



STATE OF NEW JERSEY

# DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

A Memo from the New Jersey Department of Education

Date: May 10, 2024  
To: Local Educational Agency Leads  
Route To: Principals, School Safety Specialists, Directors of Special Services  
From: Kathy Ehling, Assistant Commissioner  
Division of Educational Services

## Embracing May as Mental Health Awareness Month

As we find ourselves in the midst of Mental Health Awareness Month this May, we are reminded of our shared commitment to foster the mental and emotional health of our students. This time provides us with a valuable opportunity to deepen our understanding of, and enhance our support for, the varied mental health needs within our educational communities.

### Background

Mental Health Awareness Month encourages us to focus deeply on the challenges that affect our students' mental health, particularly the critical issue of suicidal ideation. The ability to recognize and respond effectively to signs of suicidal ideation are crucial for our educators and staff. Ensuring timely support for our students when they need it most can save lives.

Youth suicide is a complex issue, but it is also preventable. With the right strategies and interventions, we can significantly reduce the risk among young people. Prevention efforts are most effective when they involve comprehensive, community-based approaches that include education on mental health, early identification of at-risk individuals, and accessible mental health services. Schools, families, and community organizations play critical roles in creating supportive environments where young people feel safe to express their struggles and seek help.

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) is committed to supporting youth mental health and suicide prevention through a [wide range of initiatives and programs](#) designed to foster safe and supportive learning environments. Recognizing the critical importance of mental health in educational success, the NJDOE has implemented policies that require the integration of mental health into the curriculum, alongside providing ongoing professional development for educators on mental health issues. This includes specific training on identifying and responding to signs of distress and potential suicide in students. Furthermore, the NJDOE collaborates closely with other state agencies to ensure that schools have access to the resources and support networks necessary for effective intervention and crisis management.

### Department of Children and Families

In New Jersey, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) plays a pivotal role in addressing youth suicide through its comprehensive prevention, intervention, and response strategies. NJ DCF offers a variety of resources tailored to support young individuals, educators, and families facing mental health challenges. Among these resources is the [New Jersey Children's System of Care \(CSOC\)](#), which provides access to behavioral health support, substance use treatment, and services for children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as well as their families. Parents can call CSOC 24/7 at 877-652-7624 to request help, which includes wraparound care management, in-community supports, and mobile response and stabilization services that can respond within hours to the family home or other setting, in the event of a crisis.

Additionally, the department oversees a robust network of prevention resources. This includes the [Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth Program](#) at Rutgers University, which focuses on youth suicide prevention and response if a suicide does occur. Additionally, NJ DCF contracts with providers to offer School-Based Youth Services (SBYS) and the [NJ Statewide Student Support Services \(NJ4S\)](#) network, which make evidence-based suicide prevention programming and other youth wellness programming available to students in school or in the community. These initiatives, supported by extensive training programs and public awareness campaigns, emphasize New Jersey's commitment to creating a safety net for its youth, helping to prevent suicide through community and school-based efforts.

### **Department of Health**

The Department of Health enhances public health efforts through initiatives that include surveillance of suicide risk factors, public education campaigns on mental health awareness, and providing districts with curricular resources to educate youth on recognizing the signs of mental health challenges and risks of suicide. These initiatives are designed to integrate educators, community healthcare providers, and public health stakeholders to form a cohesive prevention framework that supports youth mental health. Resources for mental health and suicide awareness/prevention are available for all New Jersey residents including clinicians, educators, parents, caregivers, and youth at the [Prevent Suicide NJ website](#).

### **Department of Human Services**

The Department of Human Services offers a robust set of services aimed at mental health support, especially through its Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). This Division ensures access to emergency psychiatric services, ongoing counseling, and specialized programs for young people. It also manages New Jersey's 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, which provides immediate assistance and referral services to those in need (call or text 988 or chat at [www.988lifeline.org/chat](http://www.988lifeline.org/chat)) 24 hours a day, every day of the year. DMHAS offers ongoing QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) suicide prevention training for anyone working with adolescents or young adults in the state. For more information or to schedule a training email [DMHAS.DTBtraining@dhs.nj.gov](mailto:DMHAS.DTBtraining@dhs.nj.gov). Additionally, the Department funds various community-based programs that offer therapy, support groups, and educational resources designed to empower families and youth in managing mental health challenges effectively.

### **Office of the Secretary of Higher Education**

The Office of the Secretary of Higher Education works in close collaboration with New Jersey's institutions of higher education to ensure New Jersey students pursuing postsecondary education have access to mental health services. Beginning in 2023, the Office established a partnership with digital mental health and wellness platform Uwill, which is providing students enrolled at 45 colleges and universities in the state with access to free teletherapy, crisis connection, and wellness programming 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Currently enrolled college students or high school graduates who plan to pursue higher education can consult the [list of participating institutions](#) and should contact their college or university directly for access to services.

Together, these departments and office provide a coordinated system to support mental health by emphasizing early intervention and sustained support to safeguard the well-being of New Jersey's youth.

### **Next Steps**

In our ongoing effort to enhance student support, we are encouraging the following actions:

- Inclusion of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline on the back of student ID cards, in addition to the New Jersey Suicide Prevention Hopeline required by N.J.S.A.18A:6-113.1. This small but significant addition can make a life-saving difference, especially if attention is drawn to the change.
- Ongoing training and awareness to recognize and act on mental health concerns, including signs of distress and suicidal thoughts. The Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide offers [free training](#) and

resources for educators to enhance the knowledge in recognizing and responding to signs of mental health needs.

- Implementation of mental health screenings as a proactive measure to identify and support students who may be experiencing emotional or psychological challenges, provided local educational agencies have the necessary resources and infrastructure to do so effectively. It is crucial that these screenings are conducted with advance consent of parents or caregivers. The NJDOE has developed guidance for schools on implementing [mental health screenings](#).

By building a strong support system within our schools, we are paving the way for a healthier, more resilient future for all of our students.

For any questions or additional resources, contact the Office of Student Support Services via email at [SafeSupportiveSchools@doe.nj.gov](mailto:SafeSupportiveSchools@doe.nj.gov).

c: Members, State Board of Education  
NJDOE Staff  
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network  
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