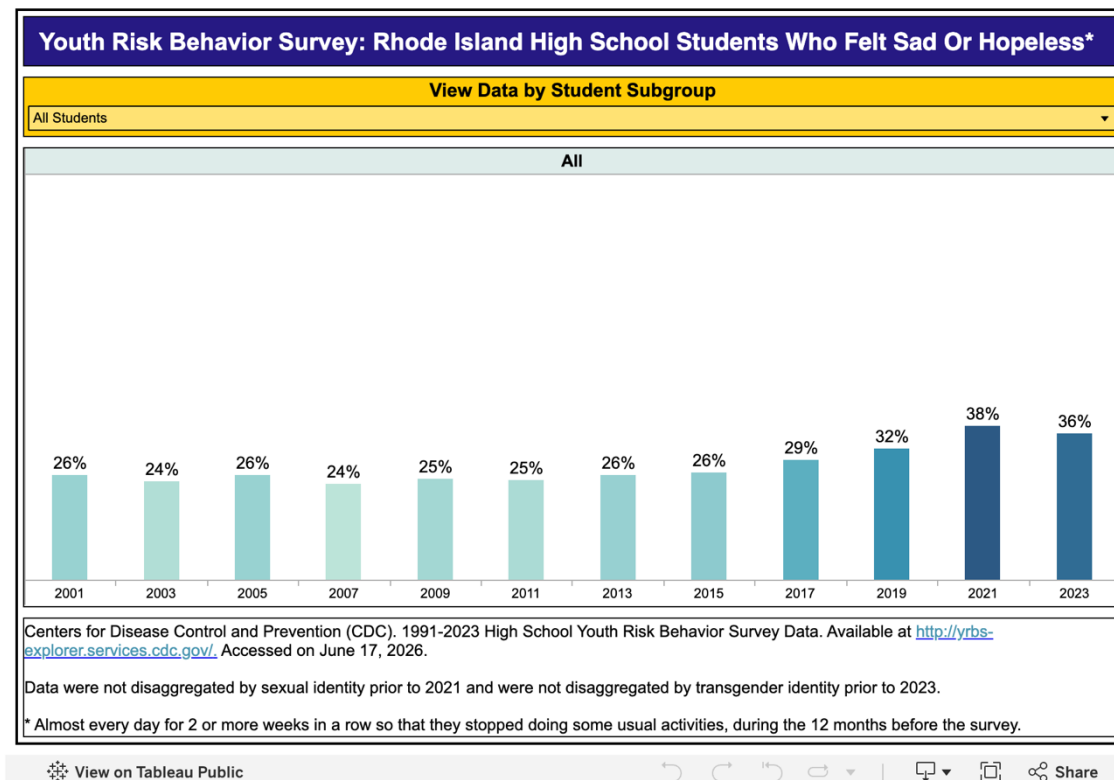
Growing Number of Children in Rhode Island are Experiencing Mental Health Conditions

While children in Rhode Island were dealing with mental health conditions prior to 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly exacerbated them. In 2022, Rhode Island pediatric and behavioral health organizations declared a Child and Adolescent Mental Health State of Emergency, stating, "this worsening crisis in child and adolescent mental health is inextricably tied to the stress brought on by COVID-19 and the ongoing struggle for racial justice and represents an acceleration of trends observed prior to 2020."⁷

"The pandemic hit a lot of people really hard. We were all stuck inside our house. You didn't really build social skills, so once we got out, it was kind of...hard to make friends and things like that."

