

Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Improve Youth Mental Health

Safe Spaces, Peer Support & Community Connection

Create calm, supportive spaces where students can take a mental-health break. Students recommended quiet rooms, calm zones, or "Zen Dens" across ACHS campuses where they could relax for a few minutes, regulate their emotions, finish work, or talk with a counselor, social worker, or other trusted adult before returning to class. Suggested features and activities included low lighting, art, music, mindfulness, physical activities, board games, and anti-stress or anxiety-relief tools

Sources: Reina Pineda Flores, *Students' Mental Wellness & Academic Balance*, 2026; Alyson Elvir, *Physical, Mental, & Behavioral Health*, 2026; Jimmy Lopez, *Mental & Behavioral Health*, 2026; Dua Sajjad, *Mental Health*, 2026; Ahmad Ehsan Nazar, *Mental Health Support for Students at ACHS*, 2026; Dagmawit Goshu, *Mental Health & Student Stress,* 2026; Alexander Carreto, *Mental Health*, 2026; Yasin Bhuiyan, *Students Struggling with Mental Health & Depression*, 2026; and Khola Raza, *Improving Youth Mental Health*, 2026



"Students currently do not have a space to relax from schoolwork for a few mins..."
~ Reina Pineda Flores, 2026



"56% of students said they would use a calm zone every chance they get."
~ Dua Sajjad, 2026

"ACHS should create more quiet and safe spaces where students can relax and talk openly."
~ Ahmad Ehsan Nazar, 2026



Create a free, welcoming mental-health hub at a local recreation center. Two students proposed a nonclinical space designed with Hispanic youth in mind that would be open after school and on weekends and feel more like a creative hangout than a counseling office. Young people could attend with friends; participate in art, music, sports, journaling, hobbies, and other low-pressure activities; join small groups led by trained bilingual adults who understand Hispanic culture; or request a private session. The program would not require identification, proof of residency, or insurance.

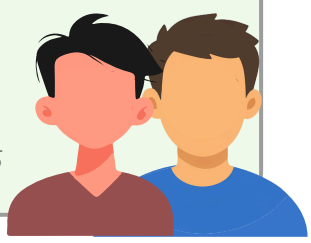
Source: Jason Osorto and Anthony Martinez, *Hispanic Youth Mental Health*, 2025

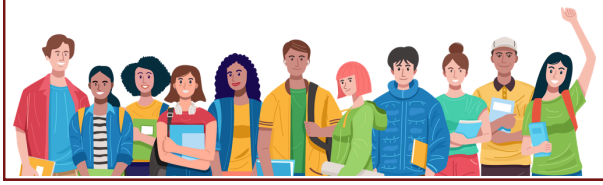
"I'm a Hispanic male who has personally experienced these emotions and felt like there was no one to talk to. The school counselor felt more like a stranger and not someone who understood or cared."

"When teens are with people they trust and in a space that feels familiar, they are more likely to open up, connect, and heal."

"We're changing how [mental health is] viewed, making it normal and accessible for Hispanic youth to get help in a way that's safe and supportive."

~ Jason Osorto & Anthony Martinez, 2025





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Safe Spaces, Peer Support & Community Connection

Expand student-led and peer-support programs and connect students with professional help. Students proposed a student-led "Share and Care Club" where teens could anonymously share their struggles and support one another; peer-support groups; culturally aware mentors, counselors, and peer leaders who share students' backgrounds and experiences; and an anonymous peer-mediation program. Through the mediation program, students could request help using a simple online form and meet with trained peers during lunch or after school. Peer mediators would listen, offer initial support, and refer students to a counselor when needed. Students also proposed using youth ambassadors to lead mental-health awareness outreach.

"38.5% say they keep their emotions to themselves because there is no safe space to open up."

"Create an anonymous peer mediation program at ACHS where students can confidentially request help when dealing with anger, conflict, or emotional stress."

~ Maryamawit A., 2026

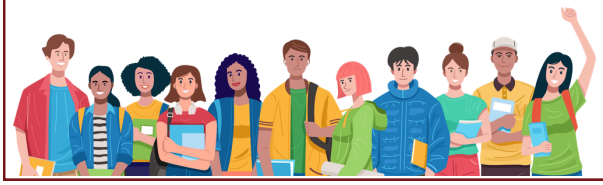


"More support groups and mental health awareness activities can help students less alone and more comfortable asking for help."

