



2026 KANE COUNTY
YOUTH VOICES
Forum on Mental Health

Lifting Youth Voices and Perspectives on Mental Health

2026 Kane County Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health Report

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Report Overview

Purpose

The Youth Voices Forum (YVF) was created in 2020 to elevate the voices of young people and ensure that their lived experiences inform the design, implementation, and improvement of programs, services, and systems that impact youth mental health and well-being. Every year, students from all over Kane County attend the forum to discuss the challenges they face, identify strengths within their communities, and provide recommendations for schools, families, community organizations, and decision-makers. By intentionally centering youth perspectives, Kane County is building a stronger foundation for youth-informed policies, programs, and supports that reflect the realities of today's adolescents.

Key Insights

Students consistently emphasized that **authentic connection and supportive relationships are one of the most important protective factors for mental health**. While schools play a critical role, many students spoke about the profound influence of relationships at home. Youth described wanting parents and caregivers who demonstrate empathy, listen without judgment, and create safe spaces for honest conversations about emotions and mental health. Students expressed a desire for adults to recognize that struggling does not mean they are failing, and that setbacks, mistakes, and failures are opportunities for growth rather than sources of shame or reason for punishment. **Students feel most motivated when adults believe in their potential while also providing encouragement, guidance, flexibility, and understanding when challenges arise.**

Call to Action

By aligning schools, families, community organizations, and youth-serving systems around these priorities, we can strengthen protective factors, improve mental health outcomes, and create environments where all young people can thrive.

Together, we should:

- Increase awareness of and access to youth-friendly mental health supports
- Ensure every child has a trusted adult in their life
- Create more opportunities for belonging, peer connection, and social support
- Replace punitive responses with supportive, relationship-centered approaches
- Reduce stigma surrounding mental health conversations
- Increase adult and community understanding of mental health and coping strategies

Introduction

The 7th Annual Kane County Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health (YVF) was held on February 6th, 2026. The event brought together over 100 high school students from 11 different high schools across Kane County to elevate youth perspectives on mental health, belonging, and overall well-being. This event was hosted by the Kane County Health Department in partnership with the Regional Office of Education (ROE) and was partially funded by the Illinois Children’s Healthcare Foundation.

The purpose of the forum was to create a safe and authentic space where young people could share their lived experiences, identify challenges affecting their mental health, and offer solutions to improve systems that serve them. Through structured discussions, interactive sessions, and peer engagement, students provided valuable insights that highlight both urgent needs and opportunities for meaningful change across schools, families, and the broader community.

Program Overview

In February of 2026, Students from across Kane County gathered at Elgin Community College for a full day of engagement, reflection, and connection. The day began with a resource fair featuring 19 youth-serving organizations, where students explored available supports and services while connecting with community partners.

The opening session in the auditorium featured a podcast-style panel hosted by Josh Axelson from the Kane County ROE alongside a student leader. The panel included both professionals and youth voices, creating a balanced dialogue. A “hot seat” format invited students from the audience to join the discussion. While participation started slowly, students quickly became eager to contribute, sharing perspectives on human connection, mental health access, and ways to build a more supportive community. The energy in the room reflected a strong desire among youth to be heard and to support one another.



Students then transitioned into small group discussions intentionally composed of peers from different schools. Facilitated by trained student leaders, these groups explored topics including self-esteem, belonging, social media, stress, family relationships, and coping strategies. Adults observed and documented insights without participating, ensuring that youth voices remained central. Students consistently described this portion of the day as impactful, noting that they felt free from judgment and stigma while building meaningful connections with peers across the county.



Following the small groups, students returned to the auditorium for a keynote presentation by Nathan Harmon, founder of [Your Life Speaks](#). Drawing from personal experiences with trauma and mental health challenges, he delivered a message centered on resilience, empathy, and personal growth. His story resonated deeply with students and contributed to a strong emotional connection throughout the day.

After lunch, students received additional information about community resources, including [Behavioral Health 360](#), and several participants shared reflections publicly. Many expressed gratitude for the opportunity to speak openly, noting that they felt less alone and more supported. The day concluded with students returning to their schools with increased awareness, connection, and a stronger sense of voice.

Student Insights

Notes from the small group sessions were compiled and analyzed, revealing several consistent and interrelated themes coming up for students across groups and schools.

Emotional Well-Being

In the small group discussions, students were most likely to mention anxiety, stress, and depression. Many mentioned that they feel pressure, not only to achieve, but also to appear “good” and “happy” all the time to avoid burdening others. Most reported feeling the need to always be perfect and usually hiding negative emotions from their parents specifically. Several students attributed the growing absentee and truancy rates to “emotional exhaustion.” They explained that since returning to busy schedules and in-person activities after the COVID-19 pandemic, they feel more exhausted than ever. This increased emotional exhaustion, they said, lead to both mental and physical symptoms that made it difficult to socialize, focus on academics, and even show up to school. Overall, they reported an overwhelming lack of motivation and feeling of burnout.