Juan – Rhode Island public school student*

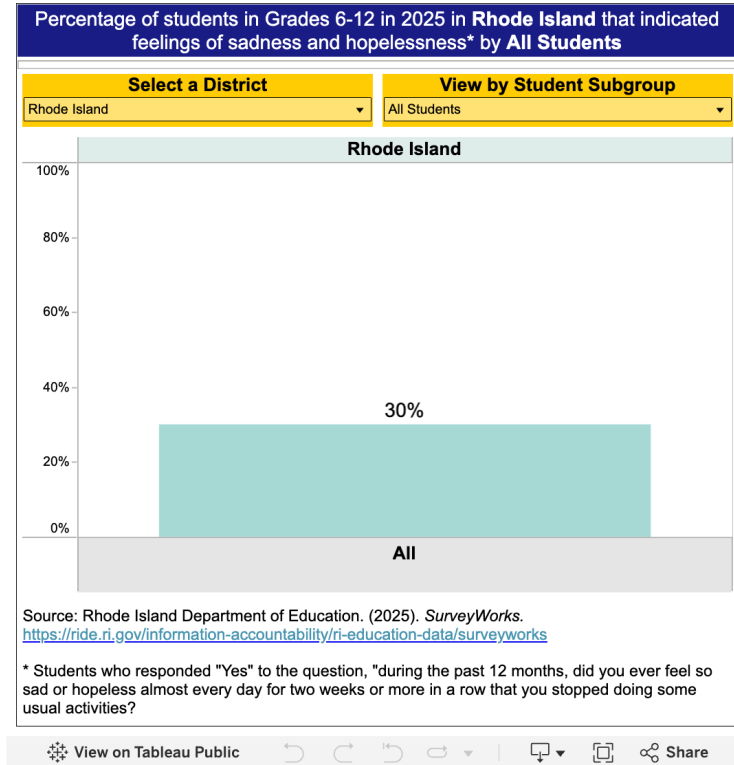
In 2001, 26% of Rhode Island high school students indicated they had feelings of sadness and hopelessness on the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)* and in 2023, that percentage rose to 36%.⁷ The percentage of students expressing having feelings of sadness and hopelessness varies greatly when disaggregated by student characteristics. For example, in 2023 47% of female students compared to 23% of male students; 56% of Multiracial students compared to 31% of white students; and 74% of transgender students compared to 34% of students who are not transgender; expressed feelings of sadness and hopelessness.



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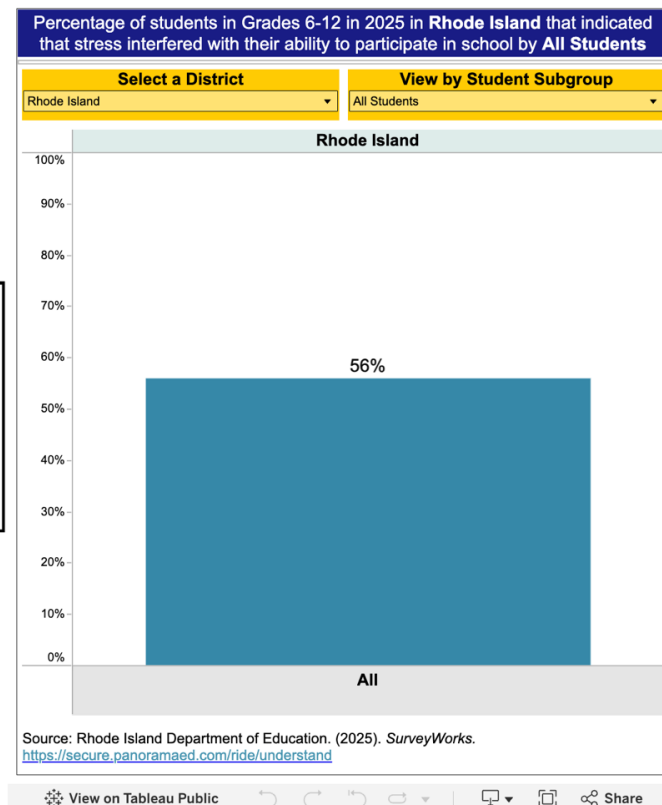
The Rhode Island Department of Education administers the *SurveyWorks* survey annually and also asks students about experiencing sadness or hopelessness. Similar to the patterns illuminated by the YRBS survey, students experiencing sadness and hopelessness vary by demographic characteristic and by school district.

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In 2025, more than half (56%) of students in grades 6-12 in Rhode Island indicated that stress hindered their ability to participate in school. More female than male students indicated negative impacts of stress and these percentages also vary by race and ethnicity.⁹

56%
of students in grades 6-12
said that stress interfered
with their ability to
participate in school, in 2025



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Children in Rhode Island Struggle to Get Support for Their Mental Health Conditions

Many children in Rhode Island are not able to access the mental health support they need. From 2023-2024, 50% of children aged three to 17 in Rhode Island who needed mental health treatment or counseling had a problem obtaining the care they needed.⁵ For children who do receive mental health services, on average, "most receive fewer than four sessions of care in community mental health settings."¹⁰

"You think, 'just give it some time and it'll be okay,' except it won't be okay if you give it time... there's stuff you have to address... and you don't have that support that you really need."

