



Youth Mental Health Navigator Program

School Year 2025-2026 Report



YOUTH MENTAL
HEALTH NAVIGATORS

Improving Mental Health—Together

A Service of SCSC

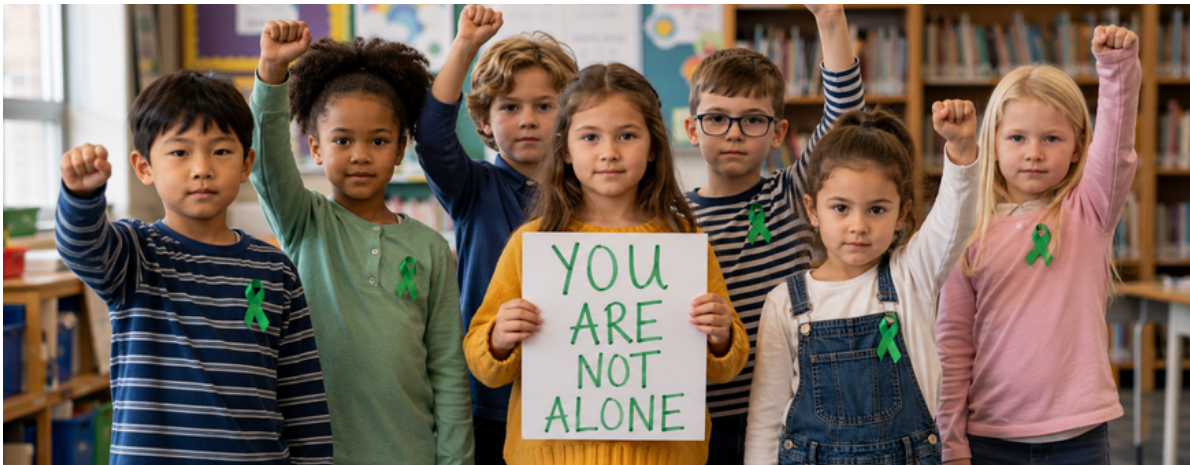


Table of Contents

Letter to Invested Partners Pg. 3

New Referral Outcomes Pg. 4

Total Referral Outcomes Pg. 5-7

Demographic Data Pg. 8-12

Additional Impacts Pg. 13

Contact Information and Thank You Pg. 14

Appendix (Wilder Reports) Pg. 15

“

"He has 100% attendance this year, and there have been no behavioral issues. He is excelling in school."

(Teacher of a 3rd grader - after hearing from the previous year's teacher about the level of difficulties in 2nd grade).

”



<https://www.mnscsc.org/ymhn>

Highlights/Overview

Dear Invested Partners,

We can confidently say this phenomenal model continues to successfully address the mental health needs of our region's youth and families. Since **Greater Mankato Area United Way's** inception in spring of 2022, **this program has served nearly *2,000 youth** attending school or living in Blue Earth, Le Sueur, Nicollet, Waseca, Watonwan Counties (and beyond), with the vast majority connected to effective and culturally appropriate mental health supports. Well over ***200 caregivers and other adults** have also been supported. **Supporting all people connected with youth is a critical part of improving youth mental health well-being.** In our most recent program year (July 1, 2025-June 30, 2026), navigators supported **438+ new youth and 69+ caregivers** and provided support for **an additional 113 youth** (served in a previous year and referred again this year).

Because of positive relationships with community providers, **navigators were able to get nearly all referrals connected to a chosen therapist within two weeks, with numerous referrals connected within just a few days.** Families wanting psych evaluation testing for their youth were usually able to start the intake process **within one month.** Based on community feedback, these connection timelines are substantially shorter than those typically experienced by families navigating the behavioral health system independently. **This highlights the value of personalized navigation in reducing barriers to timely access to care.**

Navigators also collaborated in numerous ways with community partners - to help improve access, systems, and attitudes related to mental health and family well-being. See "Additional Impacts" on page 13 for more information. **Through a collaboration of Greater Mankato Area United Way (GMAUW) and South Central Service Cooperative (SCSC), [Wilder Research](#) is facilitating a formal program process evaluation.** Results are highly affirming of program effectiveness so far. See the **Appendix** to view the [updated logic model](#) and [facilitated discussion summary](#).

YMHNs continue to serve all public schools in the 4-county region. South Central Service Cooperative recently expanded services to include public schools in Watonwan County. **Any youth ages 0-24 and their caregivers, living or attending school in this 5-county area, are eligible for YMHN support.** (Anyone is welcome to contact a navigator for help getting connected - see contact information at the end of this report.)

We are grateful for continued support for this program. Please reach out to us with questions and conversation.

