2025 RESEARCH REPORT

our minds matter



trends and insights from five years of fairfax county youth survey data

A Secondary Analysis by Our Minds Matter

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The authors thank the Fairfax County Department of Management and Budget for providing Fairfax County Youth Survey data from 2019-2024. The analyses and interpretations presented in this report are solely those of the authors; the original data collectors bear no responsibility for them. The authors also thank Dr. Chloe Kyung Lee for her helpful feedback on an earlier draft, which helped improve the accuracy of the data representation.

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introduction

Over the past decade, Our Minds Matter (OMM) clubs have expanded from five Fairfax County public high schools to more than 30 middle and high schools, with sustained student engagement in several sites. As OMM programming has matured and scaled, an important next step is to rigorously examine whether—and in what ways—the presence of an active OMM club is associated with measurable differences in adolescent mental health outcomes, protective factors, and perceptions of school climate.

This research project, conducted in the Fall of 2025, leverages existing, deidentified pyramid-level data[1] from the **Fairfax County Youth Survey** (FCYS)[2] collected in 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024, across grades 8, 10, and 12. Conducting a secondary analysis allows us to address key research questions responsibly and efficiently using data that are already well-established, comprehensive, and representative of Fairfax County youth, while avoiding additional data collection burden for students and school staff.

This analysis was originally designed to explore two complementary lines of inquiry. First, we aimed to examine **change over time within school pyramids demonstrating a strong and sustained OMM presence**, assessing whether trends in mental health outcomes, protective factors, and school climate indicators shifted as OMM programming became more embedded in the school community. Second, we planned to **compare schools with active OMM clubs to matched control schools without OMM clubs**, to assess whether observed differences were unique to schools with OMM clubs rather than reflective of broader countywide trends.

1 *This study uses pyramid-level data—which consists of school groupings, each with one high school, approximately two to four middle schools, and five to seven elementary schools—because it is the smallest geographic level of data in the Youth Survey made available for external entities to protect respondents' privacy and anonymity.*

2 *In Fairfax County, the Fairfax County Youth Survey (FCYS) has long served as a cornerstone for understanding students' lived experiences—capturing trends in mental health, well-being, protective factors, and school climate across critical developmental stages. Collected annually and at scale, the FCYS provides a rare opportunity to move beyond snapshots and examine patterns over time and across school communities.*

However, a key methodological limitation emerged related to data granularity. The FCYS data were provided in aggregate form (percentages) rather than as raw, individual-level responses, limiting the ability to conduct inferential statistical analysis or to assess relationships between variables with statistical confidence. The loss of nuance in aggregate data means the study is necessarily descriptive in nature and focuses on identifying patterns and trends over time rather than testing hypotheses or drawing causal inferences.

In light of this limitation, the research questions were refined as follows:

1 **what changes in students' mental health and suicidal thoughts/behavior (STB) outcomes are observed from 2019 to 2024, by omm club presence status?**

2 **what changes in protective factor outcomes, school culture outcomes, and other wellness indicators are observed from 2019 to 2024, by omm club presence status?**

By situating OMM's work within the broader context of FCYS data, this secondary analysis seeks to deepen understanding of how teen-led mental health initiatives may be associated with healthier school environments. Findings from this study are intended to inform continuous program improvement, guide strategic decision-making, and contribute to the growing evidence base on school-based, peer-led approaches to adolescent mental health promotion and suicide prevention.







methods

data source

This study presents a secondary analysis of data from the Fairfax County Youth Survey (FCYS), an annual voluntary survey that gathers anonymous information on risk behaviors and factors related to physical and mental health and well-being among youth in Fairfax County, Virginia. The FCYS has been administered each Fall to students in grades 8, 10, and 12 since 2001 and was expanded to include grade 6 in 2008 (Dawson, Hartman, Chaney, et al., 2010; Fairfaxcounty.gov).

The data set used for this analysis includes survey data from the years 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 for grades 8, 10, and 12; the survey was not administered in 2020 due to the COVID 19 pandemic. The Our Minds Matter (OMM) research team obtained **deidentified, pyramid-level** FCYS data from the Fairfax County Department of Management and Budget. A total of 54 items representing 15 constructs related to behavioral wellness, school climate, and student demographics were requested and included in the analysis.

sample

The analytic sample for this study consisted of 17 school pyramids. Eight (8) pyramids were classified as **OMM Pyramids**, defined as having an active[3] and sustained OMM club presence over the past five years. The remaining nine (9) pyramids were classified as **non-OMM Pyramids**, representing schools with inactive, limited, or no OMM club presence during the same period.

Non-OMM pyramids were matched to OMM pyramids using key demographic indicators, including total student enrollment, percentage of BIPOC students, and percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals (FRM). This matching strategy was intended to minimize potential confounding factors and ensure greater comparability between groups with respect to school size and student body composition.

[3] *A club was deemed "active" if they consistently met OMM's key performance indicators over the past five years: hosting at least four club meetings and one school-wide campaign each school year. The 5-year average number of meetings for OMM pyramid schools is 9 per school year (approximately one meeting per month), and the 5-year average number of campaigns held per year is approximately 2.*

methods

measures

Although the full FCYS survey contains approximately 155 items, this secondary analysis focused on selected measures aligned with the study's research questions.

Measures were grouped into the following domains:

- **Mental health outcomes:** feelings of sadness/hopelessness for 2+ weeks, suicide ideation, suicide attempts, and stress within last 30 days;
- **Bullying and school safety:** bullying at school/away from school, cyberbullying, and perceived safety at school
- **Protective factors:** health behaviors, resilience, gratitude, and problem-solving
- **Social relationships:** ability to get along with others, conflict management, and perceptions of how others view the respondent
- **School culture perceptions:** perceived teacher-student relationships

procedure

The FCYS is administered online in a classroom setting in the Fall and typically requires one 50-minute class period to complete.