Carlos – Rhode Island High School Student*

Of children aged three to 17 in Rhode Island



who needed mental health treatment or counseling **had a problem obtaining needed care**, in 2023-2024

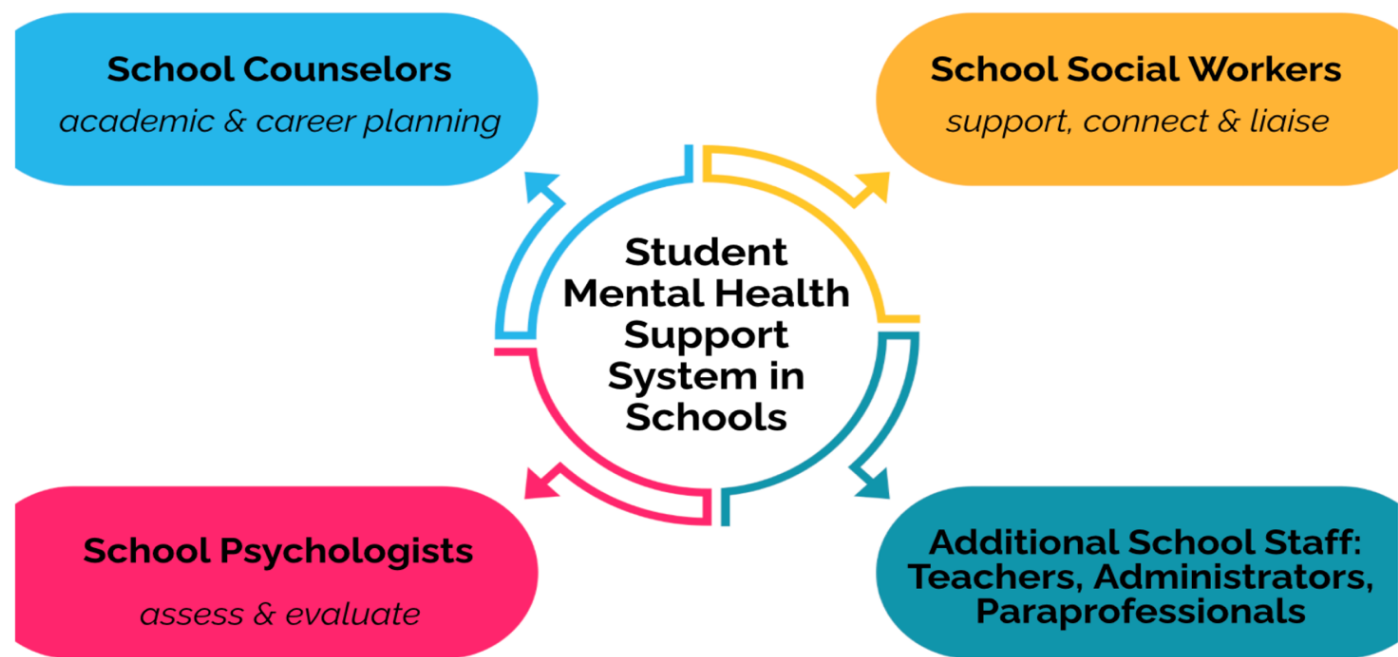
Some of the primary challenges to obtaining mental health services include problems getting an appointment, the financial cost of services or being uninsured,¹⁰ lack of available services, and poor previous experiences with health care providers.¹¹ The gap between need of mental health care and services is widest, "in under-resourced communities and among diverse groups of children and adolescents, and those with complex mental health needs."¹²

Schools are a Vital Point of Access for Mental Health Services

Schools can serve as a vital access point for children to access mental health services. Since children spend most of their time at school, they can serve as an effective setting to "identify, manage, and sustain progress for children with mental health problems."¹⁰ Providing mental health services at school reduces access barriers for underserved populations, including children from low-income households and Children of Color, and can lead to improved adherence and participation in treatment and decreased stigma among children and their families.¹⁰

