

ACSI Research Brief

Mental Health & Well-Being

IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS



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In late 2024, ACSI and the School Counseling Mental Health Initiative (SCMHI) at Denver Seminary surveyed Christian school leaders at ACSI member schools on their perceptions of student and educator well-being, school policies, and overall mental health culture in schools. We conducted this research in response to rising concern regarding the decline in youth mental health across the United States and the globe,¹ with rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality among school-aged children all growing significantly in recent years.²

Correspondingly, educators have also reported significant mental health struggles themselves, including higher rates of burnout, which correlate with greater depression, anxiety, and overall stress.³ Through this research, we aimed to explore the state of student and educator well-being in Christian schools, as seen through the perspective of heads of school. This brief provides topline findings along with recommendations for discussion and exploration within your own school context.

About the Sample

The survey was emailed to all ACSI heads of school in the United States, with 225 heads responding, for an approximate response rate of 10%. When asked about their schools, 36% of respondents said their schools were small (less than 250 students), 30% were mid-sized (251-500 students), and 34% were large (over 500 students). Of this sample, 69% came from ACSI accredited schools, while 31% did not. Just over 60% of schools were located in a suburban context, followed by rural (at 22%) and urban (at 18%). In terms of region of the U.S., 36% were located in the South, 30% in the Midwest, 20% in the Western U.S., and 14% in the Northeast.

Key Findings: Student Mental Health

Overall student mental health in schools was positively rated with leaders, with some differences observed by school type. Specifically:

- A majority of heads of school perceived students' overall mental health at their school as "good" (80%), followed by fair (17%) and poor (3%).
- The percentage of leaders reporting student mental health as "good" was highest for suburban schools, large schools, and covenantal schools (all jumping to 84%) as compared with other types of schools.
- Despite this finding, 88% of all respondents said that school leaders and teachers should be "concerned" (52%) or "very concerned" (36%) about student mental health issues.
- When asked to rate the severity of emotional issues among students, the top three concerns cited by leaders were: 1) worrying, anxiety, or nervousness; 2) attention deficit or hyperactivity; and 3) impaired self-esteem.

- When asked whether they perceived stigma around mental health in their schools, 65% said no, 29% said yes, and 5% indicated they did not know.

Key Findings: School Approaches and Resources

School leaders generally reported not having enough resources, including staff, to address student mental health concerns in their school in an adequate manner. Specific findings:

- When asked to identify the top challenges facing their schools in addressing student mental health, the top picks were: 1) limited mental health professionals; 2) social media and technology; 3) funding constraints; and 4) family issues.
- Just under half of school leaders (47%) reported that their school offers some type of mental health counseling for students, while about a quarter (24.7%) provide some kind of professional development opportunity for staff on mental health awareness and support.
- In terms of funding, an overwhelming 94% of leaders reported not having enough funds to address student mental health to the degree they'd like.

Key Findings: Cell Phones

Policies and practices regarding cell phones have been a topic of much recent attention in schools.⁴ When it comes to Christian school leaders in the survey sample, the most common policy reported (at 37%) was collecting cell phones at the start of each day and returning them to students at the end of the day (e.g., through the use of phone lockers). This was followed by allowing cell phone use only outside of class time (32%) and then by implementing a full ban on cell phones (15%).

Key Findings: Christian Foundations

School leaders overwhelmingly stated that their school's distinctive Christian mission supported student mental health and wellness. Specific findings:

- Nearly all respondents (95.4%) agreed that their school integrates faith and spiritual guidance into its mental health approach.
- 82% stated that school counselors or health professionals at their school offered faith-based or spiritually informed support options to students.
- Over two-thirds (69%) also reported that their school's own faith-based approach was helpful in supporting *their own* mental health and wellness.

Key Findings: Leader Well-Being

The survey asked leaders how often they experienced various symptoms of burnout. The most frequently experienced symptoms—measured by respondents selecting they “often” or “always” experienced them—were: being tired (44%), being emotionally exhausted (29%), being worn out (25%), and being physically exhausted (25%). These findings suggest that leader well-being should be an issue of consideration, both by leaders and by school boards who provide oversight for heads of school.

Recommendations for Discussion and Exploration

The data presented in this brief underscore both encouraging signs and important needs when it comes to addressing mental health and well-being in Christian schools. Based on the findings, school leaders and their teams may wish to explore—through discussion and data gathering in their own contexts—the following areas:

- 1. Gap Between Perceived Health and Recognized Concern:** Although most leaders rated student mental health as “good,” the majority also expressed concern about growing mental health challenges. This disconnect suggests a need for schools to evaluate how well current perceptions align with the lived experiences of students. Leaders may consider conducting student and parent focus groups or periodic well-being surveys to gain a more comprehensive understanding of student needs.
- 2. Resource Needs:** Nearly all respondents cited inadequate funding as a barrier to addressing mental health concerns, along with a lack of mental health professionals as a key concern. School leaders may wish to explore partnerships with local providers, partner with other area Christian schools and churches, and apply for available grants to address these issues.
- 3. Christian Formation Integration:** Nearly all respondents indicated that their school integrates faith into its mental health practices. Schools should continue to cultivate environments where spiritual formation, care, and emotional well-being are deeply connected. Professional development for staff could include theological reflections on care, resilience, and human flourishing, to help to strengthen this integration.
- 4. Addressing Burnout:** Attention to leader and staff wellness is important. Boards should be encouraged to actively engage in the well-being of their heads of school—not only in times of crisis, but as a proactive measure for sustaining long-term leadership.

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)* (Washington, DC: USCB, 2023), <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nsch.html>; C. Kieling et al., "Worldwide Prevalence and Disability from Mental Disorders Across Childhood and Adolescence: Evidence from the Global Burden of Disease Study," *JAMA Psychiatry* 81, no. 4 (2024): 347–356, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2023.5051>.
- ² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data* (Atlanta: CDC, 2023), <https://www.cdc.gov/yrbbs/dstr/index.html>.
- ³ B. Agyapong et al., "Stress, Burnout, Anxiety and Depression Among Teachers: A Scoping Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 17 (2022): Article 10706, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191710706>.
- ⁴ Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).