



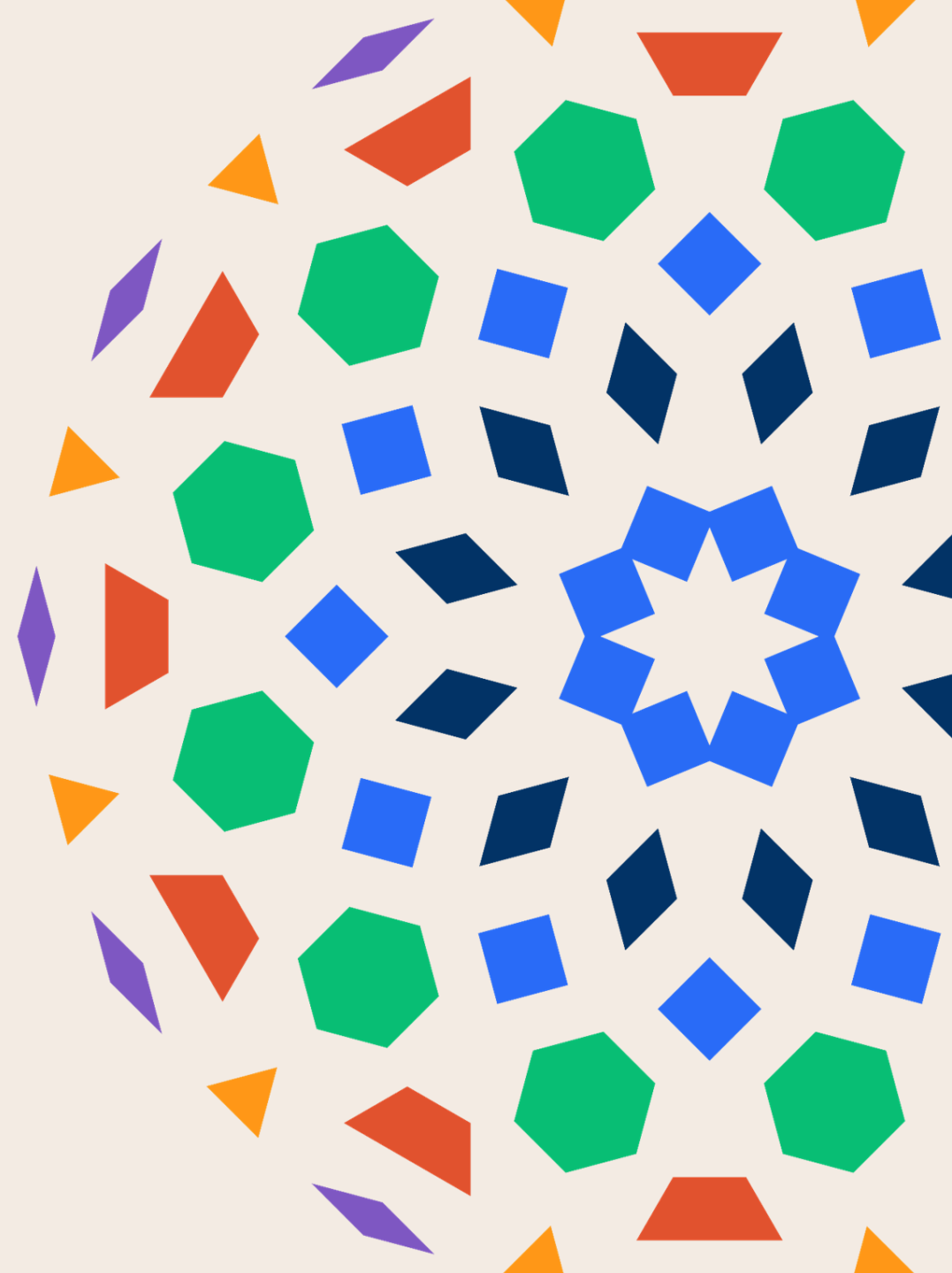
# Addressing Student Digital Media Use to Promote Mental Health

**Shari Kessel Schneider and Shai Fuxman**

**November 6, 2024**

**Education Development Center**

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# EDC Solutions

Since 1958, Education Development Center (EDC) has collaborated with public and private partners to advance education and health solutions in communities across the globe.



**EDC Solutions** offers **schools** and **districts** supports to improve the **wellbeing** and **address the mental and behavioral health** of students, educators, and families through:



**Professional Development**



**Consultation**



**Ongoing MTSS Support**



## Education & Wellbeing *Sample Projects*

District MTSS & SEL Rapid Assessment & Action Planning, professional development (2023)

SEL & Multi-Tiered Suicide Prevention for Schools IN 19 Districts (2022-2026)

