



The Colorado Health Foundation™



# Where We Start: Behavioral Health in Colorado's Classrooms

Parkland.

March for Our Lives.

Migrant children detained at our borders.

CHIP reauthorization.

In a year filled to the brim with news that has shaken us as a country and a culture, there are common threads to be found. In both increments and startling leaps, our youth, including kids in Colorado, have been disproportionately affected and mobilized by the political and social turbulence of these times.

From those who are most vulnerable – children of families with low income, whose health care hung in the balance for months with CHIP reauthorization – to those who have stepped forward with truly unbelievable determination and bravery after the Parkland shooting, our young people have gone from classrooms to center stage. In almost all cases, it is not a stage that they asked to be on. But their voices simply must be heard. And it is imperative that we listen.

At our [Colorado Health Symposium](#) in August, our CEO and President, [Karen](#), moderated a panel of young women from different backgrounds and with different stories – and all of whom have fought battles we know they shouldn't have to. One told of growing up in poverty and watching her mother fade away to addiction. Another of her suicidal ideation that was invisible to her parents. Another young woman revealed her experience of daily bullying at school. And yet another shared her journey of coming out and the anxiety and depression that came along with it. Each of these young women spoke with bravery, clarity and

conviction. Nothing about it was easy.

But ensuring our children and youth in Colorado grow up mentally well is not easy work.

At the Foundation, one of our four focus areas is “Nurture Healthy Minds.” The word “nurture” is intentional, and a key area of this work is to foster the social-emotional development of children and equip teens and young adults with skills to build resilience. So they can share their voices and grow up supported, cared for, resilient – and *yes* – nurtured.

In Colorado, [the youth \(ages 10-24\) suicide rate is higher than it has ever been](#), and continues to skyrocket. We see [bullying, especially directed at LGBTQ youth, happening in parallel](#). We see data that show that [Colorado ranks 43<sup>rd</sup> in the nation for youth mental health](#). And across the state, [the number of school-age youth experiencing homelessness has tripled in the last decade](#).

The statistics can be overwhelming.

So we ask ourselves: where do we start? How do we take what we’ve heard and seen and that we know to be true and begin to move the needle for our young people?

The answer is clear: Colorado’s classrooms. Here is where kids are not on stage. Here is where a young woman who struggled with racial and gender identity graduates with a degree in social work. Here is where a girl who grew up in poverty becomes a writer and a poet. Here is where a girl who considered suicide starts a website to provide resources and dialogue for her peers. And here is where a girl who was bullied becomes a first-generation college student.

So we start there.

Continuing the conversation from our Symposium, we will be hosting the next event in our Symposium Unplugged series at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, on Dec. 11. We will be focusing the full day's discussion on behavioral health in Colorado's classrooms. No big stage, but a candid conversation. So we can together discover how we can become a state where every child, teen and young adult is not only nurtured, but is given the opportunity to thrive.

We will also be using this opportunity to listen and learn from you, experts working in the behavioral health or educational sector. And we will use the information and insights we gather to continue to inform our work.

I invite you to join us via the [livestream](#).

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