School based mental health services are provided by many types of professionals that all have unique training and roles, but share the common goal of supporting student well-being by providing crucial socio-emotional, mental health, and academic support to help students overcome barriers to learning.^{13 14} School social workers, school counselors, school psychologists and additional school staff are all essential to meet students needs as "they hold different credentials, experience different training, and perform different roles... They may complement each other, and collaboration among these professionals may improve student outcomes."¹⁵

Web of Mental Health Supports in Schools



Summary of Roles and Responsibilities of School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists and Other School Staff

School Counselors	School Social Workers	School Psychologists	Additional School Staff: Teachers, Administrators, Paraprofessionals etc.
School counselors employ various counseling techniques with a focus on supporting students with academic, personal, and career development and planning. ¹⁶	School social workers utilize various approaches to coordinate support and liaise between the school, the family, and the community to "remove barriers to learning, such as attendance, mental health, and ability to meet basic needs." ¹⁷	School psychologist's duties may include data collection and analysis counseling, consultation, crisis preparation and development of academic behavioral and socio-emotional interventions. However, much of their time is spent conducting evaluations for students with disabilities. ¹⁸	Despite not always having the necessary training and credentials to support children's mental health, teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals and other school staff are often the "first line of defense." ¹⁹

NOTE: This table reflects a high-level summary of some tasks and duties people serving in these roles may do, but it is not exhaustive.

Rhode Island Needs More School Social Workers

Increasing the number of social workers in schools is one strategy to making school-based mental health supports more accessible to children.

Some school social workers are assigned to serve more than one school which means on some school days, there are no social workers available to help students.

"Los recursos de salud mental en la escuela de mi hijo prácticamente no existen. No hay apoyo para todos los niños."

Mental health resources at my child's school practically do not exist. There is no support for all children."

Linda – Rhode Island public school parent*

While having mental health supports integrated in schools increases accessibility to these services, not all children in need are able to access them. The majority (61%) of public schools nationally indicated they did not have adequate staffing coverage to address their student's mental health case load.²⁰

"At my school, sometimes the office is closed on Mondays 'cause they have meetings in there, but I could have a panic attack on a Monday."

Angelina – Rhode Island public school student*

In addition to often being split between more than one school, Rhode Island public schools' estimated school worker-to-student ratio exceeds the national recommendation of 1 social worker for every 250 students. As of January 2nd, 2026, the estimated school social worker-to-student ratio was 371 students to 1 social worker.