Classroom teachers provide students with a survey link and read standardized instructions aloud prior to administration. Students complete the survey independently and exit the platform upon completion. The survey is completely anonymous without any identifying information requested or collected from students. To learn more about the FCYS, visit the Youth Survey **website**.

data limitations and analytic approach

As noted previously, the study was subject to several data limitations. FCYS data were provided in aggregate form, with values representing the percentage of students selecting specific response options, rather than as individual-level responses. As a result, inferential analysis could not be performed. In addition, to protect student privacy, data was provided at the pyramid level rather than at the individual school or student level. This means that OMM pyramid data may include students from both active OMM high schools and their feeder middle schools, which may or may not have an active OMM presence. Given these constraints, analyses focused on descriptive trends. Mean percentages were calculated for each construct by year and by OMM versus non-OMM pyramid status.

results

Composition of the provided analytic sample:

37.4% eighth-graders

34.5% tenth-graders

28% twelfth-graders

50.1% male

49.4% female

68.6% non-white

79.6% heterosexual

12.1% gay/lesbian or bisexual

53% students in non-omm pyramid schools

47.1% students in omm pyramid schools

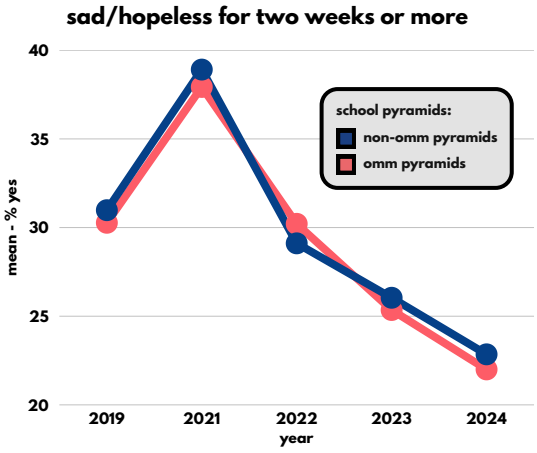
mental health & suicidal thoughts/behaviors

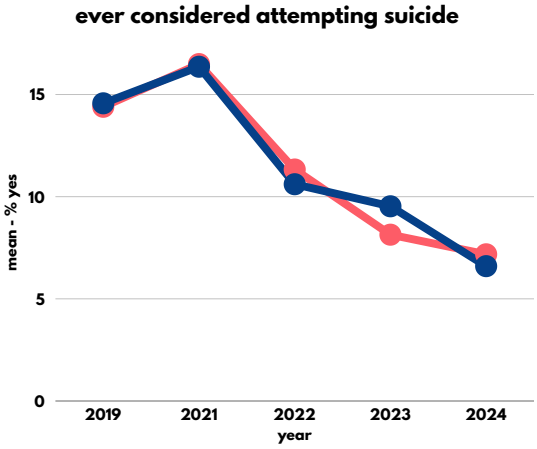
The **primary constructs of interest** for this study are measures of **mental health & suicidal thoughts/behaviors (STB):**

- sadness/hopelessness 2+ weeks
- suicide ideation
- suicide attempts
- stress within last 30 days

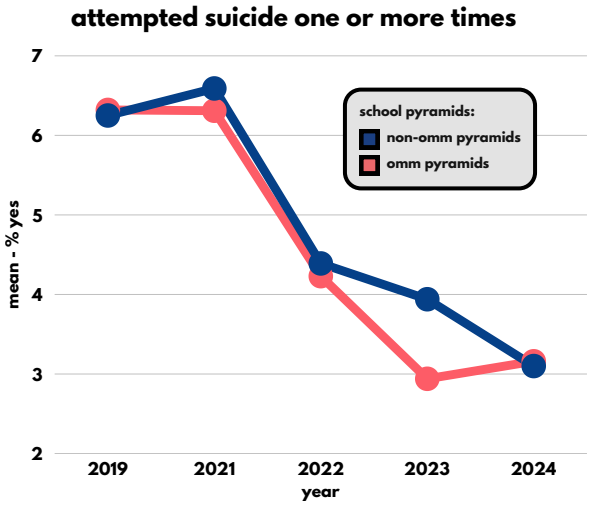
For **'feelings of sadness and hopelessness for two weeks for more'**, 30% of students across all school pyramids answered 'Yes' in 2019; this share increased by 8% between 2019 and 2021, then decreased to 22% by 2024 for both the non-OMM and OMM pyramids.

A similar trend was observed for both suicide ideation and suicide attempts. In 2019, 14% of students in both pyramids answered 'Yes' when asked if they **ever considered attempting suicide**; this average peaked at 16.5% in 2021, and then dropped to under 8% by 2024.

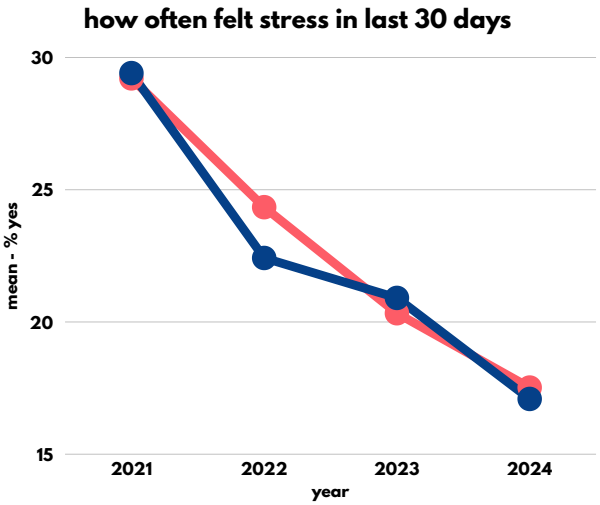




The percentage of students reporting that they **'attempted suicide one or more times in the past 12 months'** in 2019 was 6.3% for both the non-OMM and OMM pyramids, decreasing to 3.1% by 2024.



When students were asked how often they **felt stress in the last 30 days**, the percent of responses saying 'Most to All of the time' was highest in 2021 at just over 29% for both pyramids, dropping to approximately 17.5% for both by 2024 (no data was collected for this item in 2019).