~ Ahmad Ehsan Nazar, 2026



Sources: Hannah Meehan, Olivia Powers, Shira Gordon, and Juliet Houck, *Mental Health*, 2025; *Mental Health by Cultures*, 2026; Maryamawit.A, *Mental Health & Emotional Wellness*, 2026; Clifford Wobil, *Mental Health Civic Action Project*, 2026; Ahmad Ehsan Nazar, *Mental Health Support for Students at ACHS*, 2026; Osorto and Martinez, *Hispanic Youth Mental Health*, 2025; Anthony Galo & Gabriel Lopez-Alberto, *Access to Mental Health Care*, 2025; and Angie Alvarado, *Lack of Student Motivation in School*, 2026



Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Improve Youth Mental Health

Easier Access to Trusted Mental Health Support

Increase access to qualified mental-health professionals at school. Students asked ACPS to hire more counselors, licensed therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists so young people can receive timely, professional support during the school day. They recommended faster and easier ways to schedule appointments or seek help, enough staff to respond when students are struggling, and support that does not rely primarily on school counselors to meet every mental-health need. One student specifically recommended hiring more female psychologists and creating an environment where teens feel safe opening up.

Sources: Gennessis Villegas-Osorio, *Mental Health & Access to Counselors*, 2026; Dagmawit Goshu, *Mental Health & Student Stress,* 2026; Mayelin Lopez, *More Mental Health Resources,* 2026; Yasin Bhuiyan, *Students Struggling with Mental Health & Depression*, 2026; Narelie Jasmin Navarro Yanez, *Teen Mental Health*, 2026; George Byrd Conway and Christopher Diaz Portillo, *Easily Accessible School Mental Health Resources*, 2025; Andres Quiro Gasantillan, *Youth Mental Health*, 2025; Flores Garcia, *Youth Mental Health*, 2025; Mateo Sherly, *Youth Mental Health*, 2025; and Raza, *Improving Youth Mental Health*, 2026.

> ***"56% of students said they have wanted to talk to a school counselor but were unable to."***
>
> ***"ACHS should hire more school counselors and make mental health support easier for students to access during the school day."***
>
> ~ Gennessis Villegas-Osorio, 2026





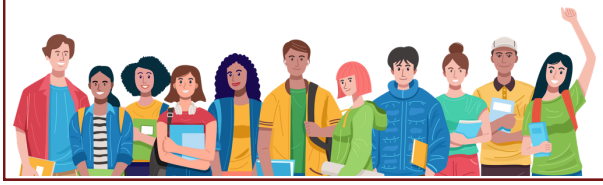
> ***"The school should add more therapists and counselors so students can talk to someone when they feel stressed or overwhelmed."***
>
> *~ Dua Sajjad, 2026*

Make existing mental-health resources easier to find, understand, and use. Students recommended ongoing outreach through posters, announcements, classroom or advisory presentations, social media campaigns, and student-led awareness efforts. One student proposed a required Mental Health Awareness Week during Titan Advisory, with hands-on tutorials showing students exactly how to access Hazel Health and the Teen Wellness Center. Students also wanted clearer communication about counseling, support groups, online services, and other available help so they know where to go and how to get started.

Sources: Fatima Wonneh, *Student Mental Health & Wellness*, 2026; Katerin Lopez, *Mental Health Awareness*, 2026; Clifford Wobil, *Mental Health Civic Action Project*, 2026; Osorto and Martinez, *Hispanic Youth Mental Health*, 2025; Angie Alvarado, *Lack of Student Motivation in School*, 2026; Gennessis Villegas-Osorio, *Mental Health & Access to Counselors,* 2026; Alexander Carreto, *Mental Health*, 2026; Mayelin Lopez, *More Mental Health Resources*, 2026; Yasin Bhuiyan, *Students Struggling with Mental Health & Depression*, 2026; George Byrd Conway and Christopher Diaz Portillo, *Easily Accessible School Mental Health Resources*, 2025; Andres Quiro Gasantillan, *Youth Mental Health*, 2025; and Raza, *Improving Youth Mental Health*, 2026.