Sincerely,

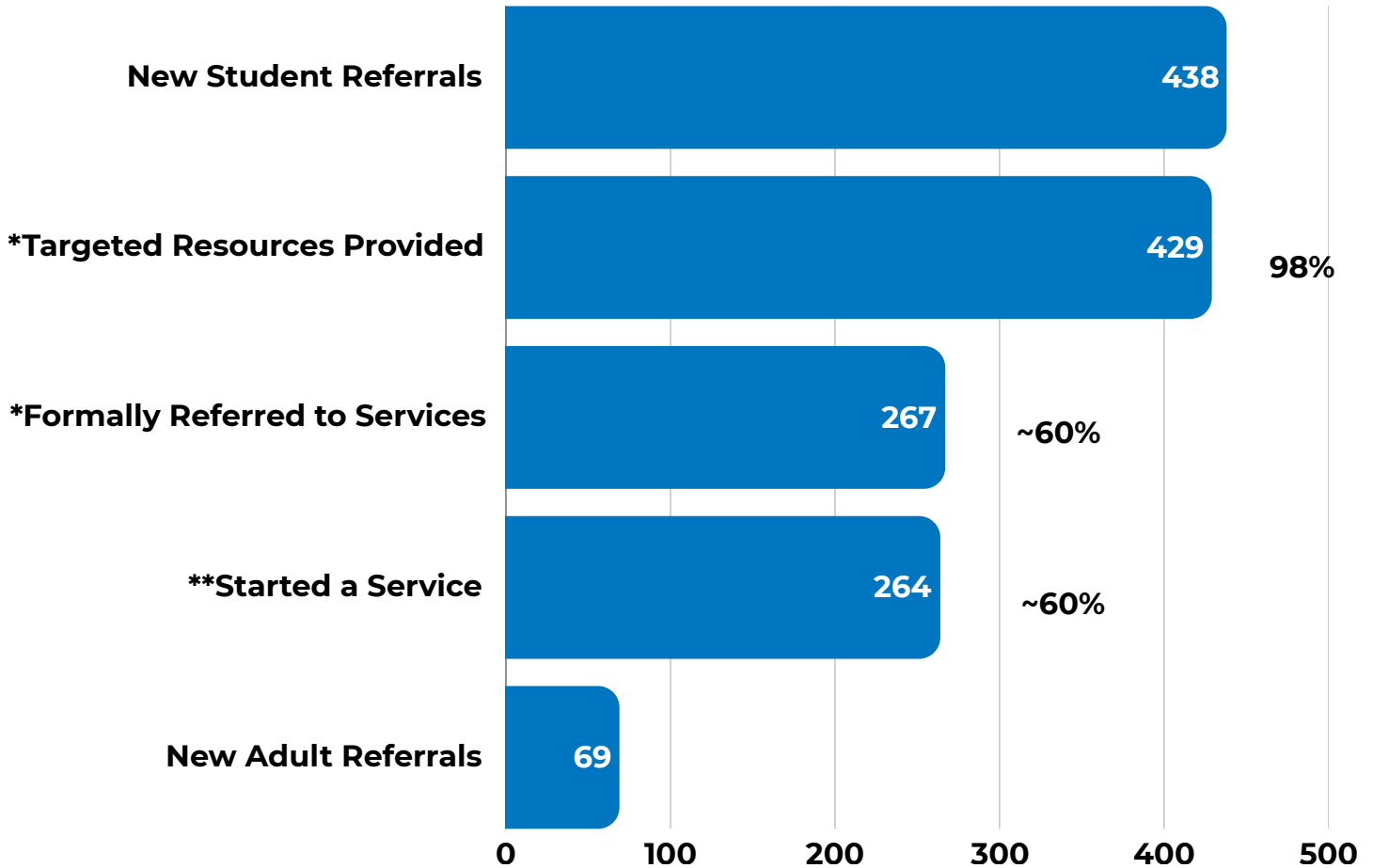
The Youth Mental Health Navigation Team

***these numbers include the new referrals for the 2025-2026 academic year.**

New Referral Outcomes

Overall Outcomes

(Supported by Navigators employed by SCSC and Mankato Area Public Schools (MAPS))



*New Student Referrals Only (Ages 0 - Grade 12, and referred since July 1, 2025).

**Known by navigators to have started a service. Actual service connections are likely much higher because caregiver follow-up is voluntary, and many students have appointments scheduled after the reporting period. (In past years, this rate has increased to well over 80% in the following months after report end).

Also - navigators worked harder this year to empower families to make their own phone calls - after providing a targeted resource or two. Follow-up with school staff and families showed this was an effective approach - these likely connections are not all reflected in the numbers.