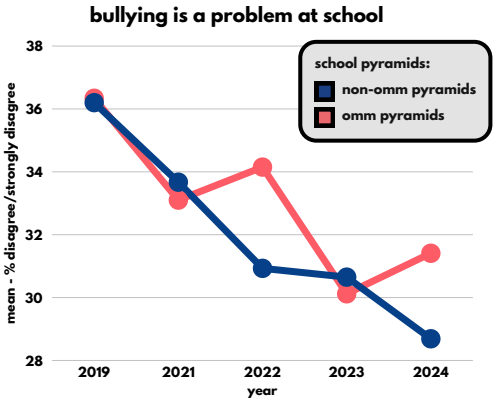


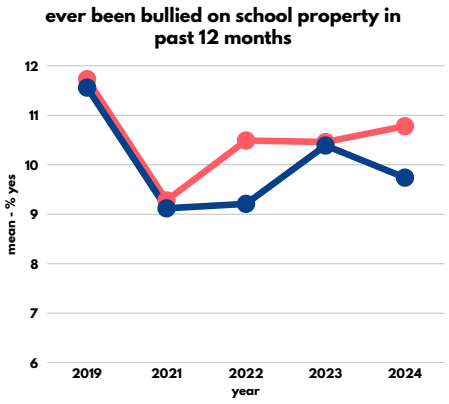


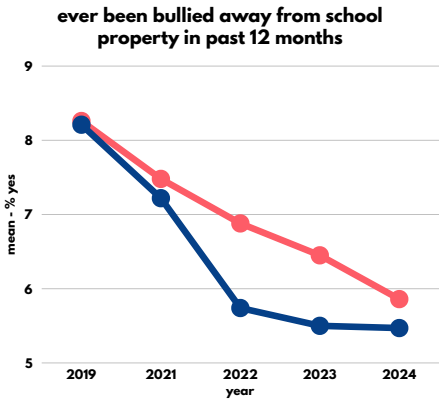


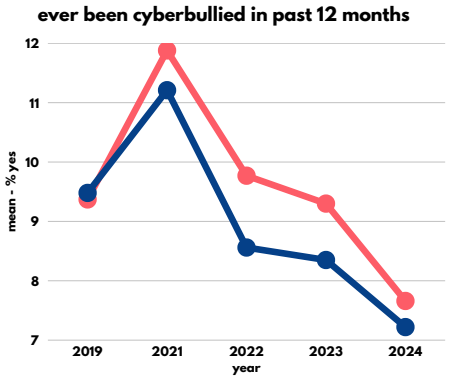
bullying and school safety

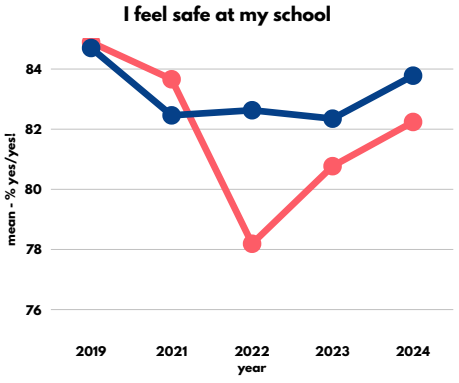
Students in OMM schools were generally more likely to 'disagree or strongly disagree' that **bullying is a problem at their school** when compared to those at the non-OMM schools. While both groups increasingly viewed bullying as a problem at school over time, OMM pyramid schools reversed this downward trend between 2023 and 2024. However, students at OMM schools were also more likely than their peers at non-OMM schools to report **being victims of bullying and cyberbullying** in the last 12 months. Both pyramid subgroups reported a 2% spike in cyberbullying experiences between 2019 and 2021—likely reflecting increased online activity during COVID-19 lockdowns—, followed by a 4% decrease by 2024. With regard to school safety, nearly 85% of students in the non-OMM schools reported **feeling safe at school** in 2019; between 2021 and 2024 this figure dropped slightly to 82% then increased to 83%. Similarly, roughly 85% of students in OMM schools reported feeling safe at school in 2019; however, this figure dropped considerably to 78% in 2022 before increasing again to 82% in 2024.







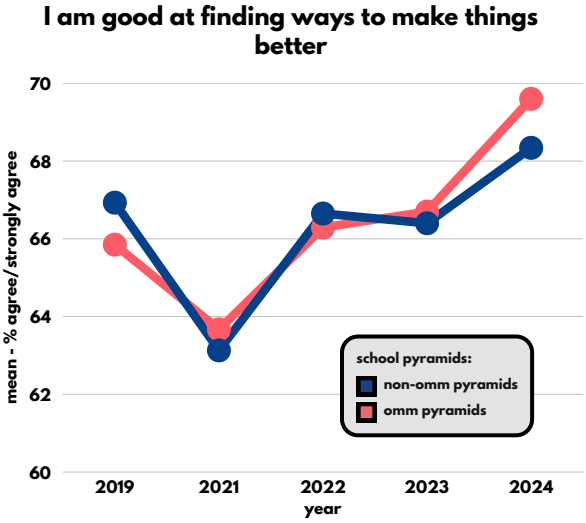


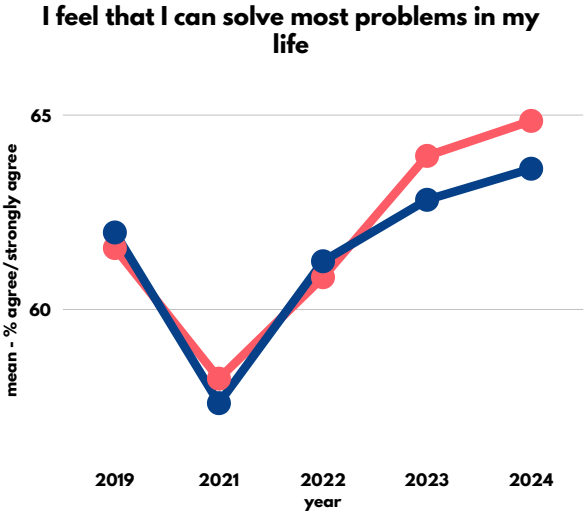


protective factors[4]: resilience, problem solving, and gratitude

Between 2019 and 2024, both non-OMM and OMM pyramids displayed a nearly identical trend with regard to four of the protective factor items under observation:

- **Resilience:** 'I am good at finding ways to make things better',
- **Problem-solving:** 'I feel that I can solve most problems in my life',
- **Gratitude:** 'I have much in my life to be thankful for', and
- **Problem-solving:** 'I try to find solutions to problems'.