> ***"Students can't use help they don't know exists."***
>
> ***"The problem isn't just a lack of resources, it's a lack of communication."***
>
> ***"By dedicating school time to awareness, we can turn that confusion into confidence."***
>
> *~ Fatima Wonneh, 2026*





Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Improve Youth Mental Health

Easier Access to Trusted Mental Health Support

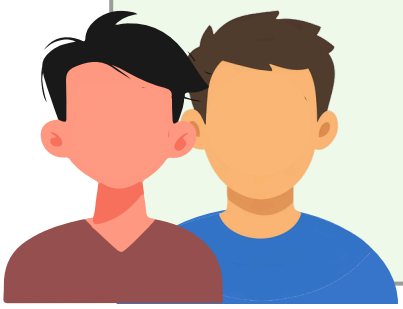
Protect students' privacy and make mental-health support feel safer and easier to approach. Students recommended more private counseling options, easier drop-in access without complicated appointments, stronger relationships with counselors, and anonymous ways to request help. They also proposed welcoming spaces that feel less formal or clinical than a traditional counseling office. One student specifically noted concerns about the privacy policies of an existing wellness center. Students emphasized that privacy, trust, and comfort can affect whether young people feel safe asking for help.

Sources: Sara Al Bahlani, *Improving Student Access to School Counselors at ACHS,* 2026; Maryamawit.A, *Mental Health & Emotional Wellness*, 2026; Lopez, *Mental & Behavioral Health,* 2026; and Clifford Wobil, *Mental Health Civic Action Project*, 2026; Anthony Galo & Gabriel Lopez-Alberto, *Access to Mental Health Care,* 2025; Carreto, *Mental Health*, 2026; Jakharri Roger, *Mental Health*, 2026; Yasin Bhuiyan, *Students Struggling with Mental Health & Depression*, 2026; Sherly, *Youth Mental Health*, 2025; and Raza, *Improving Youth Mental Health*, 2026.

"Many students still feel nervous asking for mental health support."

~ Ahmad Ehsan Nazar, 2026





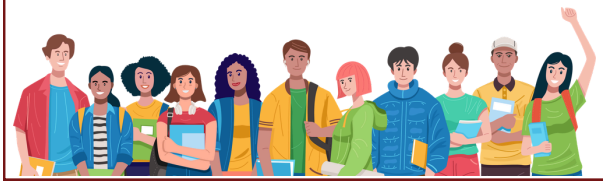
"The school counselor felt more like a stranger and not someone who understood or cared."

~ Osorto & Martinez, 2025

"Students want more privacy, better counselor relationships, and easier access without complicated appointments."

~ Sara Al Bahlani, 2026





Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Improve Youth Mental Health

Equitable, Coordinated & Youth-Informed Support

Provide mental-health support that reflects young people's cultures, languages, identities, and experiences. Students recommended bilingual and culturally grounded services for Hispanic and immigrant youth, LGBTQ+-affirming education and support, and trusted community-based care for immigrant families experiencing fear, trauma, or family separation related to immigration enforcement. They also called for safe community spaces, culturally responsive clinicians, accessible outreach, and partnerships with organizations trusted by the communities being served.

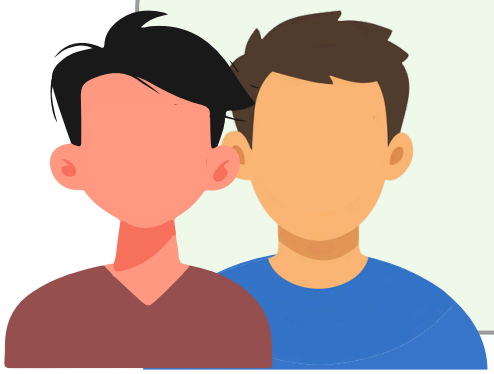
Sources: Valeria Galeano Del Cid, *Mental Health by Cultures*, 2026; Kam, *LGBTQ+ Education*, 2026; Phoebe Booker, *Physical, Mental, & Behavioral Health*, 2026; and Osorto and Martinez, *Hispanic Youth Mental Health*, 2025.

"Many students still struggle with anxiety and feel uncomfortable asking for help due to cultural stigma."

"Students can connect with mentors, counselors, or peer leaders who share similar cultural backgrounds and experiences."

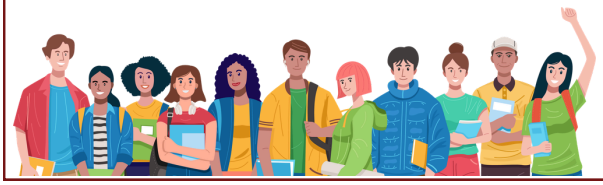
~ Valeria Galeano Del Cid, 2026





"The groups would be led by adults who speak Spanish and understand Hispanic culture. This makes it easier for students to open up and feel comfortable."