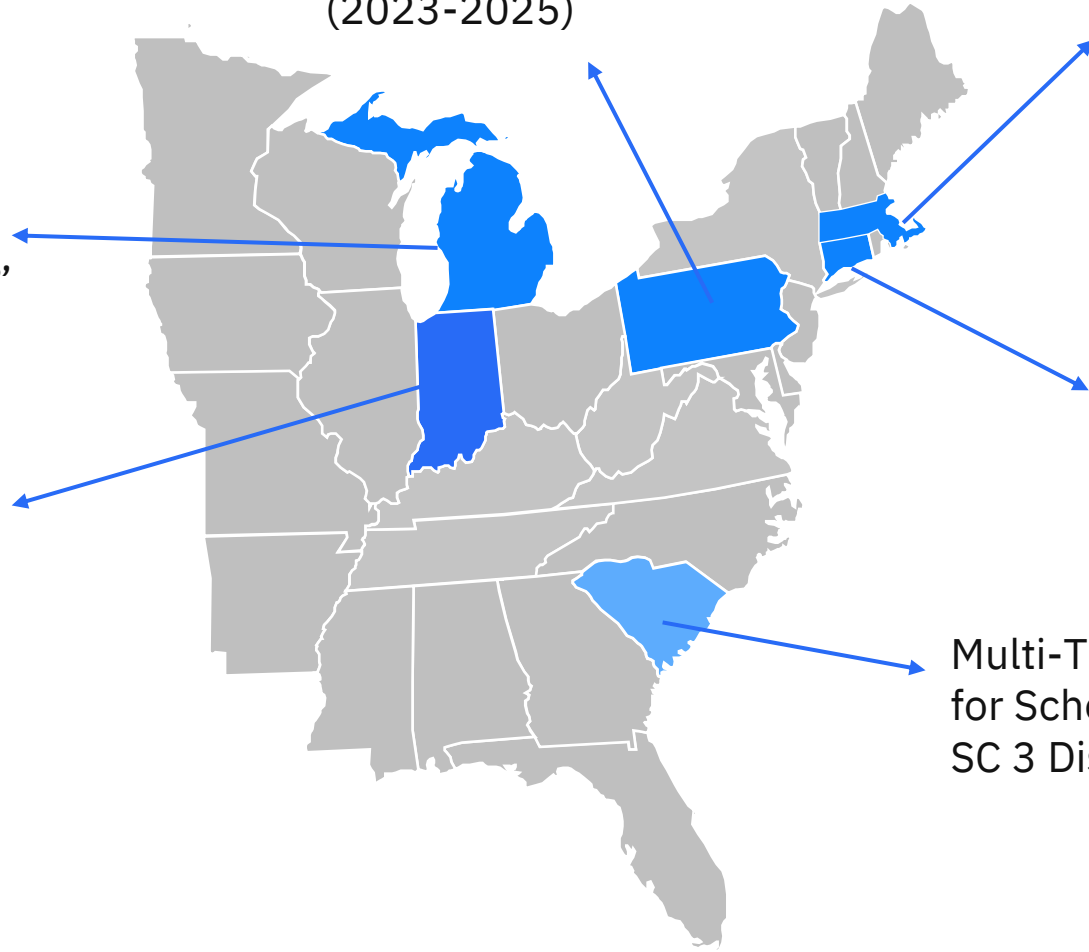
SEL strategic planning and resource development for School District of Philadelphia (2023-2025)

Multi-Tiered Suicide Prevention for Schools MA 8 Districts (2024-2029)

District MTSS & SEL Rapid Assessment & Action Planning, professional development (2024)

Multi-Tiered Suicide Prevention for Schools CT 5 Districts (2024-2028)

Multi-Tiered Suicide Prevention for Schools SC 3 Districts (2024-2028)



# Today's Agenda



1

Setting the context: Youth digital media use and mental health trends

2

Strategies for addressing the link between digital media use and mental health

3

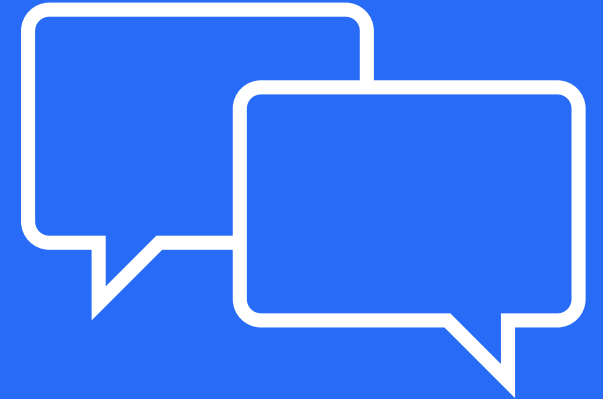
Looking ahead

# Turn and Talk

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Based on your observations, in what ways do youth use digital media that:

- + Impacts them positively?
- Impacts them negatively?



# PART 1: Setting the Context

***'It's Life or Death': The Mental Health Crisis Among U.S. Teens***

*NBC News, May 23, 2023*

**Social media is driving teen mental health crisis, surgeon general warns**

*NBC News, May 23, 2023*

**Schools across the U.S. restrict cellphones amid growing behavior, mental health, academic concerns**

*CBS News, September 2, 2024*

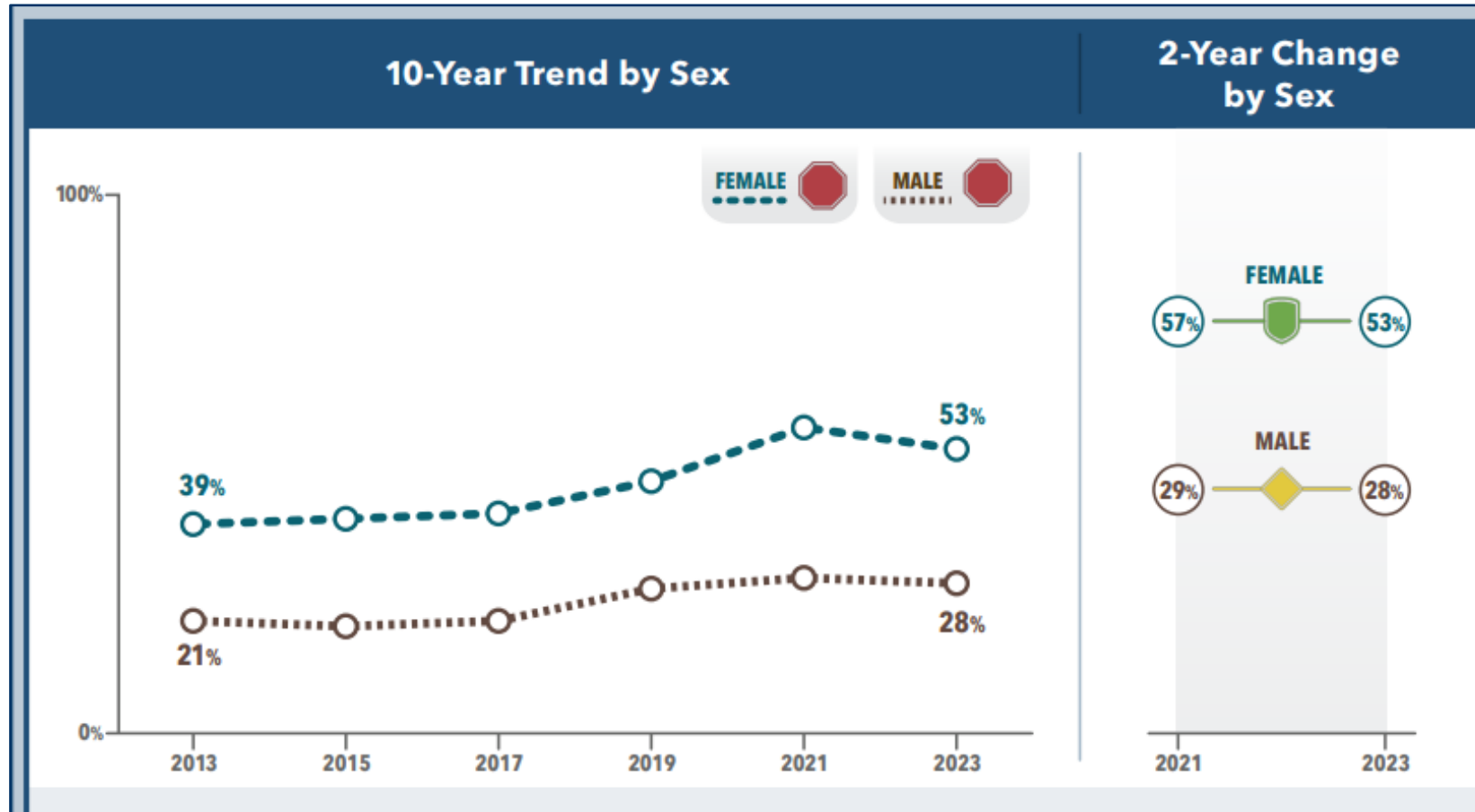
**Why Cellphone Bans Aren't the Cure for Student Anxiety**