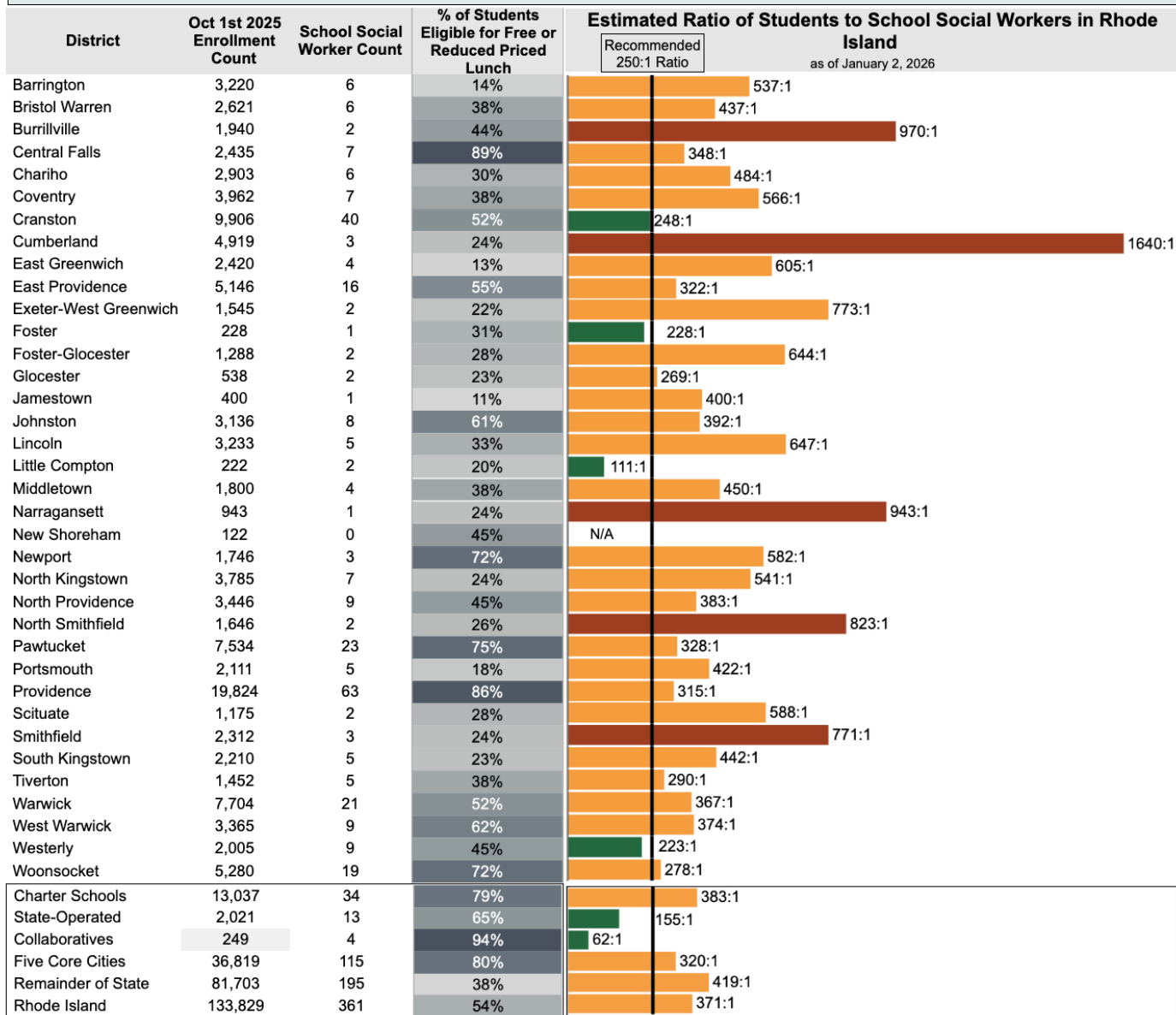
"I am the only social worker for 1400 high schoolers. I end up having to prioritize the highest level of mental health needs and services over other supportive interventions that could be done with parents/families. I think many opportunities for whole family support of my students (heating/electricity, food access, assistance with DHS, etc) fall through the cracks."

Casey – Rhode Island public school social worker*

Rhode Island's Student-to-School Social Worker Ratio exceeds the recommendation of 250:1

The Cranston, Foster, Little Compton, and Westerly public school districts as well as state-operated schools and collaboratives, are the only districts/schools in Rhode Island with student-to-school social worker ratios below the national recommendation of 250:1.

According to the National Association of Social Workers, "School social work services should be provided at a ratio of one school social worker to each school building serving up to 250 general education students, or a ratio of 1:250 students."



NOTE: To estimate these ratios, all staff data for each school district in Rhode Island were downloaded from the Rhode Island Department of Education's "Educator Verification Portal" <http://ecert.ride.ri.gov/public/> on January 2, 2026. All employees with a certificate area of "School Social Worker" were counted. Social workers who were assigned to multiple schools in one district, were only counted once.

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Recommendations

Increasing the number of school social workers in Rhode Island public schools is one strategy for addressing the growing need for student mental health support. Rhode Island schools should increase the number of school social workers to meet the School Social Work Association of America's recommended ratio of one school social worker for every 250 students.

- **Pass Legislation to Increase School Social Workers:** In 2026, legislation was introduced in the Rhode Island House ([House Bill 7456](#)) and Rhode Island Senate ([Senate Bill 2245](#)) which would require each K-12 public school to have at least one full-time social worker for every 250 students by 2030 and allocate \$2 million dollars in state funds to support this effort. An iteration of this bill has been introduced in Rhode Island in [2023](#), [2024](#), [2025](#) and [2026](#) but has not passed.
- **School Districts can Maximize Available Funding to Hire More School Social Workers:** Many school districts cite financial constraints as limiting their ability to effectively provide mental health supports to students.²¹ School districts can capitalize on the opportunities presented by recent legislation that permits Medicaid reimbursement for mental health services provided in schools.²²

* Pseudonym

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