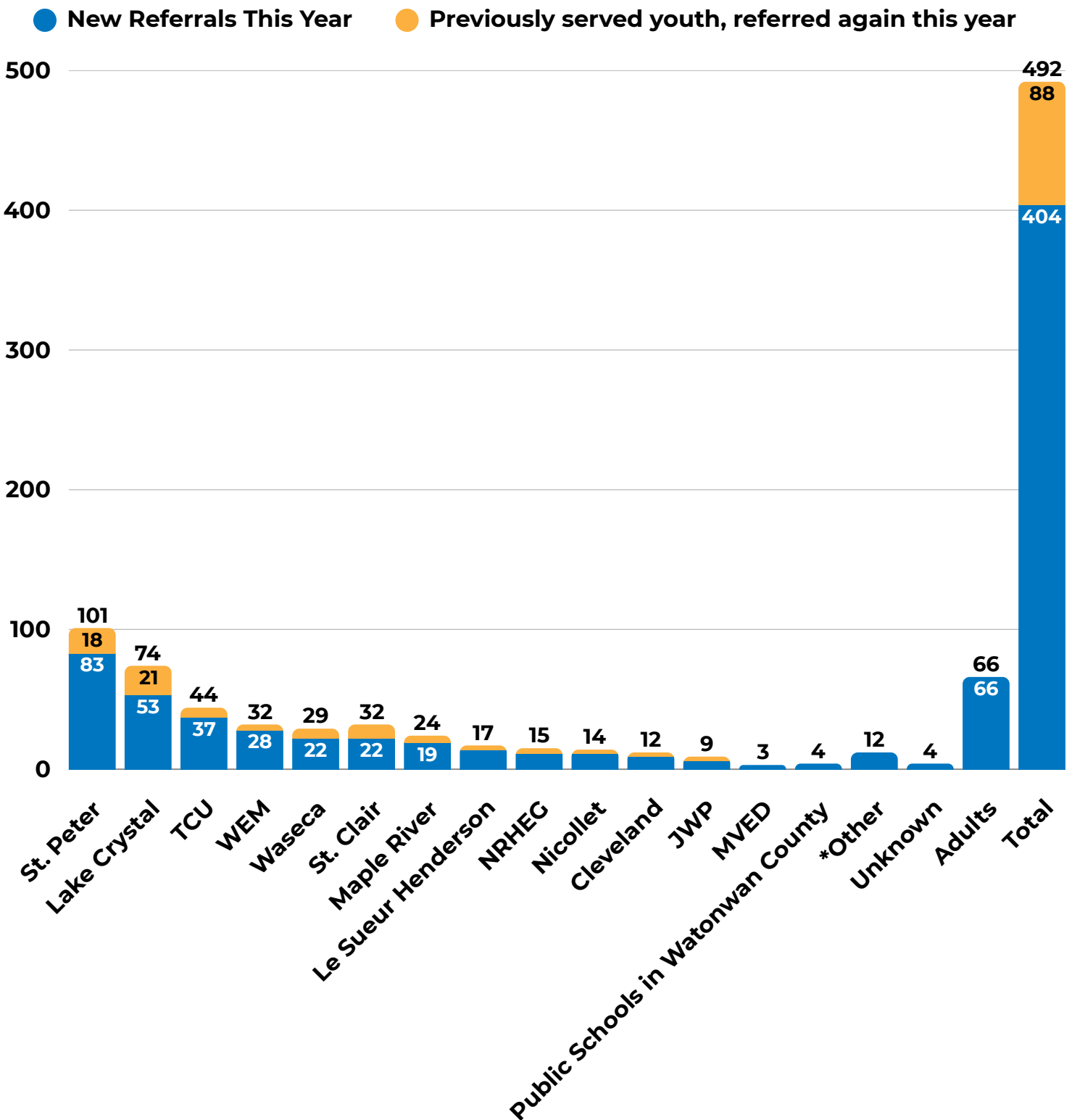


**I appreciate the collaboration and the care
you provide to students and families.**
- Provider



Total Referrals Served

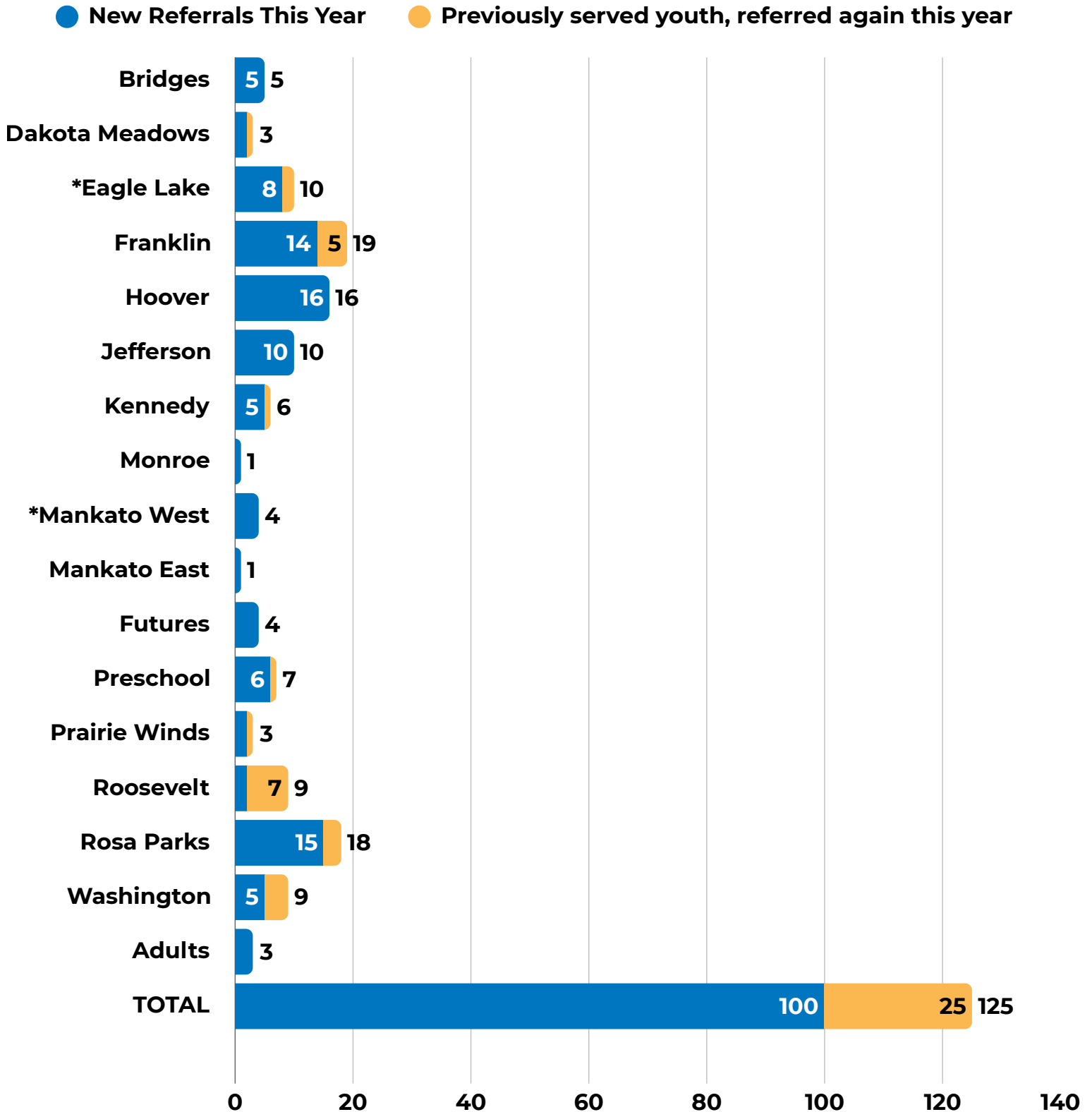
SCSC Total Youth and Families Served (per school district)



*1 in this category was supported by a MAPS Navigator

Total Referrals Served

MAPS Total Youth and Families Served (per school building)



*4 of these students were supported by a SCSC Navigator

Reasons for Re-Referrals

Previously-served youth were supported for the following reasons:

- **Caregivers reached out to navigators:**
 - For navigation consults, and/or to ask for help accessing additional or different services from the ones previously established.
 - Because they were now ready to proceed with getting help for their youth, after having considered the possibility/consulted with a YMHN in a previous year.
- **School Staff asked navigators:**
 - To reconnect with caregivers to provide additional support and resources
 - For consults and recommendations for a student previously served.
- **Providers asked navigators to help with previously-referred clients:**
 - Adding a service which providers didn't have access to (meds, county case management, etc.)
 - For help accessing telehealth within schools for their clients.
 - For guidance in how to access/navigate systems outside their scope of practice.

“

It's so helpful to know I can continue checking in with you about next steps and support. I've learned so much from you and really appreciate your knowledge. - Parent

”

“

There really is no one else I can ask these questions to. - Parent

”