Many students described how they use **technology and social media** to “escape” or “cure boredom”, but recognize that this behavior is negatively contributing to their emotional well-being. Research indicates that while digital platforms can facilitate connection, excessive or negative use is associated with increased depressive symptoms, particularly through social comparison processes (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Students also said that increased reliance on digital communication—particularly during the pandemic—has made in-

person interactions more difficult. Social media, they said, contributes to comparison, self-esteem challenges, and pressure to present a curated identity. Students also mentioned specific things they see on social media that make them feel worse about themselves including: comparison culture, triggering imagery (i.e.: self-harm), immigration enforcement, and local hate groups posting content encouraging racism and other forms of discrimination. Students were split on their feelings toward cell phone bans during school, but many appreciated the stricter rules and said that they self-limit cellphone use because it makes them feel better. One table came to the consensus that they do not know what healthy cell phone use even looks like.

Belonging and Social Connection

A profound sense of loneliness and disconnection emerged across groups. Students described difficulty forming friendships, particularly in large school environments, and highlighted barriers such as social anxiety and exclusion. Students said that joining sports or other organized groups helped them feel more accepted and connected, with one student stating that “being on the track team” dramatically decreased her loneliness and depression. This aligns strongly with research on school connectedness, which identifies belonging as a key protective factor. Studies show that higher levels of school belonging are associated with significantly lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress both during adolescence and into adulthood (Allen et al., 2024). Many students said that their schools sponsor out-of-school activities that they would like to attend, but that they often do not hear about them until after they have occurred. Overall, students would like more time just to socialize with one another during the day and after school.



While less frequently discussed than disconnection, students also noted experiences with bullying and feeling judged by both adults and peers at school. Some constantly feel judged, while other reported feeling invisible even when surrounded by people. There was an underlying theme of needing to be authentically known and heard in order to feel connected. When asked who actually helps them when they are feeling low, most said their closest friends.

Adult Relationships at School and Home

While most students said that schools make real effort to provide services and create supportive environments, they still expressed a need for more supportive and understanding relationships with adults in schools, at home, and in the community. Research reinforces that

strong relationships with both school staff and caregivers are critical to mental health outcomes. Studies show that school connectedness paired with positive parenting significantly influence adolescent depression risk, highlighting the importance of supportive adult relationships across settings (Choi & Graves, 2026).

Students across the Youth Voices Forum consistently emphasized the critical role that adult relationships, both at home and in school, play in shaping their mental health and sense of support. Many students described hesitation in opening up to parents or caregivers due to fear of being misunderstood, judged, or causing additional stress within the family. Similarly, in



school settings, students reported that while some adults are supportive, others are perceived as unapproachable or primarily focused on discipline rather than understanding underlying challenges. This disconnect contributes to a reluctance to seek help, even when students are struggling significantly. A particularly strong theme was the impact of punitive responses to attendance. Students shared that when absences are driven by anxiety, depression, or emotional overwhelm, disciplinary consequences (i.e., detentions, loss of credit, or threats of escalation) often

intensify their distress rather than resolve the issue. Instead of addressing root causes, these responses can reinforce avoidance, shame, and disengagement. Students expressed a clear preference for supportive, relationship-centered approaches in which adults seek to understand the “why” behind attendance challenges and respond with empathy, flexibility, and connection.

Students talked a lot about relationships with their caregivers and how stress at home impacts their performance at school. There were two main types of home environments that seemed to cause the most stress: high pressure or instability. Students from homes where the pressure to succeed academically was high stated that their parents did not listen to them and often said things like “how can you be stressed? All you have to do is go to school.” The students perceived these comments as dismissive and felt like their parents only cared about grades. Other students shared that they lacked stability at home and could not depend on their caregivers to provide expectations or support. Students in these situations reported that their parents had their own mental health, substance use, and/or relationship issues and were not able to help them. Several were responsible for paying bills, keeping peace, and maintaining the household. Moving around a lot, balancing two separate families (separation), and cultural differences between parent and child were all named as stressors for the students.

Several students also highlighted that their home environment directly affects their ability to engage in school. For example, stress at home can lead to difficulty concentrating, poor sleep, or lack of motivation, which then impacts attendance and academic performance. In some cases, students described feeling like they have to “switch roles” between home and school and often take on adult responsibilities at home while being expected to function solely as a

student during the school day. This disconnect can be exhausting and isolating. At the same time, a few students shared that supportive family relationships, when present, serve as a major protective factor, helping them cope with stress and feel grounded. Overall, students emphasized that when family environments lack open communication or emotional support, schools often become the primary place where they hope to find understanding adults and access to help, reinforcing the need for strong, connected systems across both home and school contexts.

Academic Pressure

Students highlighted the significant impact of rigorous academic expectations on their mental health. Recent studies show that students are spending significantly more time on homework than previous generations. Students are not only expected to do more work, but they are also experiencing more psychological stress stemming from intensified competition for college admissions and expectations for future success.

Students noted experiencing a cycle in which they would fall behind, feel stress, experience mental health symptoms, fall further behind, and so on. Several comments about a lack of flexibility and understanding from educators reflect another key shift: academic systems have increasingly emphasized accountability and performance metrics, while often lagging in adapting to students' mental health needs. Research on academic stress shows that when students perceive expectations as exceeding their available time, energy, or emotional capacity, stress becomes chronic and can lead to burnout, sleep disruption, and disengagement (Ward, 2021). Once they fall behind, rigid policies and high expectations can make it difficult to recover, reinforcing a negative cycle rather than supporting re-engagement.