~ Osorto & Martinez, 2025



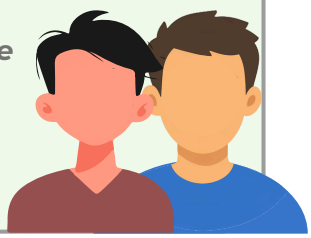
Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Improve Youth Mental Health

Equitable, Coordinated & Youth-Informed Support

Use youth and family feedback to evaluate and improve mental-health programs. Students proposed using pre- and post-session surveys, tracking how many sessions are held, how many young people attend and return, and how many people are reached through outreach. They also recommended asking students and families how participants are feeling, what they liked, and what should be improved and using that feedback to make the program better.

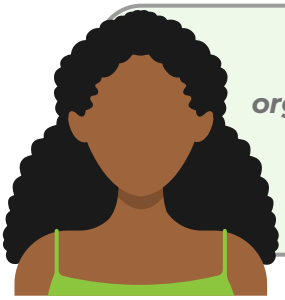
Sources: Osorto and Martinez, *Hispanic Youth Mental Health*, 2025.

> ***"Ask students and families for feedback...This helps us make the program better."***
>
> ***"We will give short surveys after sessions to get feedback from students about how they felt, what they liked, and what can be improved."***
>
> *~ Osorto & Martinez, 2025*



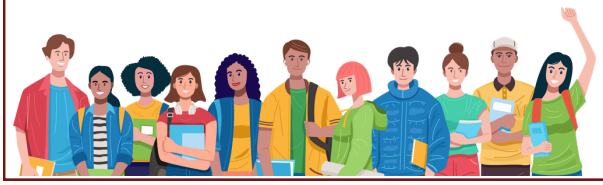
Work with school, health, and community partners so students have more ways to get help. Students identified ACPS counselors and Student Support Teams, the School Board, the Teen Wellness Center, Hazel Health, the Alexandria Community Services Board, the Alexandria Health Department, Neighborhood Health, the ACPS FACE Center, RAISE, the Campagna Center, Mental Health America, recreation centers, and other community organizations as possible partners or resources. They described roles including school-based and virtual counseling, mental-health screenings, bilingual and culturally responsive support, family outreach, community programs, peer-mediator training, and connecting students with additional help. Students also identified NAMI and the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline as sources of mental-health information and crisis support.

Sources: Wonneh, *Student Mental Health & Wellness*, 2026; Nazar, *Mental Health Support for Students at ACHS*, 2026; Del Cid, *Mental Health by Cultures,* 2026; Christian Ramirez, *Mental Health & How it Affects Students*, 2026; Maryamawit.A, *Mental Health & Emotional Wellness*, 2026; Elvir, *Physical, Mental, & Behavioral Health,* 2026; Eliud Monge-Paz, *Mental Health Awareness*, 2026; and Osorto and Martinez, *Hispanic Youth Mental Health*, 2025; Galo & Lopez-Alberto, *Access to Mental Health Care*, 2025; Roger, *Mental Health*, 2026; Quiro Gasantillan, *Youth Mental Health*, 2025; Flores Garcia, *Youth Mental Health*, 2025; Sherly, *Youth Mental Health*, 2025; and Raza, *Improving Youth Mental Health*, 2026.



> ***"Alexandria needs to strengthen partnerships within community organizations to gain more mental health support options and more areas of care."***
>
> *~ Joneisha Robinson, 2026*

> ***"Teachers, coaches, and other trusted adults should help spread the word and tell students about the program. This helps build trust and gets more kids involved."***
>
> ***"These partnerships will help us reach more families and build trust in the program."***
>
> *~ Osorto & Martinez, 2025*

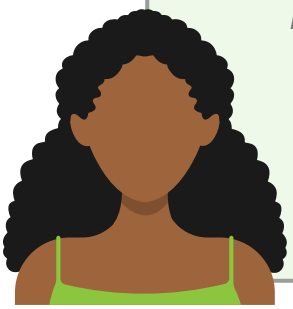


Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Improve Youth Mental Health

Prevention, Coping & a Healthier School Experience

Train teachers and school staff to recognize when students are struggling and respond supportively. Students recommended preparing educators to recognize early warning signs, respond without judgment, connect students with appropriate help, use trauma-informed practices, and understand how academic demands and major transitions can affect mental health. They also recommended training staff to facilitate respectful, LGBTQ+-affirming conversations about sexual orientation, gender identity, and mental well-being.