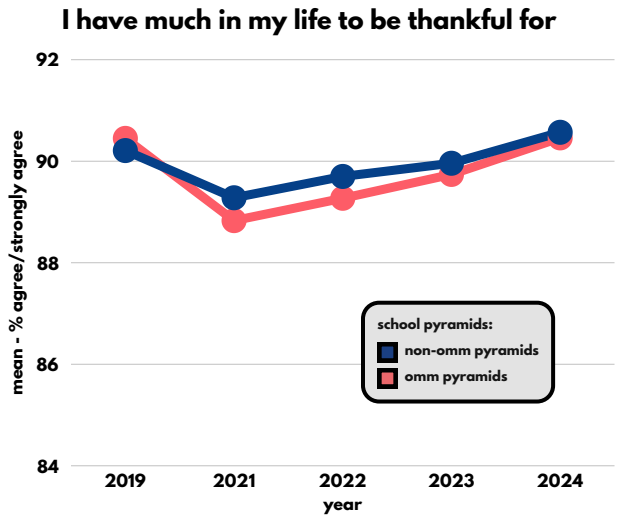


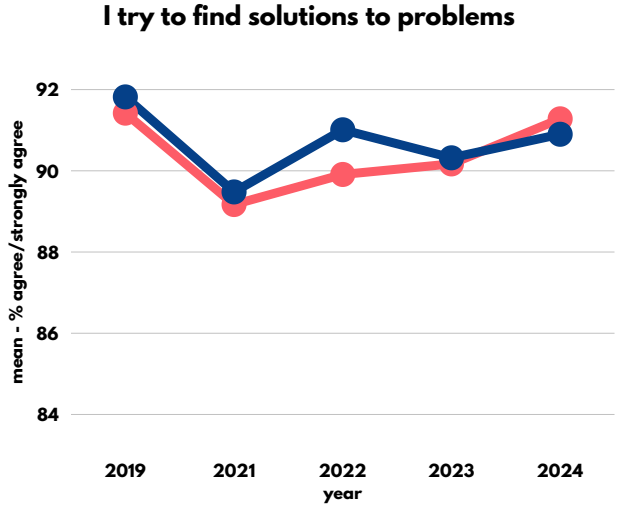


4 *The "protective factor" items discussed in this report align with OMM's primary program outcomes—such as positive coping, healthy habits, and social connectedness—and are distinct from the protective factors defined by the Fairfax County Youth Survey. The FCYS protective factors refer to a specific set of assets identified by the survey and shown to promote positive youth development and well-being.*

protective factors: resilience, problem solving, and gratitude

Between 2021 and 2024, there was a 5-6% increase in the share of students who agreed/strongly agreed that they were **good at finding ways to make things better**; a similar 6% increase was observed from 2019-2024 in the share of students who agreed/strongly agreed that they **could solve most of their own problems**; the percentage of students who agreed that they **had much to be thankful** for remained relatively stable across the years, with slight decrease from 2019 (90%) to 2021 (89%) before trending upward again from 2021-2024 to pre-pandemic level (90%); between 2019 and 2021, the percentage of students who agreed/strongly agreed that they **try to find solutions to problems** also remained relatively stable for both pyramid subgroups. The analysis shows a downtrend in the student responses across all four items in 2021.

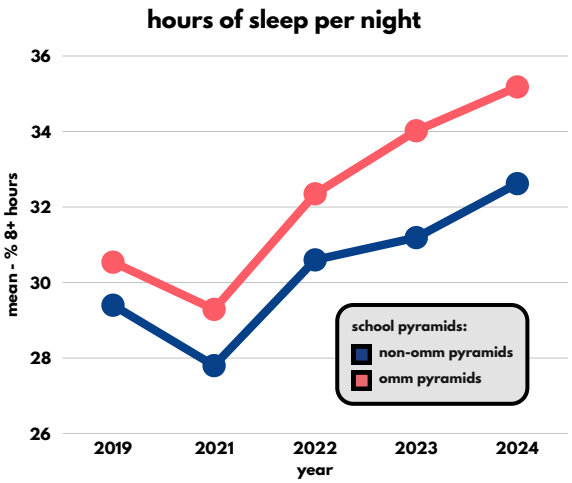




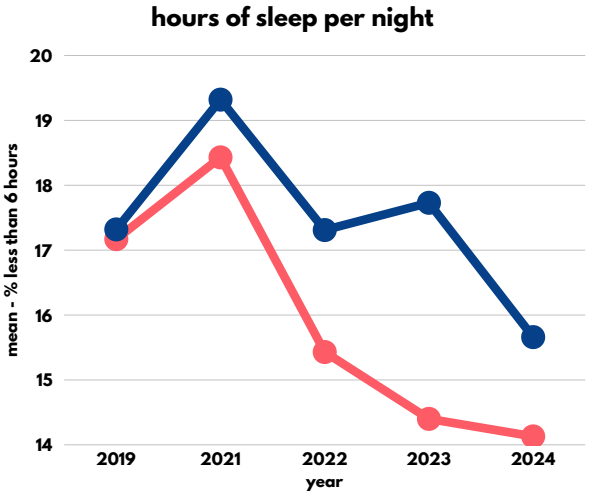
protective factors: healthy habits

Students at OMM pyramid schools reported higher engagement in healthy habits—**'hours of sleep per night'** and **'days of physical activity per week'** — than students at non-OMM pyramid schools.

Students at OMM pyramid schools were more likely to **get 8 or more hours of sleep per night** and less likely to **get fewer than 6 hours of sleep per night** compared to their non-OMM peers. The percentage of OMM students receiving 8 or more hours of sleep per night was just over 30% in 2019, decreasing slightly in 2021 before steadily increasing over time to 35% in 2024. While a similar over-time trend was observed for the non-OMM, the percentage of non-OMM students who reported 8+ hours of sleep per night was 1% lower than OMM students in 2019, 2% lower from 2021 to 2022, and 3% lower from 2023 to 2024. Roughly 17% of students in both pyramid groups reported getting less than 6 hours of sleep per night in 2019.