Access to Support

The majority of students reported that they are aware of the mental health supports at their schools and that their school social workers and counselors are knowledgeable and helpful. Most, however, noted many barriers to accessing the support like stigma, time constraints, and worrying that their parents will be called. Many of the groups discussed that in order to get help, a student has to proactively reach out and find ways to connect, which is difficult when feeling bad already. Overall, they said that there are not enough social workers to adequately serve the student population and that they don't have enough time in the day to address various issues.

When asked about mental health supports outside of school, they reported not knowing what is available and/or feeling like their parents would or could not find, pay for, or transport them to services. Many students said that they wished their parents would learn more about mental wellness and talk more openly about struggles and supports. Students reported paying attention to mental health campaigns like "its okay to not be okay", and feeling favorably about anything that reduces stigma around mental health.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been generated from research, evidence-based practices, and input from students at the 2026 Kane County Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health.

Schools

- Implement accessible, low-barrier mental health supports such as drop-in wellness spaces
- Establish systems where every student is connected to a trusted adult
- Shift from punitive to supportive approaches for attendance and behavioral issues
- Provide ongoing training for staff on youth mental health and trauma-informed practices
- Create and widely promote structured opportunities for peer connection and socialization (advisory periods, peer mentoring, clubs)
- Increase flexibility and support for students experiencing mental health-related academic challenges
- Provide psychoeducational opportunities for staff, students, and caregivers to raise awareness about mental health and teach positive skills

Parents and Caregivers

- Increase understanding of one's own mental health and how it impacts youth in the home
- Make ongoing effort to maintain one's own mental wellness, seek help when needed
- Increase awareness and understanding of youth mental health through education and outreach
- Foster open, non-judgmental communication at home
- Normalize help-seeking behaviors and reduce stigma
- Engage in available parent support programs and community resources

Students

- Participate in peer support opportunities and school-based activities
- Utilize available mental health resources and supports
- Practice and share positive coping strategies
- Support peers by fostering inclusive and empathetic environments

Community Organizations

- Expand culturally responsive and youth-friendly mental health services
- Improve coordination between schools and community-based providers
- Increase outreach and awareness of available resources
- Support peer-led and youth-driven initiatives
- Invest in community-wide strategies that address belonging and social connection

Conclusion

The Youth Voices Forum demonstrated the power and importance of elevating youth perspectives in shaping systems that impact their well-being. Students across Kane County shared consistent messages: they are experiencing significant mental health challenges, they crave connection and belonging, and they want adults and systems to better understand and support them. These themes are deeply interconnected and strongly supported by decades of peer-reviewed research. Evidence consistently shows that connection to peers, trusted adults, and family systems serves as one of the most powerful protective factors in adolescent mental health (Resnick et al., 1997; Loades et al., 2020).

At the same time, the forum highlighted a strong sense of resilience, empathy, and willingness among youth to be part of the solution. Most students reporting feeling that the forum was a non-judgmental environment where they could be authentic and even take on leadership roles. The small group discussions were insightful, nuanced, empathic, and often solutions-focused. They not only identified challenges but also offered clear, actionable recommendations for improvement.

Moving forward, these insights provide a critical foundation for coordinated action across schools, families, and community organizations. By empowering youth voice and aligning resources to address the priorities identified, Kane County has a meaningful opportunity to strengthen its support systems and improve outcomes for young people.



Participating Schools

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the Kane County Regional Office of Education and the following school districts and schools for supporting and encouraging student participation in the 2026 Youth Voices Forum. Your partnership and commitment to elevating youth perspectives are invaluable to advancing the mental health and well-being of young people throughout our community.

- Bartlett High School
- Batavia High School
- Blackhawk Academy
- Dundee Crown High School
- Elgin High School
- Geneva High School
- Hampshire High School
- Larkin High School
- South Elgin High School
- Streamwood High School
- West Aurora High School

Participating Community Organizations

We extend our sincere gratitude to all of the community organizations that participated in the 2026 Youth Voices Forum with a resource table. Students consistently expressed a desire to learn more about the behavioral health and community resources available to them and their families beyond the school setting. The Youth Voices Forum Resource Fair provided an important opportunity for students to engage directly with representatives from local organizations, ask questions, and bring valuable information and materials back to their families, friends, and neighbors. Meaningful community partnerships such as these play a vital role in supporting the health and well-being of our youth and families.

- Alive Center
- Association for Individual Development
- Bridgeview Counseling
- Centro de Información
- East Aurora Counseling
- Easter Seals DuPage & Fox Valley Region
- Ellie Mental Health
- Family Counseling Services
- Family Service Association of Greater Elgin
- Fox Valley Hands of Hope
- Gateway Foundation
- Kids Above All
- Lighthouse
- Owens Counseling
- Suicide Prevention Services of America
- Tri-City Family Services



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