

Most New Jersey parents support depression screening in schools, but they have some concerns

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A majority—more than 75 percent—of New Jersey parents of middle and high school students recognize the benefits of screening and early

detection of depression risk in adolescents but many express concerns about potential unintended consequences of screening, according to a survey of New Jersey parents and guardians of children ages 12 to 18.

The statewide survey, which was fielded by the Rutgers Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling in March 2022 on behalf of Project ASPEN, assessed parents' views regarding a recent state law (formerly bill A970), the Mental Health Screening in Schools Grant Program within the Department of Education, that will provide funding and resources to [school districts](#) to implement evidence-based depression screening programs to identify students in grades 7 through 12 at risk of depression.

"Rates of psychological distress among [young people](#), including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other [mental health disorders](#) have significantly increased in recent years and are further exacerbated due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet rates of adolescent depression screening remain extremely low despite knowing early detection is effective in preventing long-term effects," said Itzhak Yanovitzky, a co-author of the research and professor of communication at Rutgers University. "Communication between parents and school professionals is crucial to enabling future success of this important initiative."

Among the findings:

- About half of all parents of middle and [high school students](#) are very or moderately concerned about their child's risk for depression and about one-third about their child's risk for suicide.
- A majority of parents said they agree or strongly agree that depression screening is beneficial to preventing serious mental health-related risks. However, nearly half of all parents are

concerned about the administration of depression screening in schools.

- Parents cited potential undesirable outcomes such as some students believing that something is wrong with them, too many students being prescribed antidepressant medications, and administration of screening increasing the financial burden on schools and taking up valuable class time.
- Parents were asked to indicate their likelihood of giving school permission to screen their child for depression if asked to do so. About one-third (32.4 percent) said they are very likely to do so, 33.5 percent said they are likely, 7.1 percent said they are unlikely, and 12.3 percent said they are very unlikely to do so. About 15 percent said they are not sure.
- Answers differed sharply by region: A greater percentage of parents from shore communities (29.9 percent) and the south (22.8 percent) said they are unlikely to consent to school screenings compared to parents from urban (9.2 percent), suburban (16.9 percent) and exurban or rural (20.6 percent) regions.
- About one-third of parents expressed concern about not knowing what to do if they receive a notification from their child's [school](#) about a positive screening result.
- Forty-two percent of parents are concerned about being able to afford the cost of additional evaluation and diagnosis. These concerns are particularly acute among Black parents (47.9 percent) and Hispanic parents (52.2 percent).
- About 55 percent of Hispanic parents surveyed said they are concerned about their child's risk for depression compared with 52.3 percent of white parents, 48.6 percent of Black parents and 51.4 percent of parents from another race.
- Hispanic parents were most concerned about risk for suicide (41.9 percent), followed by Black parents (36.1 percent), white parents (27.9 percent) and parents from another race (22.4

percent).

Cindy Blitz, lead author of the research brief and executive director of Rutgers Graduate School of Education Center for Effective School Practices, said the findings point to the urgency of communicating more effectively with Black and Hispanic parents of teenagers about how to follow up with a professional diagnosis and [mental health care](#) if screening detects potential risk for [depression](#) or suicidality.

"It is reassuring to see that more than 75 percent of parents recognize the importance of early screening," said Meredith Blount, executive director of National Alliance on Mental Illness of New Jersey. "However, we need to better educate parents in what this [screening](#) means, and what the follow up steps are. It is not enough to simply identify the problem—we need to support parents and the community in providing affordable, accessible treatment and services for the children once identified."

Project ASPEN is a collaboration between a team of researchers from Rutgers and the National Alliance on Mental Illness New Jersey to improve access for policy decision-makers to credible and timely research evidence regarding different aspects of formulating and implementing sound youth mental health policies.

More information: Suvey results: [aspen.rutgers.edu/wp-content/u ...
vey-FINAL-6-2-22.pdf](https://aspen.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-06-22-22.pdf)

Provided by Rutgers University

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