We can't solve a complex problem with a simple solution

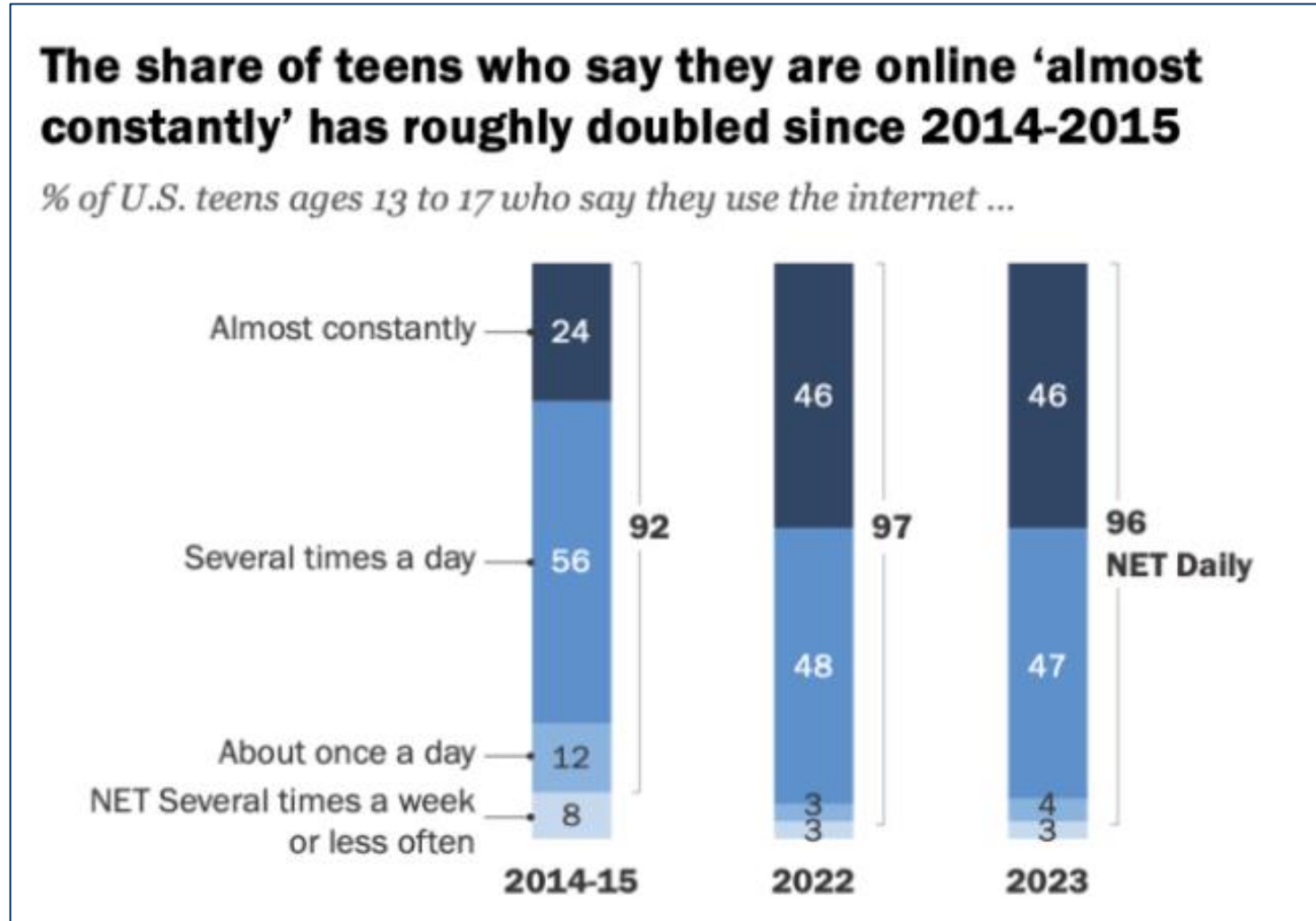
*Education Week, August 22, 2024*

# National Trends in Mental Health

## Persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year, 2013-2023 YRBS



# National Trends in Online Behavior





## What does research say about the link between social media and mental health?\*

- There are associations with benefits and harms:
  - Benefits: connection, self-expression, creativity, support, promoting help-seeking
  - Harms: anxiety, depression, poor sleep, cyberbullying, negative social comparison, lower school performance, poor body image, disordered eating
- Conflicting findings may be due to:
  - Measures of social media use (e.g., time, quality of interactions, addiction)
  - Study populations
  - Many other contributing factors
- Little evidence on directionality

***Everyone Says Social Media Is Bad for Teens. Proving It Is Another Thing.***

Parents, scientists and the surgeon general are worried. But there isn't even a shared definition of what social media is.