“

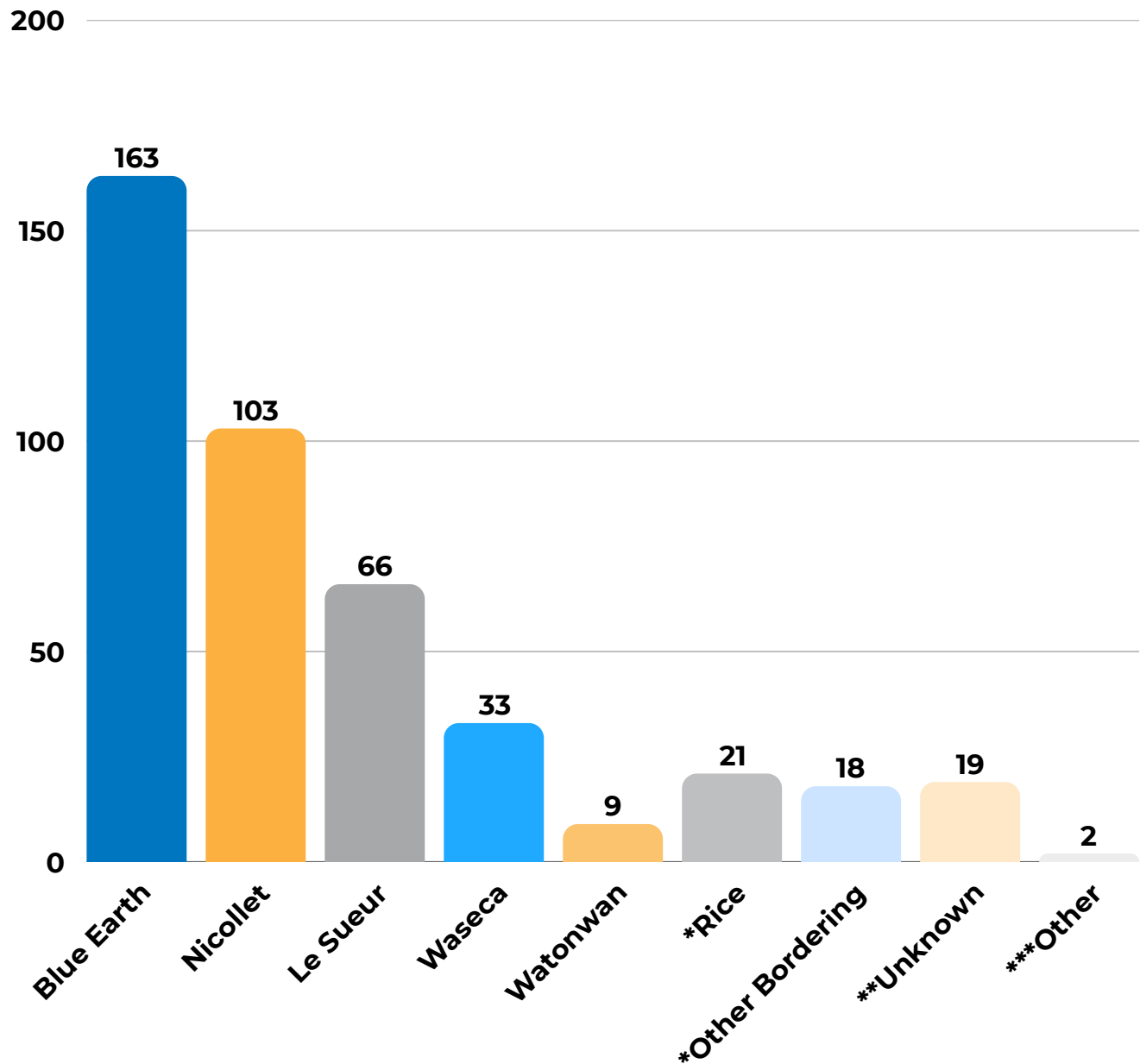
Thank you so much for checking in. Everything has been going well so far with both the therapist and med provider. I'm really happy with how everything has been going so far. - Parent

”

Demographic Data - Counties

Combined MAPS and SCSC - New Youth Referrals Only

New Referrals by County of Residence



Blue Earth, Nicollet, Le Sueur, Waseca and Watonwan = GMAUW 4-county area plus SCSC expansion county

*Attending schools in the 5 county region and living in bordering counties

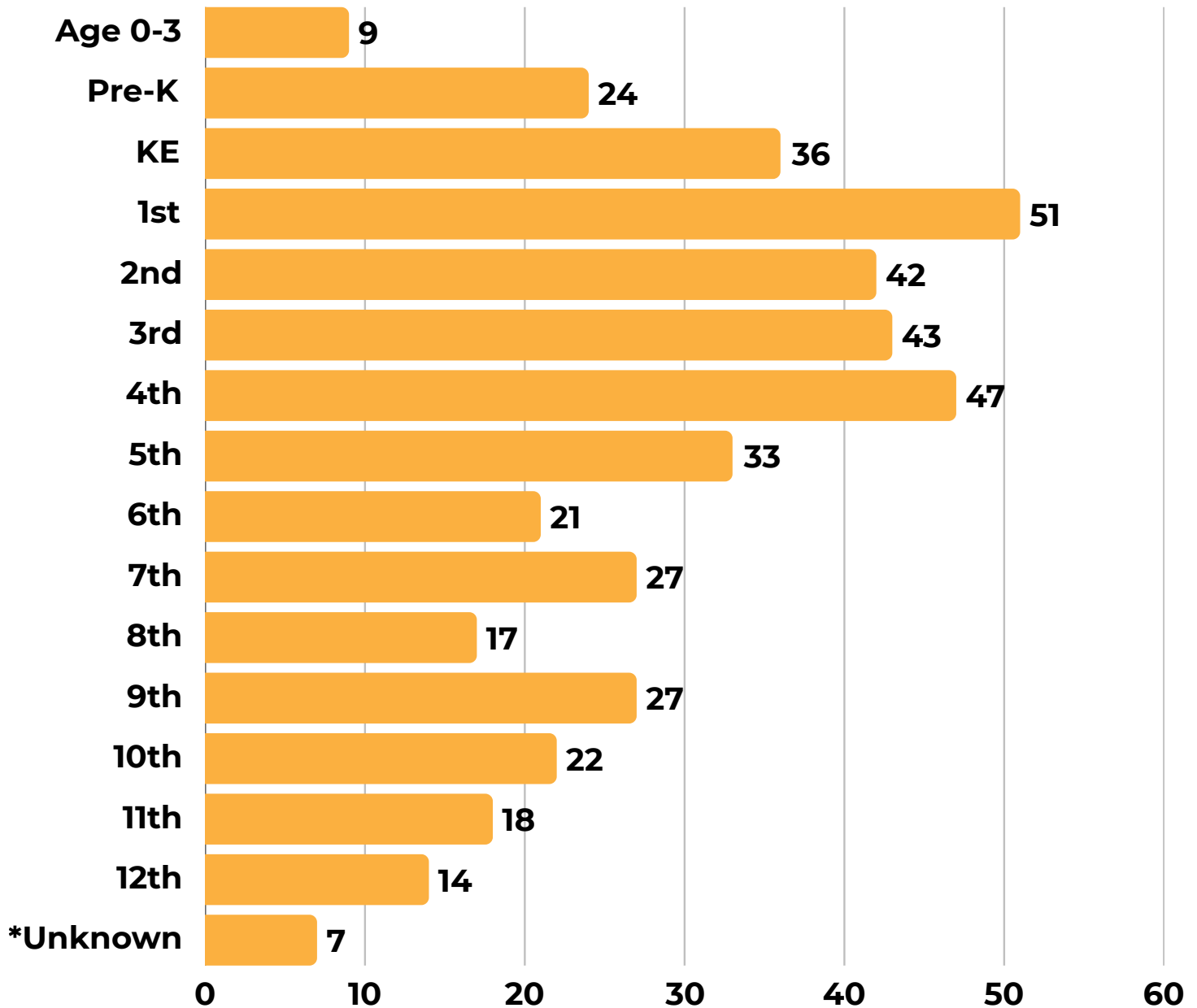
**Most likely living in Blue Earth or Nicollet Counties.