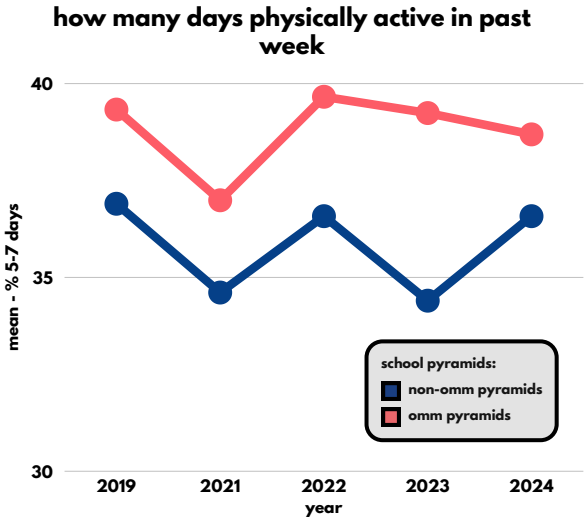
However, the trend line gap consistently widens between 2021 and 2023, showing that non-OMM students are consistently more likely to get inadequate rest than OMM students and that the percentage of OMM students reporting less than 6 hours of sleep per night continued to decrease from 2021 to 2024.



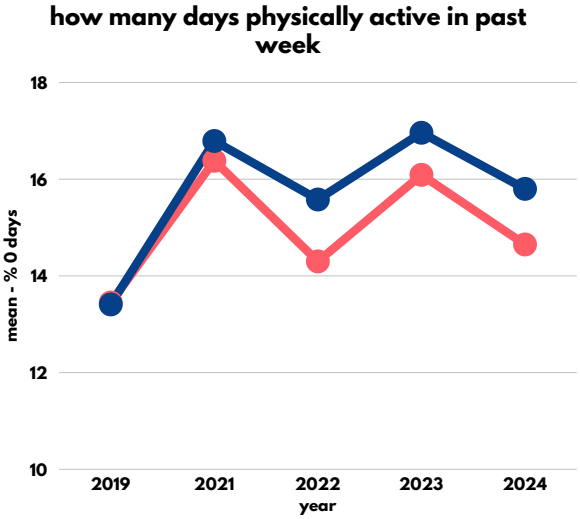


protective factors: healthy habits

OMM pyramid students were more likely than non-OMM pyramid students to be **physically active for 5 to 7 days per week,** with a 3% higher likelihood between 2019 and 2022 and a 5% higher likelihood in 2023.

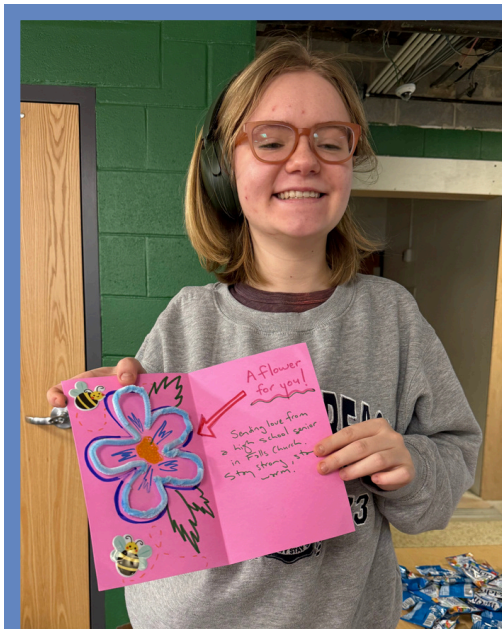


For the opposite measure—- being **physically active for 0 days per week** — the same percentage of students in both pyramids (13.5%) reported not being active in 2019. While there were uptrends in lack of physical activity in 2021 and 2023 for both groups, OMM pyramid students were less likely to report being physically active for 0 days per week from 2021 to 2024 compared to non-OMM pyramid students.







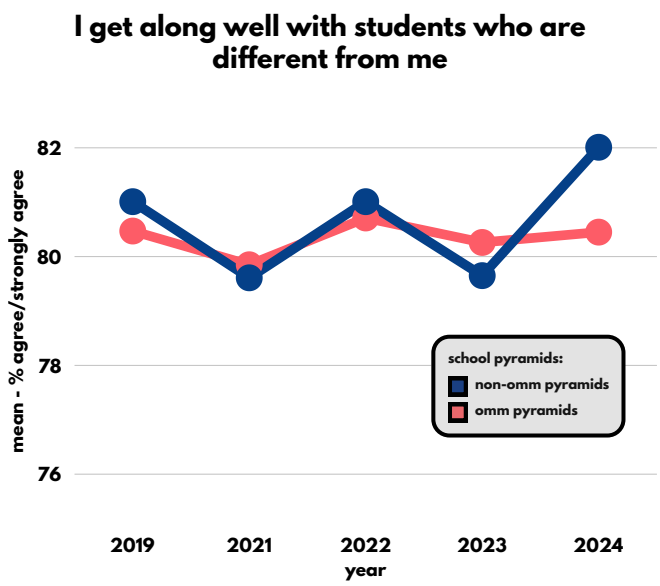


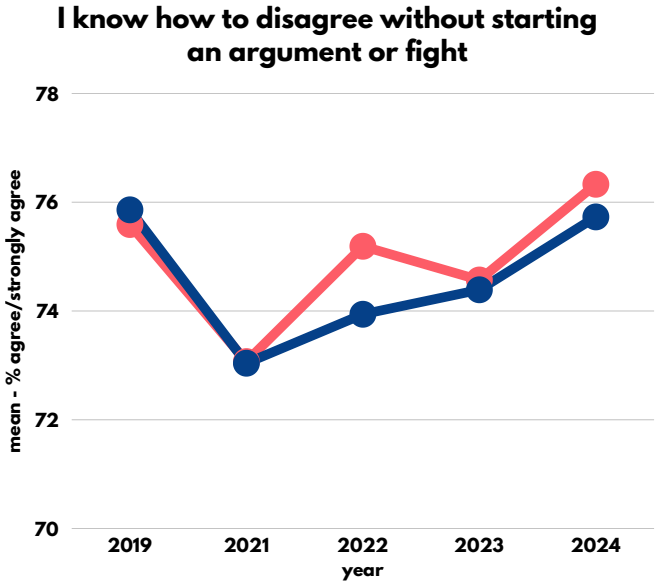
social relations

Two items were selected as a measure of social relations:

- **Inclusivity:** 'I get along well with students who are different from me'
- **Conflict resolution:** 'I know how to disagree without starting an argument or fight'

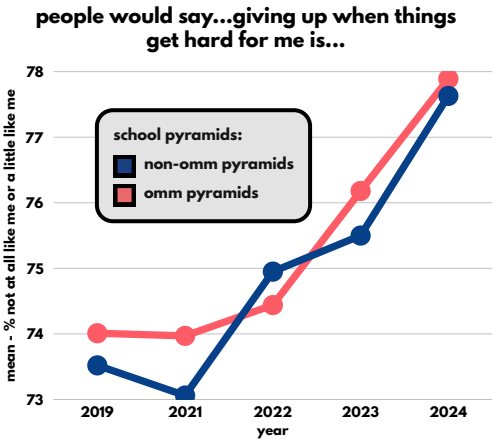
The percentage of OMM pyramid students who agreed that they **get along well with students who are different from them** remained relatively consistent at roughly 80% from 2019 to 2024. For non-OMM pyramid students, the percentage who agreed slightly fluctuated between 81% and 79% each year, increasing to 82% in 2024. A majority (75%) of students at both non-OMM and OMM pyramid schools agreed that they **knew how to disagree without starting an argument** in 2019. This figure dipped to 73% in 2021 for both pyramid groups, but OMM pyramid students were more likely than non-OMM pyramid students to report that they could disagree without arguing.



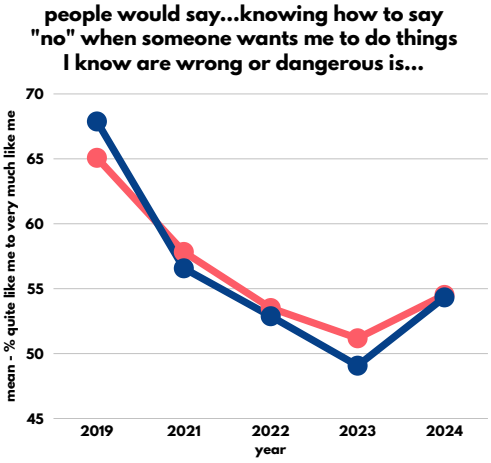


others' perception of respondent

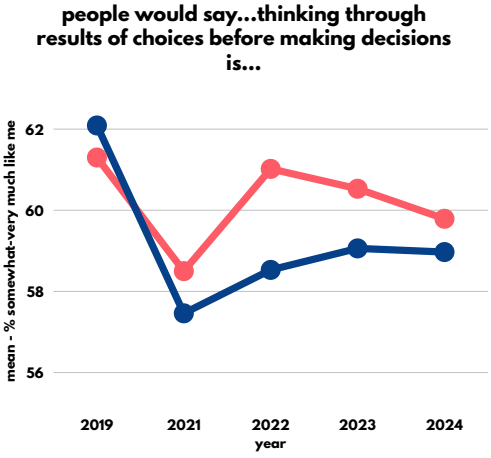
Three items were selected as a measure of others' perceptions toward the respondent. When asked if **'People would say...giving up when things get hard'** is 'not at all like me or a little like me', responses from both subgroups trended upward over time, indicating an increasingly positive perception of the students' resilience. Nearly 78% of students at non-OMM and OMM pyramid schools responded this way in 2024, up from 73% in 2019.



In response to the statement **'People would say...knowing how to say 'no' when someone wants me to do things I know are wrong or dangerous'** is 'quite like me or very much like me', responses trended downward over time from 67% to 54% for non-OMM pyramid students and from 65% to 54% for OMM pyramid students. This suggests an over time decline in students confidence around resisting peer pressure and setting boundaries, regardless of pyramid grouping.



Finally, in response to the statement, **'People would say...thinking through the results of choices before making decisions'** is 'somewhat to very much like me', 61-62% of students across the two pyramid schools agreed in 2019 compared to roughly 59% in 2024. Responses showed a sharp 4% downtrend in 2021.

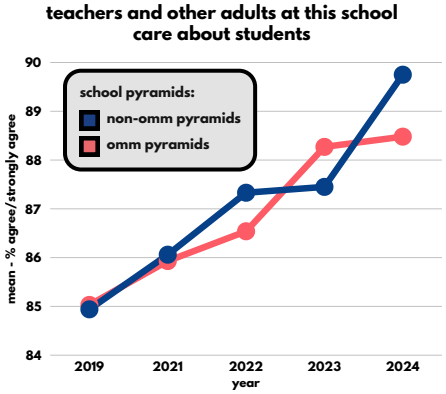


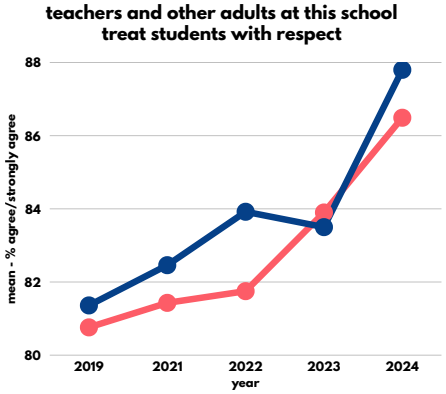
school culture

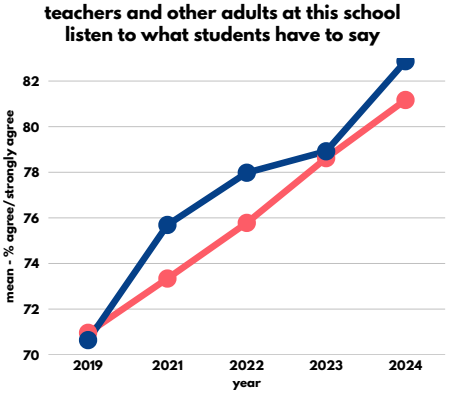
Three items measuring school culture via **teacher-student relationships** were included in the data set:

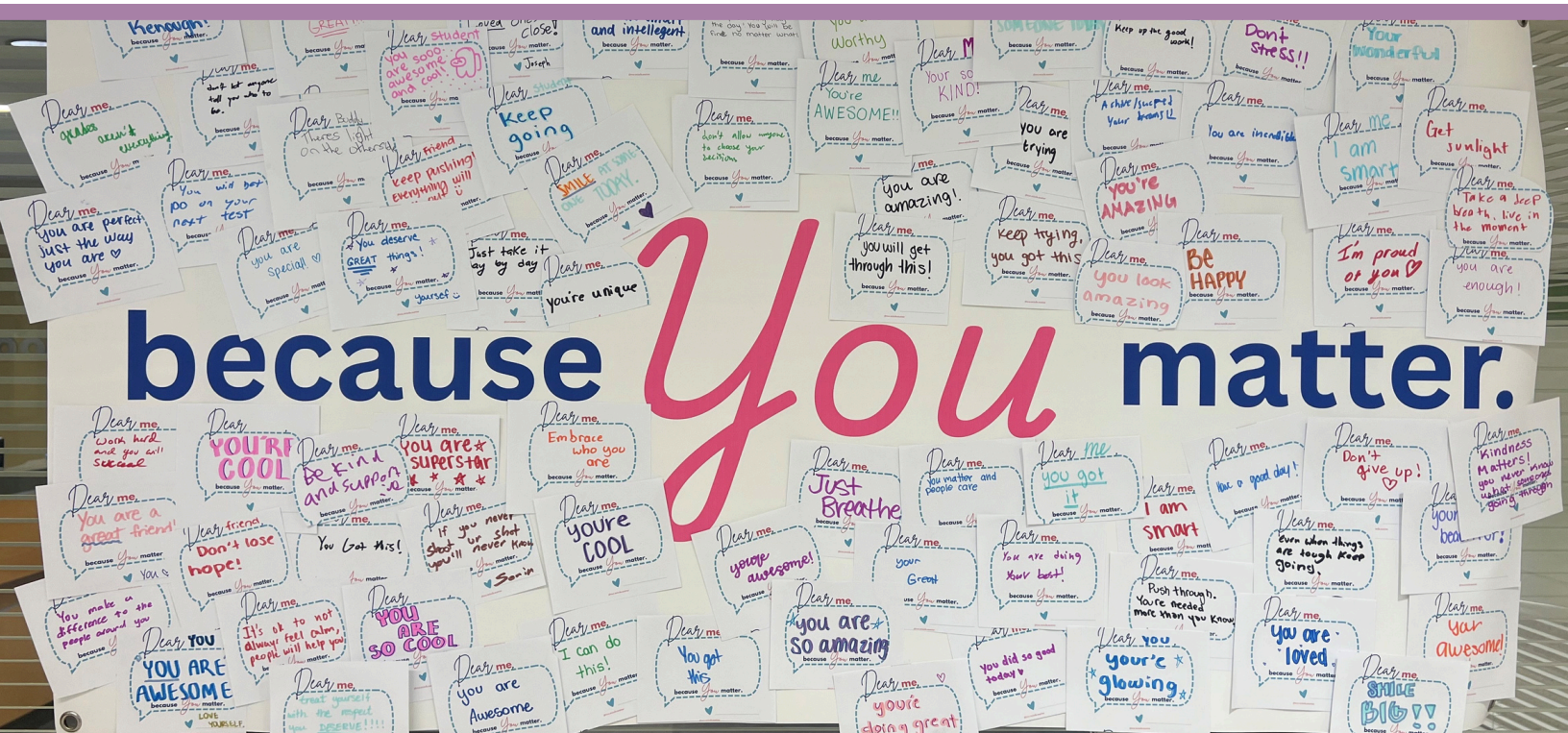
- 'Teachers and other adults at this school **care about students**'
- 'Teachers and other adults at this school **treat students with respect**'
- 'Teachers and other adults at this school **listen to what students have to say**'

For all three statements, the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed trended upward between 2019 and 2024. Students at non-OMM schools appear more likely to agree that adults at their schools care about, respect, and listen to students.









discussion & implications

Results of the analyses reveal a range of trends across school pyramid subgroups. While the aggregate nature of the data precludes causal inference, the observed trends provide important descriptive insight into how student experiences may evolve within school communities where teen-led mental health programming is present.

mental health outcomes

The OMM pyramids and non-OMM pyramids exhibited similar outcome trends for the primary mental health constructs—stress, sadness, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts. Adverse mental health responses noticeably peaked in 2021 and subsequently dropped over time. Given that 2021 was the height of the COVID 19 pandemic, analyses suggest that the pandemic may have led to poorer mental health outcomes for youth due to changing norms such as social isolation and increased digital media consumption, among others.

Fewer students in OMM pyramid schools reported having attempted suicide between 2021 and 2023 than students at non OMM pyramid schools, with a negligible overlap in reported attempts in 2019 and 2024.

This modest-but-meaningful difference over time could be partly attributed to a slight protective effect of OMM programming against suicide attempts due to OMM's championing of mental health awareness and providing resources on suicide prevention. For a low-base-rate outcome like suicide attempts, even minimal percentage differences can represent meaningful real-world impact, particularly when they are consistent over time. Nevertheless, this finding should still be interpreted with caution, as other influencing factors such as cultural and community support and pre-existing positive school wellness culture can also contribute to a potential protective environment rather than definitive program effects.