New York Times, June 2023

\*Summarized from research literature, media, and subject matter experts

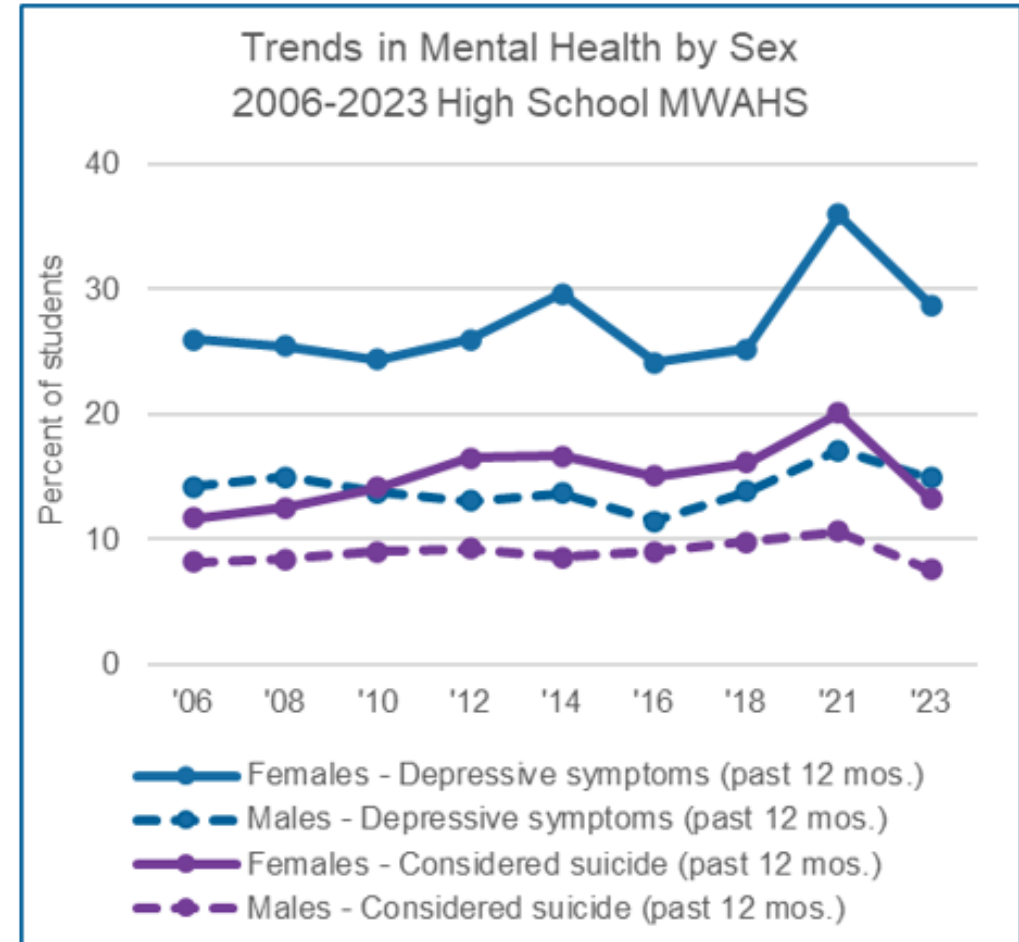
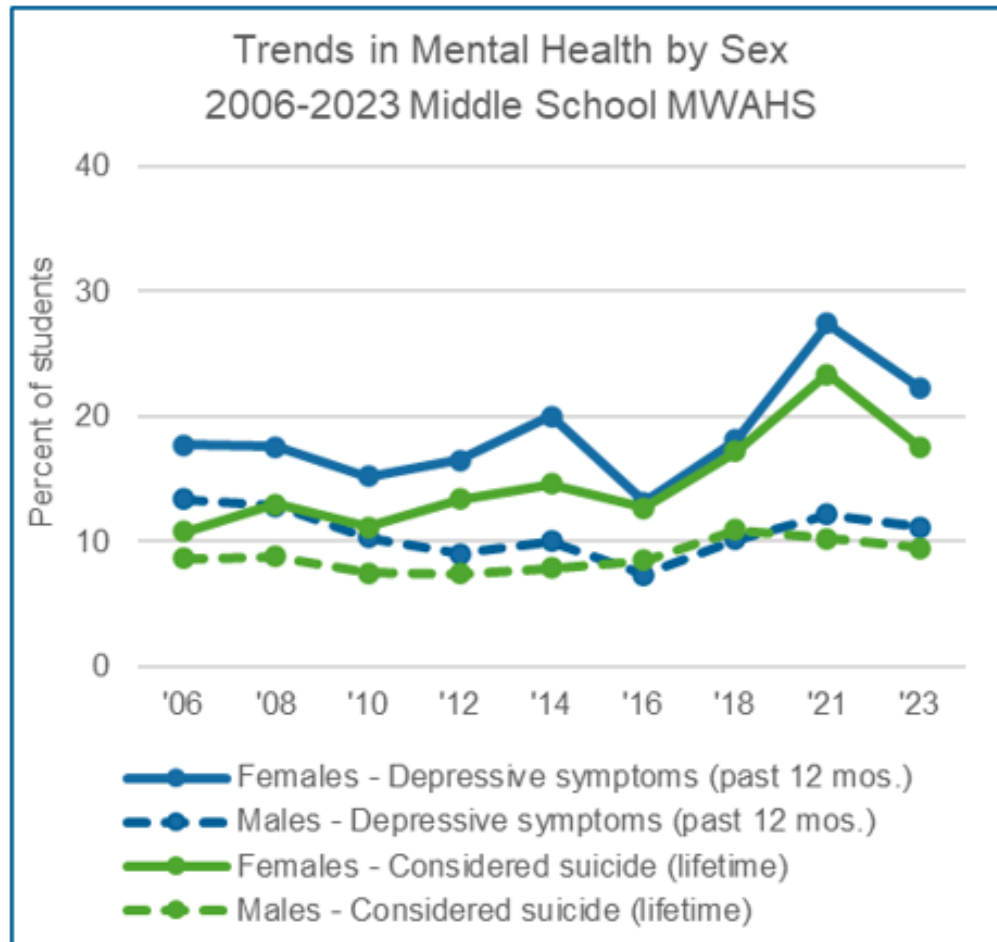
# EDC's Work in the MetroWest Region of Boston:

## *MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey*

- Biennial survey of health and risk behaviors beginning in 2006
- Goal is to provide timely, local data to inform health initiatives
- Census survey in middle and high schools in 25 communities
- Approximately 40,000 youth at each survey
- Funded by the MetroWest Health Foundation in Framingham, Massachusetts ([www.mwhealth.org](http://www.mwhealth.org))



