

While recently testifying at a local town hall meeting on youth mental health, I was struck by a glaring paradox: the group most affected by the policies in question was conspicuously absent. How could seasoned professionals and leaders discuss youth mental health without the voices of the youth themselves? How could they design a system for us without us? Engaging in mental health advocacy as a high schooler has granted me the unique opportunity to observe some of the most inspiring manifestations of hope that humanity has to offer. Simultaneously, it has opened my eyes to the systemic underrepresentation and misrepresentation of youth.

I have been mentored by my school psychologist, an active contributor with NASP, to liaise between our mental health awareness club and the psychology team. I've worked regularly to invite students of diverse backgrounds across the student body to help shape new wellness initiatives planned by our administration, from therapy dogs during stressful testing weeks, to words of encouragement posted around entrances of campus testing centers, to having teachers wear "Be Kind" shirts on Fridays. I've led youth advisory councils and boards with various mental health non-profit organizations locally and nationally, championing the principle of youth co-design in mental health systems of care. Through these programs, I fight to shift systems away from medical models and toward more robust approaches that view recipients of services as equals. At conferences, I've advocated for environments where young people aren't just passive beneficiaries but active facilitators of change in conversations concerning their wellbeing. More than giving youth a seat at the policy table, I seek to redefine the table itself.

Those far removed from youth circles often resort to rhetoric about this national concern yet fail to take concrete steps to act. Meanwhile, young individuals are inherently driven to nurture not only their own mental health but also that of their peers, as they are the ones directly

experiencing these challenges. Thus, a key and enduring approach to mitigating the youth mental health crisis lies in harnessing the unique skills, passions, and lived experiences of the youth themselves. If we genuinely want to make a difference, we must not only allow, but actively *encourage* young people to speak up. We must create environments where they feel safe to express their thoughts, struggles, and ideas and treat them as equal partners.

School psychologists are uniquely positioned to witness the day-to-day challenges and triumphs of young individuals navigating mental health issues. By collaborating closely with youth, psychologists can gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of current programs and identify gaps in service delivery. They can advocate for and facilitate the inclusion of youth voices in school-based mental health initiatives, forming partnerships that enable more tailored and effective interventions, as students are more likely to engage with programs they have had a hand in creating. This approach, in turn, fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among the youth as they see their ideas and feedback being taken seriously. Therefore, practitioners should be trained to not only provide services but also to act as facilitators for youth-led initiatives and discussions around mental health. This could involve organizing focus groups, peer-led workshops, and feedback sessions where young people can openly discuss their needs and experiences.

School administrators, leaders, policymakers, and practitioners must not only create platforms for youth to express their views in school-based settings, but actually *use* their input in decision-making processes. This could be through youth advisory boards, inclusion in policy discussions, or providing feedback on school mental health services. Bring a young person into the room to advise and strategize for solutions. Hear them out. Co-creation and agency are essential for children to feel supported, and when youth are supported, entire communities thrive.

Youth voice matters. Encourage it, foster it, listen to it. And most importantly, act upon it. Let's not just make decisions for our youth, but with our youth. After all, there can be nothing about us, without us.