***Outstate Minnesota

Demographic Data - Grade

Combined MAPS and SCSC - New Youth Referrals Only

New Referrals by Grade

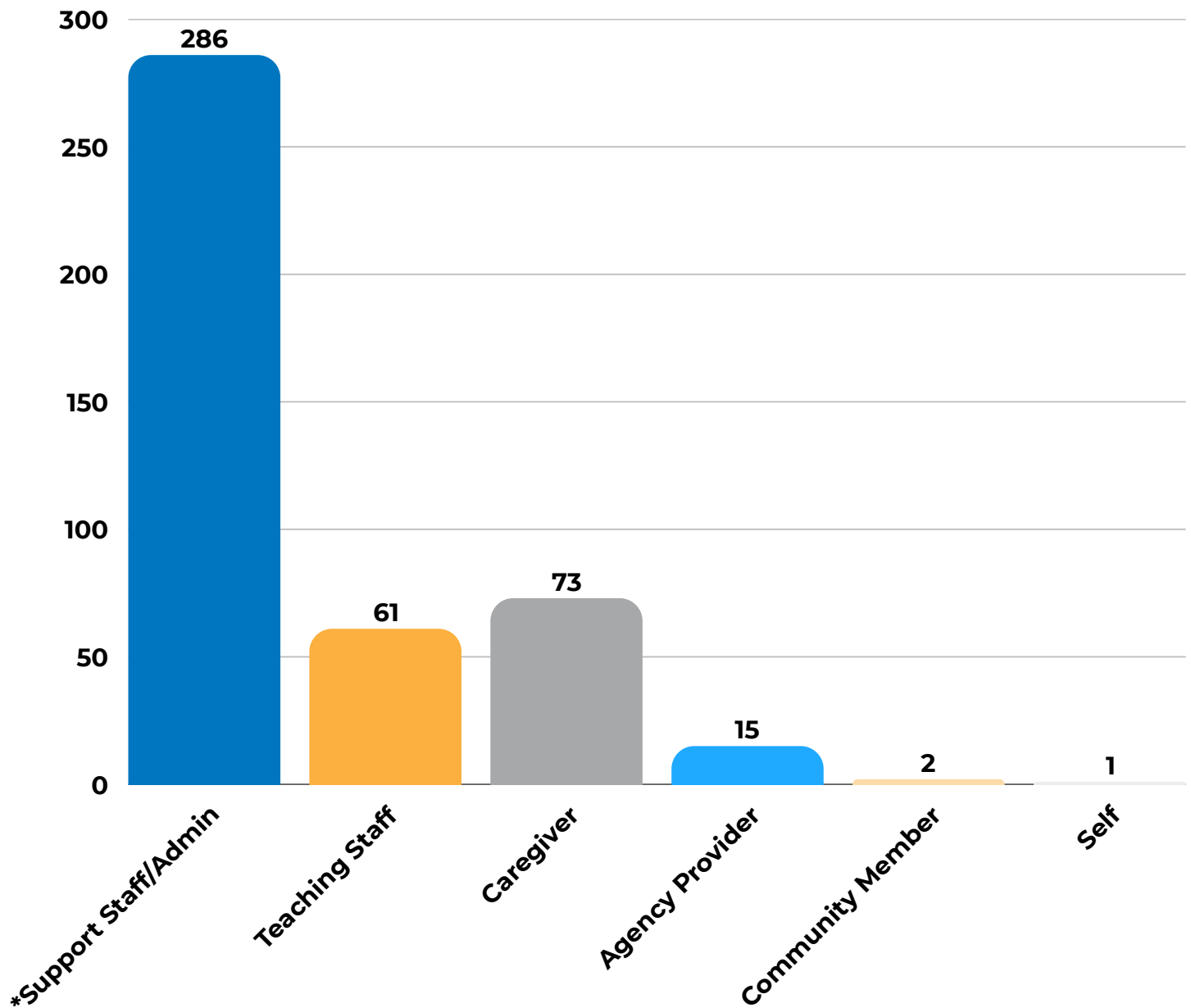


*All are students

Demographic Data-Referral Sources

Combined MAPS and SCSC - New Youth Referrals Only

New Youth Referral Sources

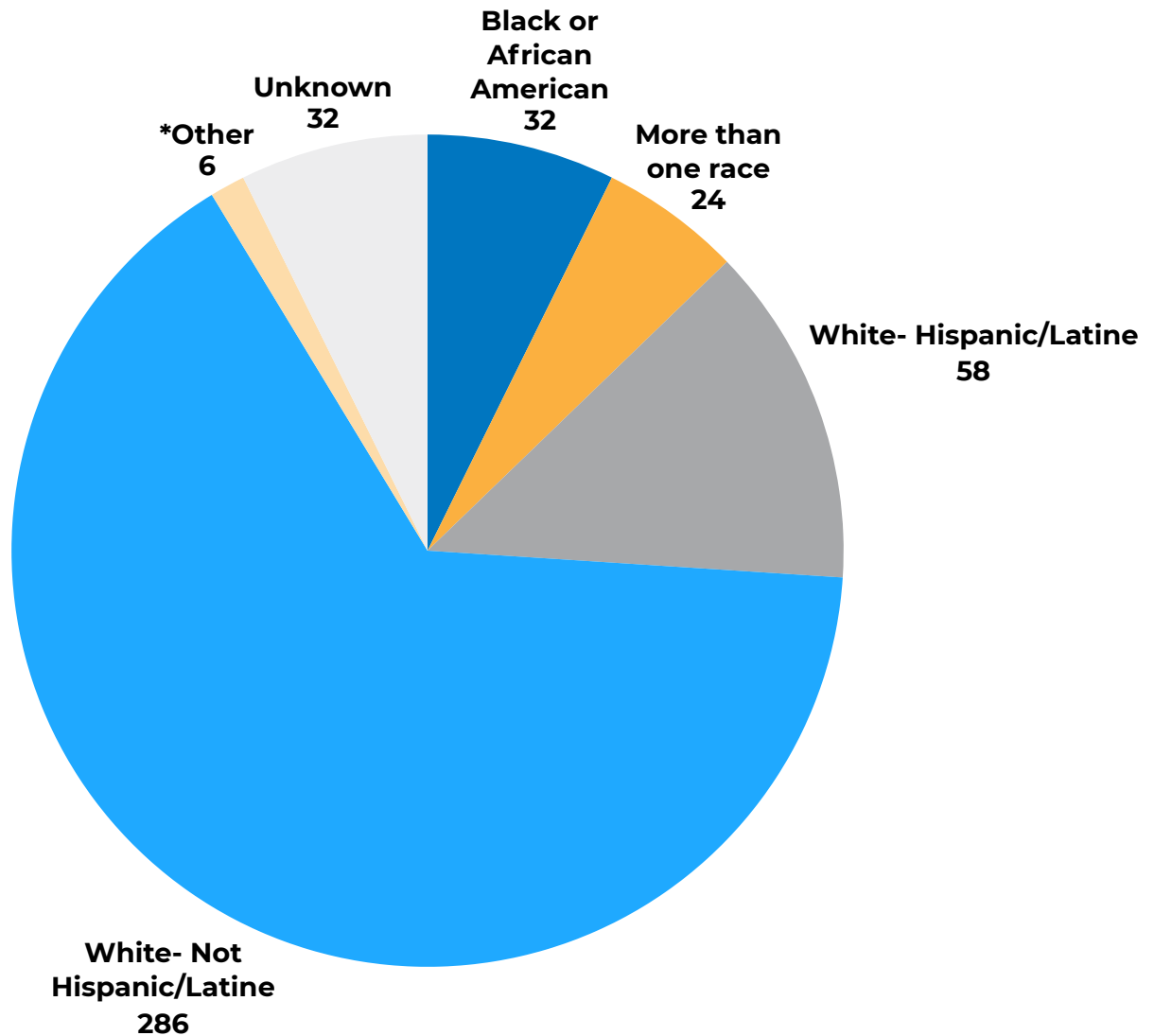


*Support Staff includes school administrators, social workers, counselors, behavior interventionists, and deans of students.