# Depressive Symptoms and Suicidal Thoughts by Sex *2006-2023 MWAHS*



## Negative Associations of Digital Media and Health Among Girls, *2023 Middle School MWAHS*

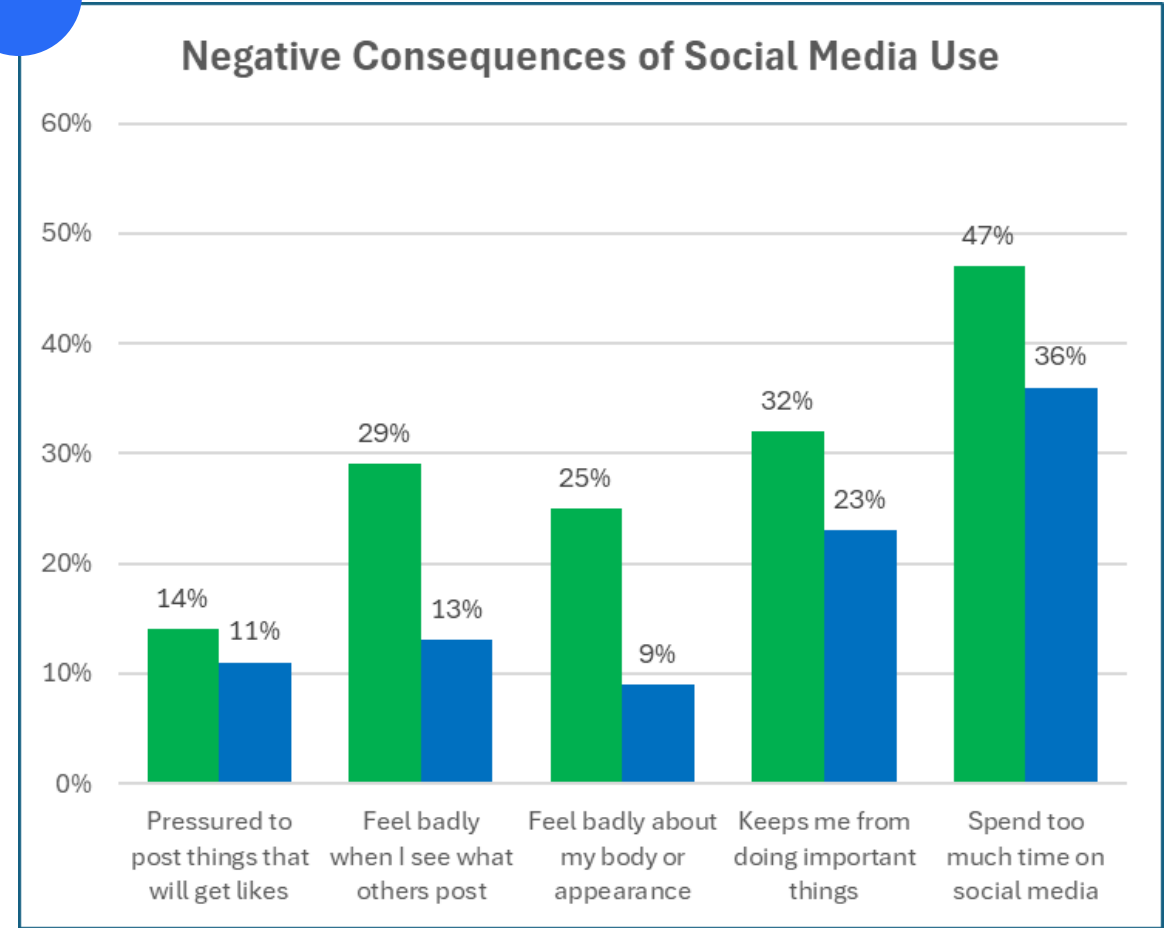
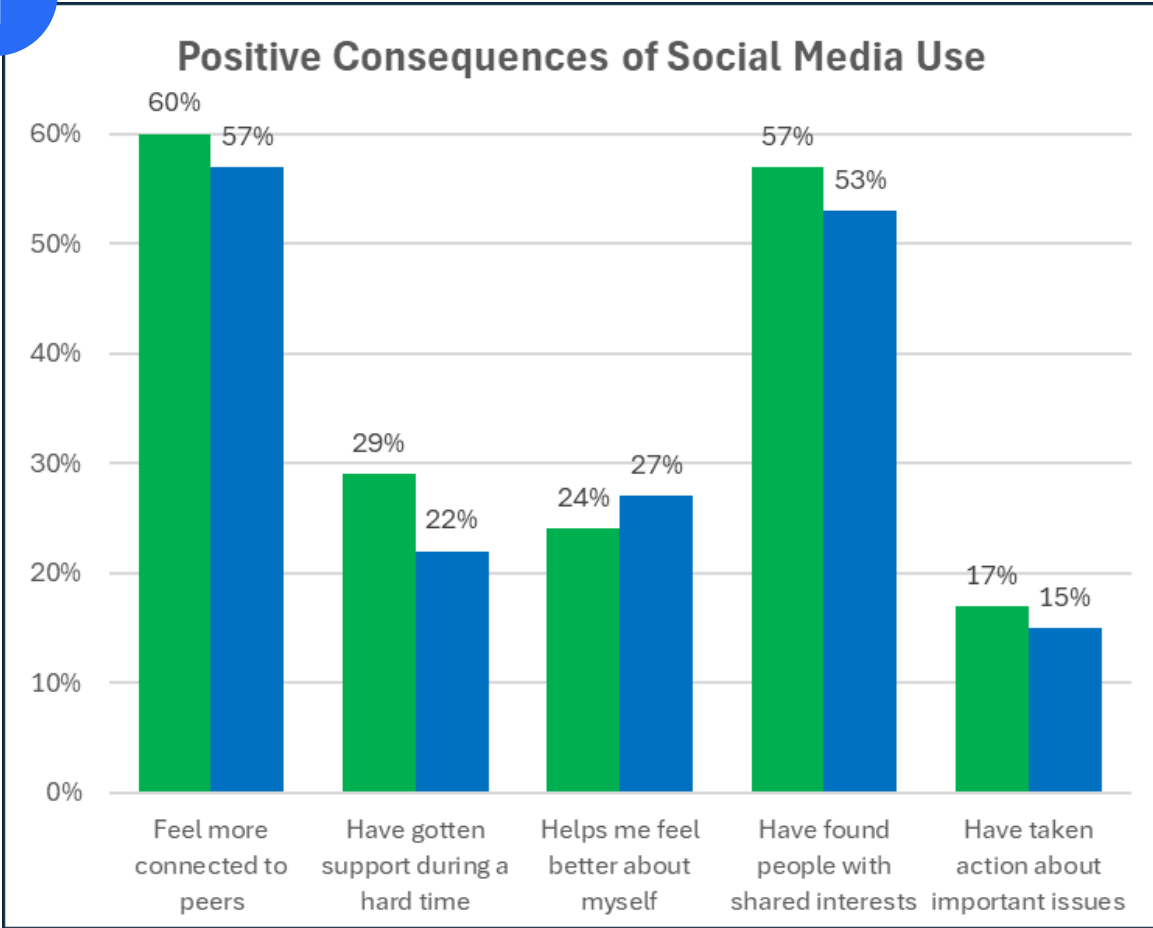
Middle school girls who spend 3+ hours on social media\* are:

- **1.8-2.3** times more likely to report poor mental health (depressive symptoms, self-injury, suicidality)
- **2.1** times more likely to be cyberbullied (past 12 months)
- **1.6** times more likely to feel overweight
- **3.9** times more likely to report lifetime nicotine vaping
- **2.7** times more likely to report lifetime alcohol use

\*On the average school day; compared to students who spend <3 hours

# Positives and Negatives of Social Media Use\*

## 2023 Middle School MWAHS (Grades 7-8)



■ Females ■ Males

\*Agree/strongly agree

# PART 2:

## Strategies to Address Digital Wellness & Mental Health

Lessons from an in-depth  
qualitative study





What comes to mind  
when you think of digital  
wellness?

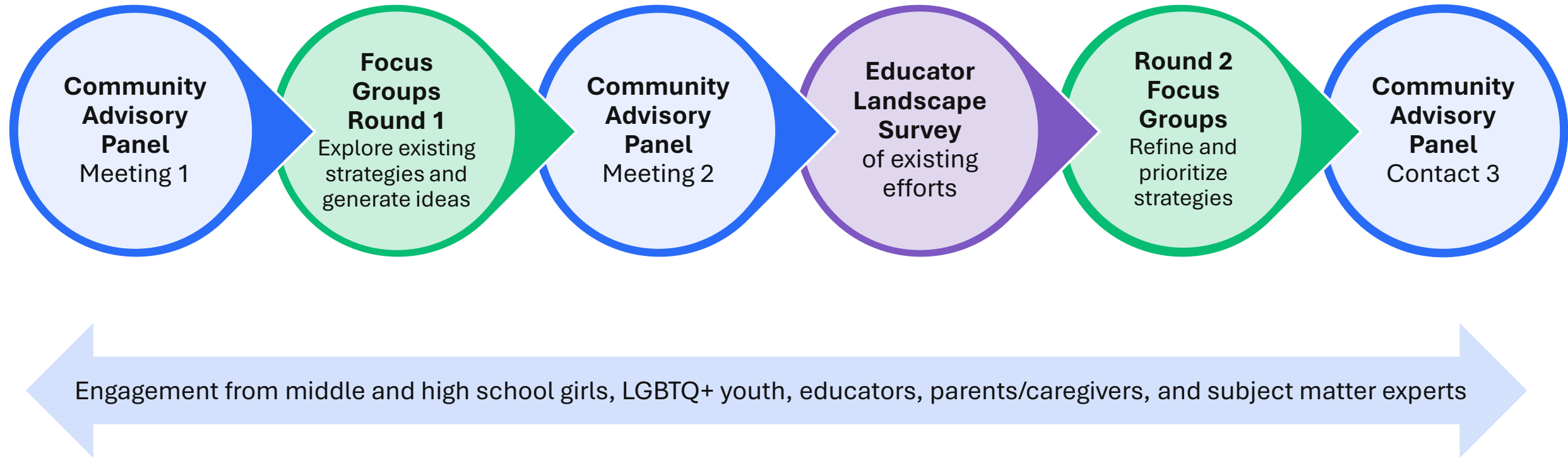
“Digital wellness is a positive state of mental, physical, and social-emotional health pursued through intentional, authentic, and balanced engagement with technology and interactive media.”



Source: Children’s Hospital Boston Digital Wellness Lab  
[About Us - The Digital Wellness Lab](#)



# The Girls' Digital Wellness Project Activities



## Student Voices: Impacts of Digital Media Use

*I think sometimes there's filters or people really prepare for a video and it sets really high expectations. And then when a girl sees that, they're like, oh, she's so pretty. I want to be that pretty. And it creates this toxic idea that you have to be that pretty or that ideal body shape. I just think it sometimes sets toxic standards. (Middle School Girl)*

*And sometimes you just happen upon homophobia just on a random post and it kind of hits you very quickly and it can be very overwhelming to realize, wow, there seem to be a lot of people out there who don't think that someone like me deserves rights and stuff like that. (LGBTQ+ youth)*

*I feel like my childhood [was] cut short. [I'm in] eighth grade, I can barely remember sixth grade... I feel like when you reach a certain age, you feel like you wasted your childhood on your phone... You see that phone is really messing with head. We used to go outside all day. (Middle School Girl)*

*If you're going through something, let's just take for example anxiety. You can also just scroll through and you'll see people going through the same thing... and [it] brings you comfort knowing you're not the only one with this problem. (High School Girl)*

# Girls' Digital Wellness: Key Findings in 4 Areas



School and District Policies



Classroom Education and Whole-School Approaches



School Climate



Mental Health Supports

# Student Voices: School Policies

*They [teachers] don't really care anymore. They're really giving up. (Middle School Girl, in regard to smartphone use during class)*

*In my school we're completely not allowed to use our phones. We have to put them in our lockers and stuff. Probably powered off, but that just encourages kids to keep them on and they'll sneak, we use them in class and stuff and a lot of my friends also have them in their pockets for safety reasons. (LGBTQ+ youth)*

*I feel like when it comes to phone usage, I think that it's most reasonable to just have it up to the student's discretion because then the punishment for having your phone when you're not supposed to is maybe missing stuff or maybe not doing so well on your assignments or tests or something. That's its own punishment... I think accountability is better than confiscating a student's property. (High School Girl)*

# School Policies on Digital Media and Smartphone Use

*School policies are widely implemented to prevent inappropriate use and distractions, but educators and students struggle with inconsistent implementation and enforcement.*



## Students

- Restrictive policies don't teach self-management and indicate a lack of trust in students.
- Teachers are not always good role models.
- Students feel unprepared for the transition from middle to high school.