> **across the five study years, there is an average 0.3% difference in reported suicide attempts between the two subgroups, amounting to an annual difference of roughly 61 fewer students in omm pyramid schools compared to non-omm pyramid schools**

discussion & implications (continued)

bullying and school safety

Students in OMM pyramids were more likely to disagree that bullying was a problem at school yet slightly more likely to report being a victim of bullying at school, away from school, and online. The **perception-experience gap** evident in the finding may suggest a coexisting desensitization toward bullying behaviors at large even while experiencing negative interpersonal interactions with peers; it may also suggest that students are willing to report on incidence of bullying yet still believe that their school's overall climate is relatively healthy. Further quantitative and qualitative examination into these findings is recommended to better understand the relationship between OMM exposure/participation and bullying at various developmental stages.

protective factors

The selected protective factor items measured habits of resilience, problem-solving, self-efficacy, and practicing gratitude, to examine how the health-positive habits of students at OMM pyramid schools compared to those of students at non-OMM schools. Trends were nearly identical for the two pyramid subgroups, indicating that there were no strong program effects on these protective factors. The protective factors improved over time, except for in 2021 when all four items saw a downtrend in positive student responses, suggesting that:

> **students showed signs of recovery as they socially re-engaged after the pandemic**

The largely parallel trends across pyramid groups demonstrate that broader societal and contextual influences were primary drivers of students' protective habits rather than pyramid classification. While OMM may still support other social or emotional outcomes, these results imply that the program's impact on these particular protective habits is not strongly measurable at the group level, especially when considering broader environmental factors at play.

> **students in omm pyramid schools reported more favorably than those in non-omm pyramid schools on healthy habits measures—days of physical activity per week and hours of sleep per night—suggesting potential program impacts on students valuing and prioritizing their self-care and wellness**

discussion & implications (continued)

OMM pyramid students were more likely to get eight or more hours of sleep per night and be physically active for five to seven days per week in comparison to their non-OMM pyramid counterparts. They were also comparatively less likely to get less than six hours of sleep per night and be physically active for zero days per week. Regardless of pyramid grouping, trends across these healthy habits measures indicate that sleep and activity levels were greatly disrupted by societal circumstances, particularly between 2021 and 2023, but that students were generally on track to return to baseline behaviors or improve them by 2024. While data could not be tested for significance or causal relation, the findings point to an apparent health advantage among OMM pyramid schools in the county.

social relations

A majority of students reported having positive social relations with others. The percentage of non-OMM pyramid students reporting that they get along well with peers who are different from them fluctuated over time while reports from OMM pyramid students remained relatively consistent over the six years.

> **omm pyramid students were also generally more likely than non-omm pyramid students to report that they could disagree with others without arguing**

These findings may indicate the positive influence of OMM programming in strengthening student social competence and promoting stable and inclusive peer interactions.

When asked about others' perceptions of them, students across both subgroups increasingly reported that people would not characterize them as a person who gives up when things get hard. This perception of perseverance stood in contrast to their responses regarding knowing when to say no and thinking through results before making decisions. On these two items, the percentage of students who reported that others would think positively of them generally declined over time. These results show that students tend to think that others may see them as resilient but that they struggle with making good or thoughtful decisions.

discussion & implications (continued)

school culture perceptions

With regard to school culture, the share of students who agreed that teachers care about students, treat students with respect, and listen to what students have to say, increased over time for both pyramid subgroups, with non-OMM pyramid students reporting slightly higher rates of agreement than OMM pyramid students. These findings point to a broad improvement in middle and high school climate and that students' perception of positive teacher-student relationships does not appear to be uniquely associated with OMM programming.





implications for research and practice

Taken together, these findings offer several research- and practice-relevant insights for the implementation, refinement, and scaling of teen-led, mental health programs like OMM within school settings. While causal conclusions cannot be drawn, the observed patterns suggest several actionable opportunities to strengthen program design, tailor support by developmental stage, and align OMM efforts with broader school- or district-level mental health strategies.

sustain and normalize peer-led mental health promotion/suicide prevention

The overall lower prevalence of suicide attempts among students in OMM pyramids points to a possible protective effect of sustained mental health awareness and prevention efforts, even when overall patterns between OMM and non-OMM were similar. For low-base-rate but high-impact outcomes such as suicide attempts, even modest and stable differences over time may reflect meaningful protective effects. Practically, this finding supports continued investment in teen-led OMM programs as part of a comprehensive, multi-tiered approach to teen mental health promotion and suicide prevention, particularly in reinforcing mental health awareness, normalizing help-seeking, and building healthy habits.

reinforce and rebuild protective factors post-pandemic

The findings from this secondary analysis underscore the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth mental health. Across school pyramid subgroups and outcome constructs, 2021 consistently emerged as a period of heightened risk, generally followed by gradual improvement, suggesting that broader social disruptions rather than school context alone drove many adverse trends. Although protective factors rebounded over time, the broadly parallel trends across groups suggest that these skills require intentional, ongoing reinforcement, and OMM clubs may be well positioned to complement other school-based initiatives by promoting adaptive coping such as practicing gratitude in club meetings or through school-wide campaigns, particularly during transitional or high-stress periods (e.g. exams).

address the perception-experience gap in bullying

Mixed findings related to bullying perceptions versus experiences highlight the complexity of how students interpret and report school climate and peer interactions. This pattern suggests a need for programming that explicitly helps students recognize, label, and respond to

implications for research and practice (continued)

harmful behaviors while also reinforcing collective responsibility for creating and maintaining a safe and inclusive environment. Integrating bullying prevention strategies (e.g. bystander intervention training) into OMM activities may help bridge the observed divergence between perception and experience of bullying.

leverage omm to strengthen social relations

Slightly more stable and favorable trends in social relations among OMM pyramid students point to a potential role for OMM clubs in fostering peer connectedness and constructive conflict management. Club leaders may consider emphasizing activities and/or campaigns that foster connectedness and build social competence (e.g. communication skills, perspective-taking, respectful disagreement) as these skills appear to align with observed strengths in OMM pyramid schools and are foundational to broader school climate and students' mental well-being.

future evaluation

Finally, these findings highlight the importance of ongoing monitoring and mixed-methods evaluation. Future research should further explore the emerging themes through qualitative methods, examine differential program impacts by grade level, and assess the role of contextual factors such as community support, social media consumption, and post-pandemic stressors. Additional overtime studies that evaluate measures of program fidelity and student engagement can also help to explain how school-based mental health programming such as OMM most effectively promotes resilience, decision-making skills, and overall well-being, particularly in the years following large-scale societal events such as the COVID 19 pandemic. Most importantly, descriptive trends from population-level data can guide hypothesis generation, but future practice would benefit more from granular data which can better capture individual-level change.



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