Demographic Data - Race

Combined MAPS and SCSC - New Youth Referrals Only

New Referrals by Race



*American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and/or Other Pacific Islander (Combined due to small numbers).



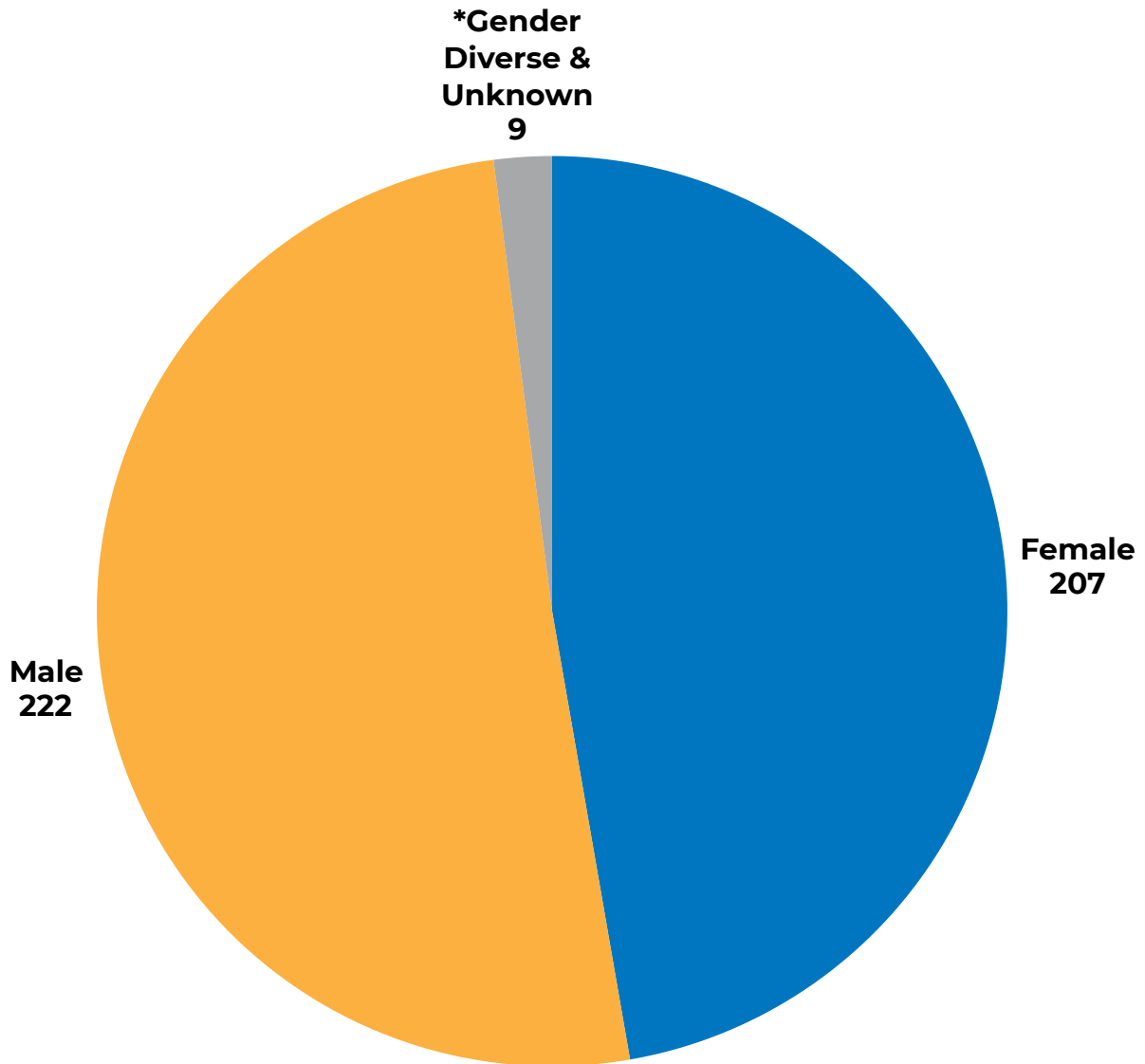
I feel I can't thank you enough. You have been so incredibly helpful. - Parent



Demographic Data - Gender

Combined MAPS and SCSC - New Youth Referrals Only

New Referrals by Gender



*Combined, due to small numbers.