## School Staff

- Enforcement takes time and removing students from class harms learning.
- Policies can hinder use of digital tools for learning purposes.
- When policies are consistently enforced, students are less distracted and have more social interactions.



## Parents

- Parents want their children to be focused on learning and generally endorse some restrictions.
- Some parents want their children to have phones due to safety concerns.
- Parents want schools to help teach self-management of digital media tools.

## Recommendations: School Policies

- Establish collective dialogue and shared goals (students, educators, and parents)
- Provide education to the school to improve understanding and gain buy-in
- Implement consistent enforcement and clear expectations
- Set the same/similar policies for student and staff behaviors
- Balance preventing negative consequences and teaching self-management



# School Digital Media Use and Smartphone Policies

What smartphone  
policies have you seen  
in action?

What seems to work?

# Student Voices: Educational Approaches

*I think they broadly go over cyber bullying, but I don't think they go into the issues that much that it could cause on our personal lives and on our mental health. And obviously we all have our own little personal issues that we've experienced with social media, and I don't think they've gone much into that. (Middle School Girl)*

*I think in the way that they present the information to us, they should do it anyway, not necessarily more personal, but more realistic to something that we could see because the examples that they're using aren't really things that we'd see or experience. (Middle School Girl)*

*When they do talk about it [in school], it's always the extremes [that] you're going to get kidnapped or something.... It's not like [about] your mental health over time. (High School Girl)*



# Classroom and Whole School Educational Efforts

*Education is often limited in scope and depth, and generally addressed only in health education classes or large assemblies. School efforts focus on preventing harms rather than promoting digital wellness and don't address unique online experiences of different subgroups.*



## Students

- School efforts often feel outdated, insufficient, and unrelatable.
- Efforts assume all students' online experiences as the same.
- Lessons often focus on preventing rare, extreme situations rather than promoting digital wellness and teaching related skills.



## School Staff

- Educators would like to focus more on digital wellness, but there isn't enough class time.
- Teachers lack resources and training.
- Assemblies and other one-off events are helpful but are not enough to counter daily challenges.

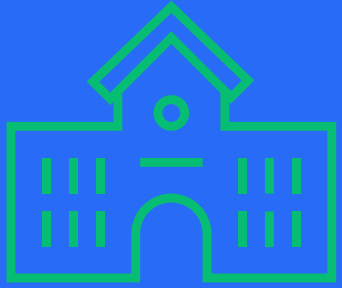


## Parents

- There is a lack of communication between schools and parents about what is taught in school.
- Parents would like to be able to reinforce school efforts at home, but many are struggling.

## Recommendations: Educational Efforts

- Integrate developmentally appropriate K-12 education into all subjects
- Provide a greater emphasis on skills to promote digital wellness
- Make space to address online experiences specific to certain groups (e.g., girls, LGBTQ+ youth)
- Teach mental health literacy along with digital media literacy
- Seek input from students to ensure that efforts are relatable and realistic
- Implement student-driven efforts when possible



# Educational Efforts

How do educational efforts in your district promote digital wellness?

# Student Voices: School Climate

*They'll say whatever comes to mind [online], and then something they say could hurt... it'll spread around the school and then... everybody gets involved in the problem and it just gets stressful. (Middle School Girl)*

*People will get ideas from the internet where other people maybe said something homophobic and then without people to say, hey, that's not okay, people will accidentally think that it's okay to say negative things towards the LGBTQ+ community [at school]. (LGBTQ+ youth)*

*Having a healthy relationship with the internet is possible when you have a group of real people around you. (High School Girl)*

*It definitely has negatives and positives. You can definitely make new friends, but you can also lose friends. And there's definitely more drama [in school] around social media. (High School Girl)*

# School Climate

*What happens online impacts the school climate, and negative situations at school can escalate online. Smartphone use at school limits face-to-face interactions. For some students, it increases feelings of loneliness and decreases feelings of belonging.*



## Students

- Negative stereotypes, hate speech, and bullying are normalized when students view it online.
- Lack of connection at school makes students more susceptible to negative social comparison and other online harms.
- Some online interactions can ease in-person interactions.
- If students feel more included and welcomed at school, they would use their phones less.

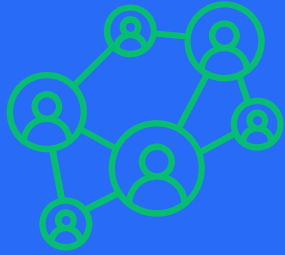


## School Staff

- School climate is less interactive, less collaborative due to smartphones.
- Students lack skills to interact in person and feel anxious about social interactions.
- Teachers frequently encounter situations at school (bullying, exclusion) that stem from online interactions.
- Students enjoy breaks from digital media.

## Recommendations: School Climate

- Implement efforts that consider both online and offline spaces as part of the school environment
- Address misconceptions/stereotypes that are exacerbated in online spaces
- Develop SEL competencies as they relate to online and offline spaces
- Increase opportunities at school to interact without digital media
- Foster school-community collaborations to provide opportunities for healthy, offline activities where adolescents can contribute



# School Climate

How do digital media  
use and smartphones  
impact school  
climate?

# Student Voices: Mental Health Supports

*They're [counselors] always trying to resolve the situation. Even if you don't want to... Sometimes you just want to go to talk to your [counselor] because you have no one else to go to, and then they try to solve the whole thing. I just want them to listen. (Middle School Girl, regarding cyberbullying)*

*I honestly think it'd be helpful if they [older girls] talked about any struggles that they went through during our age, and I feel like that would be helpful for people if they were in the same boat. So be like, oh, this person went through the same thing, they actually understand me. I'm not the only one... They could say helpful things that help them with their mental health throughout their years because a lot of high schoolers – I feel like it gets a lot more difficult in high school. So I feel like they could definitely share a lot of insightful things about the topic. (Middle School Girl)*



# Mental Health Supports

*Girls and LGBTQ+ youth – and their peers – have different needs when it comes to digital media use and addressing the potential mental health consequences. Programs and supports are not often customized to meet the specific and varying needs of students.*



## Students

- Some girls can self-manage their digital media use, but others struggle or show addictive behaviors.
- Counselors rarely inquire about the role of digital media use unless the student brings it up.
- Girls would rather talk to other girls than to adults to get education and emotional support.