Sources: Hannah Meehan, Olivia Powers, Shira Gordon, and Juliet Houck, *Mental Health*, 2025; Urbina and Stehanie Garcia, *Student Mental Health*, 2026; Kam, *LGBTQ+ Education,* 2026; Joneisha Robinson, *Mental Health In Alexandria's Youth*, 2026; and Estefany Ordonez, *Student Mental Health in School*, 2026.



"Staff and educators [should] recognize early signs of mental health struggles and connect their students to the appropriate resources."

~ Joneisha Robinson, 2026

"Staff training to communicate and facilitate LGBTQ+ friendly discussion would be one helpful strategy."

~ Kam, 2026



Provide ongoing mental-health education and normalize asking for help. Students recommended age-appropriate mental-health education beginning in middle school and continuing through high school, including regular classroom discussions, seminars, advisory lessons, and awareness campaigns. They wanted students to learn how to recognize when they or a peer may need help, talk openly about mental health, and connect with available support without shame or stigma.

Sources: John Bowden & Robert Carothers-Ruiz, *Mental Health Education & Awareness*, 2026; Robinson, *Mental Health In Alexandria's Youth*, 2026; and Stephany Urbina and Stephanie Garcia, *Student Mental Health*, 2026.

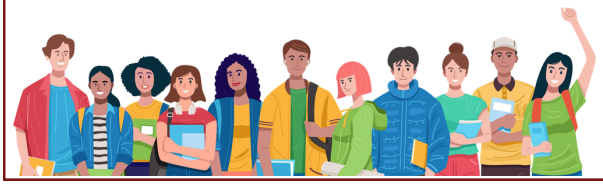
"Our community should focus on prevention by creating more open conversations about mental health."

"Schools should implement regular seminars or classroom discussions starting in middle school and continuing through high school."

"Teaching students how to check in on each other and normalize asking for help could make a big difference."

~ John Bowden & Robert Carothers-Ruiz, 2026





Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Improve Youth Mental Health

Prevention, Coping & a Healthier School Experience

Reduce school-related stress and create a healthier balance between academic expectations and student well-being. Students recommended reducing homework and academic pressure, offering more tutoring and one-on-one help, and giving students time during the school day to complete assignments or relax. They also proposed wellness activities, mental-health days, and a free period to help students manage stress and avoid feeling overwhelmed or burned out.

Sources: Rosselyn Gonzalez, *School Related Stress Among Students*, 2026; Ordonez, *Student Mental Health in School*, 2026; Melvin Argueta, *Increasing One-on-One Support*, 2026; Alvarado, *Lack of Student Motivation in School*, 2026; Urbina and Garcia, *Student Mental Health*, 2026 and Lopez, *More Mental Health Resources*, 2026.

Teach social-emotional skills and practical coping strategies. Students recommended structured opportunities during classes, advisory, and out-of-school-time programs to build self-awareness, emotional regulation, relationship skills, decision-making, mindfulness, movement, and healthy ways of managing stress. Some proposed a dedicated freshman SEL course or therapist-designed advisory lessons, along with support for seniors managing the transition from high school to college or adulthood.

Sources: Angelly and Madison, *Youth Behavioral Health*, 2025; Eliud Monge-Paz, *Mental Health Awareness*, 2026; Sajjad, *Mental Health*, 2026; Elvir, *Physical, Mental, & Behavioral Health*, 2026; Brenda Anderson & Lily Clance, *Mental Health in NovA*, 2026; Aidan Muldoon, *Socio-Emotional Health for 9th Graders*, 2026; and Bahara Kabiri and Camila Chavez, *Youth Mental Health,* 2025; and Escobar Mateo Sherly, *Youth Mental Health*, 2025

"Almost all students (96.2%) have felt overwhelmed by schoolwork at some point."



"Schools should focus more on students' mental health and less on academic pressure."

~ Rosselyn Gonzalez, 2026



"Our school culture should prioritize the well-being of every student, not just their grades."

~ Reina Pineda Flores, 2026

"Mental health support helps students feel safer, healthier, and more successful in school. Quiet spaces and therapists can help students manage stress and emotions."

~ Dua Sajjad, 2026





"Foster positive relationships, practice mindfulness, and manage screen time."

~ Angelly & Madison, 2025

"I propose that we create a program that would prioritize the strengthening of social and emotional skills to better connect teens / high school freshmen."

~ Aidan Muldoon, 2026

