



Sarah-Jane Lorenzo
Research Associate

On the Agenda

Preventing Student Suicides

Suicide rates have been rising for more than a decade, affecting youth in every age group. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds and the third leading cause of death for 10- to 14-year-olds. Each one devastates an entire community and school. Educators are at the front lines of suicide prevention efforts, and their interactions with students can be transformative.

Yet state boards of education are considering statewide strategies to support these efforts. In 2017, state boards promoted suicide prevention in myriad ways: through initiatives on school personnel training, a comprehensive school mental health framework, and an innovative student helpline. In states such as Louisiana, Kansas, and Illinois, state boards have provided professional learning materials and model guidance for schools on preventing student suicides and promoting mental health by creating caring, well-resourced environments.

Boards can intensify the focus on students' mental health within their states. In 2017, Kansas board members oversaw development of a comprehensive school mental health framework and established a School Mental Health Advisory Council. Board members began their process in March, when they first requested an outline for a school-based mental health model inclusive of supports and training to help schools better commit to trauma-informed care. As the model was developed, board members received monthly updates. They stressed the importance of collaborating with legislators and community partners before the plan's release to ensure schools are equipped to implement it. As they developed the model framework, board members collaborated with the Kansas State Department of Education, invited stakeholder representatives for conversations, and publicly emphasized

community partnerships as essential to building strong local networks of support.

Utah's suicide rate is among the highest in the nation. Thus student mental health is an urgent concern of the Utah State Board of Education. In August, Utah board members focused on expansion of the state's prevention toolkit: a suicide and mental health tip line that helps students in crisis connect with counselors 24/7. The tip line is accessible through an app called SafeUT, which lets students text or call licensed counselors or submit confidential tips to school administrators on bullying, violence, and threats. Like many states, Utah has a large rural population, which can mean limited access to psychiatrists and clinical therapists. Utah board members recognized that obstacle during their August conversation and discussed the challenge of funding more school counselor and school psychologist positions.

Suicide prevention requires a comprehensive approach, with schools, communities, and state-level agencies working together. Through thoughtful resources and supports, state boards of education can elevate and foster a focus on students' mental health.

How does your state board help address student suicide and mental health, and what role do you play in bringing those issues to the table? To learn more about state board strategies across the country, visit stateboardinsight.nasbe.org and browse the Student Support category.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's guide to suicide prevention statutes by state includes information on roles and opportunities for state boards within existing legislation. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is accessible online at <http://www.suicideprevention-lifeline.org> or by calling 1-800-273-TALK (8255). ■