



BROWN COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH

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Public Health Corner Article

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Brown County Lunch Table Initiative Erin Schwab, Health Educator and Planner

Brown County Public Health staff along with the Heart of New Ulm's Brown County Mental Health and Wellness Action Team piloted a new program this school year at Springfield Public School. This program, called "The Lunch Table Initiative" aimed to help support students and staff by providing education around a variety of mental health and wellness topics – all during the lunch hour.

Brown County students have seen an increase in mental health, behavioral or emotional problems over the last several years according to data from the 2022 Minnesota Student Survey. Poor mental health as a teenager can linger into adulthood and may lead to negative health consequences, such as chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes, as well as risky behaviors like substance misuse. However, there is hope. Protective factors can lessen the likelihood of those negative health consequences. Therefore, the goal of this initiative was to equip students with tools they need to build resilience, learn coping skills, and gain understanding of tough topics. On top of building those skills, the lunch table initiative also provided students at Springfield Public School to engage with caring adults outside of their own



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teachers. According to the research from Harvard University, “children who do well despite serious hardship had had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult”.

The Brown County Lunch Table Initiative visited the 6, 7, and 8th graders at Springfield Public School during their lunch period one day a month for seven months. Each month’s topic ranged from social media to kindness and everywhere in between. The planning team developed games around each topic and had conversations with students about each topic. The pilot of this program was a great success. Most students agreed that the topics were helpful in addressing health topics and they also would recommend the Lunch Table Initiative to other students. Half of the students also felt that they were more comfortable discussing health-related concerns after participating in the Lunch Table Initiative.

The need to support the youth in our communities is real and should be a priority for the adults in our communities. The complexity and challenges of the world around teenagers can be scary and confusing for them, especially as they continue to develop into young adults. The Lunch Table Initiative was one small way to start conversations about hard topics, offer support and tools to them and encourage them to make healthy and safe choices.