**I appreciate the collaboration and the care
you provide to students and families. -**
Provider



Additional Impacts

Strong relationships with schools, providers, community partners, and caregivers continue to be the foundation of this program's success. Improving youth mental health is a shared responsibility that requires collaboration across systems. Because mental health is interconnected with many aspects of a child's life, **every partnership strengthens our collective ability to support youth and families.**

- **New Collaborative Partnerships**

- [WellShare International](#) invited Navigators to present to various culturally diverse communities, and Navigators and WellShare worked together to help connect culturally appropriate providers to youth and families impacted by ICE enforcement.
- Conversations with [LSS The Reach](#) and [Minnesota Valley Action Council](#) have resulted in youth and families who otherwise had not heard of the program getting connected with services.
- Navigators are working with [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota Center for Rural Behavioral Health](#) and various private providers to help facilitate more in-person therapy and telehealth opportunities for schools - particularly in deeply rural areas.

- **County Partnerships**

- South Central Service Cooperative's Navigators are part of county-wide efforts to improve youth and family mental health. See [Nicollet County's Community Health Improvement Plan](#) and [Le Sueur County's Family Collaborative Strategic Plan](#) for more information.

- **YMHN Community of Practice**

- Navigators from Mankato Area Public Schools, South Central Service Cooperative, [Southwest West Central's Service Cooperative](#), and Connecticut's [LEARN Regional Service Center](#) met regularly for case consultation and support.

- **Presentations**

- Various presentations were given on behalf of [Greater Mankato Area United Way](#)
- Navigators presented for numerous school staff and community meetings.
- [Minnesota Social Service Association](#) (over 500 attendees across MN heard about this program, and feedback shows a high degree of interest throughout the state.)

- **Tabling**

- Navigators were present at various events, including Project Community Connect, Parent-Teacher Conferences, Back-To-School Open Houses, and Resource Fairs.

- **Awards**

- In honor of the YMHN Program, South Central Service Cooperative was awarded the [Rural Behavioral Health Organization of the Year](#) by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota Center for Rural Behavioral Health at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Contact Information and Thank You

2026-2027 Youth Mental Health Navigator Assignments:

Beth Winterfeldt, LGSW | bwinterfeldt@mncscsc.org | 507-908-6376

All Nicollet, Watonwan, and Blue Earth County Public School Districts (except Mankato Area Public Schools); Private- and Homeschool students and families.

Christine Meeks | cmeeks@mncscsc.org | 507-779-3385

All Le Sueur County and Waseca County Public School Districts

Hanno Botha | hbotha1@isd77.org | (507)740-1360

Mankato Area Public Schools (Elementary)

Thank You

This program exists because of our community partners and leaders; thank you to everyone who has championed or financially supported this program!

We are grateful to our past and present funders:

- Greater Mankato Area United Way
- South Central Service Cooperative
- Mankato Area Public Schools
- Blue Earth County
- Waseca County
- Le Sueur County
- City of Mankato
- Mayo Clinic
- Mankato Clinic Foundation
- Consolidated Communications
- Waseca Public Schools

Additional Contacts for Further Information

Funding/Contribution Conversations:

- Barb Kaus, CEO, Greater Mankato Area United Way | barbk@mankatounitedway.org | (507) 345-4551

Programmatic Conversations:

- Holle Spessard, Director of Student Support Services, South Central Service Cooperative, hspessard@mncscsc.org | (507) 389-1914
- Beth Winterfeldt, LGSW, Youth Mental Health Navigator - Lead | bwinterfeldt@mncscsc.org | 507-908-6376

Youth Mental Health Navigator (YMHN) Logic Model

Inputs	Activities	Short-term outcomes	Intermediate outcomes	Long-term outcomes
Funding for behavioral health/navigation services (for the full year, outside of school hours, and/or business day hours) School staff (i.e., administrators, counselors, support staff) Partnerships with community providers and county supports School/agency infrastructure and administrative support (e.g., IT support for printing, etc.) Program coordination and evaluation systems Community engagement and outreach Trained Youth Navigators (employed by MAPS and SCSC) Designated private space for staff and for meetings with families Program infrastructure and resources (e.g., FERPA/HIPAA compliant systems, equipment, cell phone, fax, laptop, portable program material, mileage reimbursement) Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between YMHN and participating schools to support collaboration and implementation	Provide connections to youth and family mental health and neurodiverse support services, navigation and access, and ongoing referral and follow-up support Coordinate care between the school, caregivers, and providers Build and maintain relationships with community providers Expand/scale implementation of the program model across other school systems and regions Monitor referrals, access, and service effectiveness Engage in mental health-related community activities (e.g., presentations, committees, conferences, community events) Conduct outreach to youth and/or families (e.g., youth 16+) Consult with school and provider staff (e.g., share behavioral health resources, collaborate to problem-solve youth needs) Attend IEP meetings and other intervention meetings at schools	Increased community (or caregiver) knowledge of available behavioral health services and navigation access Improved communication and care coordination between the school, caregivers, and community providers Reduced administrative burden on school staff, enabling greater focus on direct student services Increased support for school staff Increased support for youth and families Increased support for behavioral health community providers Connected with good-fit therapeutic care and services (e.g., good-fit therapist and behavioral services that are tailored to meet youth's unique needs and goals, etc.)	Increased identification, access, initiation, and sustained engagement in behavioral health services for vulnerable youth Increased early identification of needs and connection to behavioral health services for youth and families Increased timely, effective, and culturally appropriate access and initiation to behavioral health services Improved service coordination and sustained access/engagement with mental health supports	Increased the general public's ability to equitably access behavioral health services Sustained reduction in wait times and improved system efficiency Increased upstream service delivery for youth and families Stronger, more integrated school-based communication systems for youth and families' behavioral health needs Improved academic, attendance, and social outcomes Enhanced youth and family well-being and connection to school and community

Outputs are the direct, measurable products of the YMHN program's activities — what the program delivers or produces. For YMHN, outputs include information on the youth served (such as demographics), their school and district, referral sources, identified service needs, and the services and supports provided.