## School Staff

- Teachers notice some warning signs of problematic media use and mental health, but lack training to accurately identify students who may be at risk.
- Small groups are effective in providing extra support to students who need it, but they are not often in place or available to all who may benefit.



## Parents

- Parents find it difficult to know if their children are engaging in problematic digital media use or experiencing mental health issues.
- Parents want more support from schools in identifying students who exhibit concerning behavior and in seeking help.

# Recommendations: Mental Health Supports

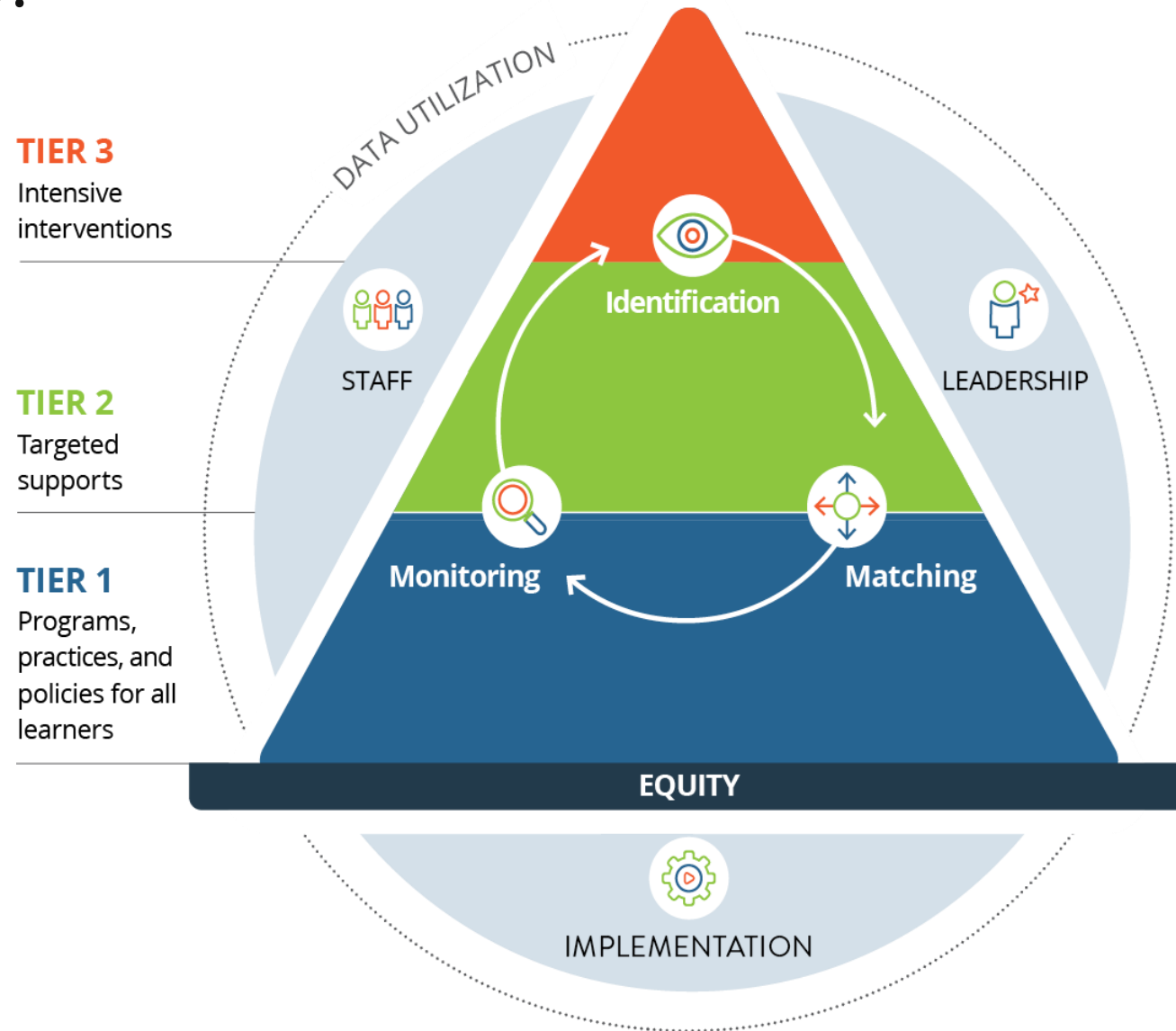
- Establish processes for identifying students in need and providing supports at multiple levels
- Incorporate skills relating to online interactions into existing small group behavioral interventions
- Create or strengthen group programs to support specific needs of girls, LGBTQ+, and other students online and offline
- Actively inquire about the role of digital media use in counseling
- Train counselors in treating media addiction and/or ensure that outside resources are available

# PART 3:

## Thinking Ahead



# What is MTSS?



## Why Apply the MTSS Framework to Digital Wellness?

- It is critical to address the varying levels of needs and provide appropriate supports for all students.
- Promoting digital wellness requires a systemic, integrated approach.
- MTSS is data-driven.
- MTSS provides a framework for identifying gaps and prioritizing strategies.
- There is evidence of the effectiveness of the MTSS approach in other areas.

# Data to Inform MTSS for Digital Wellness



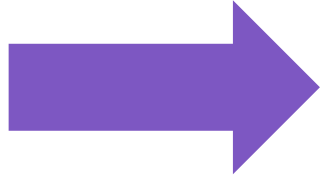
**What sources of data do you have about digital media use and its effects in your school/community?**

- Student surveys
- Records of cyberbullying incidents
- Discipline related to school media use policies
- Teacher observation

**What does the data tell you?**

**What data/information do you wish you had?**

# Getting Started



Establish a **Digital Wellness Task Force** (or charge an existing group) to determine priorities and strategies, educate the school community, gain buy-in, and represent all voices (educators, students, parents/caregivers)



Conduct an **inventory and assessment** of existing digital wellness efforts; prioritize efforts to fill gaps and improve current practices



Begin to think about how you might determine students' **levels of need** and ways you may match them with the appropriate **supports**

# Optimistic Closure



***What is one action  
you can take right  
now?***



# Thank you

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For more information and for slides