Youth Mental Health Navigator Program

Facilitated Discussion Summary

Background

The Youth Mental Health Navigator (YMHN) Program aims to work directly with caregivers, schools, and community providers to identify signs of mental health concerns, facilitate timely access to effective and culturally responsive care, and support sustained engagement with services. The program was piloted in 2022 by Greater Mankato Area United Way and Mankato Area Public Schools (MAPS) and expanded to schools served by South Central Service Cooperative in August 2023. The program currently serves all public schools in the Blue Earth, LeSueur, Nicollet, and Waseca counties in Minnesota.

South Central Service Cooperative contracted with Wilder Research to evaluate the YMHN program. As part of this evaluation, Wilder Research held a facilitated discussion with key stakeholders and partners, including community providers, school staff, administrators, counselors, and county staff in April 2026. The discussion explored program implementation, effectiveness, and impact; identified strengths, barriers, and needs; and gathered recommendations to support program improvement and sustainability. The following summarizes the main themes that emerged from the discussion.

Findings

Experience working with the YMHN Program

Working with Youth Navigators

Youth Mental Health Navigators work directly with caregivers, school staff, and mental health providers to build a collaborative support network that ensures youth can access and maintain engagement with helpful mental health support. Partners and stakeholders consistently described their work with Youth Navigators as positive and effective. They said:

- Youth Navigators bring specialized skills and training, a strong work ethic, and a high level of dedication to helping youth and families connect and access behavioral health services. They also provide ongoing referral and follow-up support.
- Youth Navigators communicate openly, flexibly, and promptly with school staff, community providers, and families, and they make themselves available for consultation and meetings.
- Youth Navigators are knowledgeable about available providers, resources, and services, which helps youth and families access behavioral health care more quickly. This also reduces the burden on school staff and shortens the time between identifying a need and receiving services.

- Youth Navigators help bridge gaps among families, schools, and community behavioral health providers, strengthening trust and communication between families and schools.
- Youth Navigators reduce the burden on schools and community providers by coordinating care and helping youth and families navigate services. They help fill service gaps for schools with limited staffing, capacity, and resources.
- Youth Navigators attend and actively participate in school meetings, discussions, conferences, and events, such as Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, multidisciplinary team (MDT) meetings, and back-to-school events.
- Youth Navigators collaborate with counties and key partners to provide education and raise awareness about behavioral health topics and services.

Perceived outcomes of the YMHN Program

Partners and stakeholders described positive outcomes from the YMHN program including:

- Improved support, communication, and care coordination among schools, caregivers, and community providers.
- Improved timely, equitable, and culturally appropriate access to behavioral health services for youth and families, including follow-through with those services.
- Reduced administrative and care management demands on school staff and community providers, allowing them to focus more on direct services for youth and families.
- Reduced burden on youth and families through flexible communication channels, follow-up, and offering support tailored to their needs and comfort with services.
- Reduced stigma, from youth and their families, towards mental health and seeking support, as well as alleviating fear and trust barriers between schools, families, and community providers.

Perceptions about YMHN program implementation

Perceived facilitators of program success and implementation

- Maintaining consistent staff throughout the program helps build strong relationships and familiarity with schools, community providers, youth, and families.
- The program's ability to adapt to each school system's preferred level of use and provide support where it is most needed is especially important for rural districts that may be more cautious about outside assistance.
- The program is externally funded, allowing schools to access services at no cost.
- The program being based at a cooperative allows for more flexibility in how and what services can be provided.

Perceived barriers to program implementation at schools

- Youth Navigators may have limited capacity when serving multiple schools.
- Some rural school districts may be hesitant to accept outside support and may limit how they use the program, which can reduce equitable access for youth and families in those districts.
- Systematic barriers may hinder Youth Navigators' ability to provide optimal support to youth and families, including a lack of available, affordable, and culturally and age-appropriate services.
- There is limited public awareness and understanding of the Youth Navigator program.
- Youth and families hold some amount of stigma and fear about mental health and seeking support which hinders timely access to services and optimal support.

Suggested indicators to document program success

- Number/rate of referrals, communication points, or length of contact (i.e., hours served)
- Number/rate of youth and/or families who started services (i.e., completed intake with provider)
- Demographics, including age breakdowns
- Program satisfaction for parents, schools, and providers
- Measures of family well-being and youth outcomes, including family and caregiver stress and anxiety
- Documenting primary concerns and goals for youth and families, along with their progress in services and outcomes
- Academic and school outcomes, including changes in school attendance, behavioral challenges, and engagement in classrooms



Recommendations for implementation, sustainability, and growth of the YMHN program

- Youth Navigators should have the proper training, skillset, and commitment to providing services for youth and families, and collaborating with schools and community providers.
- Increase program visibility, presence, and impact in schools by having schools that have used the program share their experiences, outcomes, and impact with districts that have not yet implemented it.
- Youth Navigators should meet with school leadership, share information about their role and services, and highlight the program's complimentary and extended services to existing school supports to increase understanding of their role and its impact (i.e., Youth Navigators work in tandem with social workers and counselors).
- The program should be based at a service cooperative to provide flexibility in service delivery.
- School districts should advocate for more funding streams, specifically for programs like the Youth Navigator program.
- Other recommendations were directed towards addressing systematic barriers, including enhancing health insurance accessibility and coverage, enhancing intake efficiency, and reducing the intake bottleneck for youth behavioral health services.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of the South Center Service Cooperative's Youth Navigator Program's Facilitated Discussion Summary. For more information about this report, contact Julie Atella at Wilder Research, 651-280-2658 or julie.atella@wilder.org.

Author: Miamoua Vang

June 2026

Youth Mental Health Navigators



“

I've never seen my (parent) not stressed. It's like (they) are a different person. - From a teen who, together with their parent, were both referred to therapists.

”

When schools, families, providers, and communities work together, children thrive.



<https://www.mnscsc.org/ymhn>



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