

Dear parents and caregivers,

This spring Charlo Schools is partnering with *Rural Health Behavioral Institute* to conduct mental wellness screening. Grades 6-12 will participate in this 5-15minute online screening.

WHY SCREEN FOR MENTAL WELL-BEING?

Schools often use validated screeners to measure a student's skills and knowledge. Academic and health screenings help students, families, and providers learn how well school and health care programs are working. They also identify students who might need extra help. Without routine screening, teachers often would not know that a particular student or group of students needs extra help with a particular aspect of learning. For example, dividing fractions or hearing the sound breaks in words are more difficult for some students. Likewise, screening for height, weight, vision, hearing, and dental screenings help determine if students are physically healthy.

Screening for mental health issues measures a critical aspect of children's overall health. It can help measure the effectiveness of the school's approach to mental health. It also provides an effective way to find out if a student is in need of help. This is important because not all students experiencing mental health issues have outward signs. Many do not tell anyone they are struggling. Such issues negatively impact happiness, relationships, behavior, health, safety, and academic performance.

Many of our students experience social, mental, and emotional well-being. However, here, and nationwide, at least 1 in 5 students experience a significant mental health issue during their school years. In Montana, rates of youth suicide have regularly been among the highest in the country. We need to do more to help our children live their fullest lives. The good news is that mental health issues are like any other health issue, such as learning healthy eating habits or taking insulin to treat diabetes. They are usually very treatable, especially if detected early. Additionally, students experiencing mental health issues can be taught skills that will help prevent or lessen the severity of future mental health issues.

Our school carefully examined whether screening poses any risk to students. For example, we looked into whether asking about students' mental health could cause a student to become suicidal, make thoughts of suicide worse, or increase the risk of suicide attempt. This is called "iatrogenic risk." All 17 studies looking at iatrogenic risk among those with suicidal thoughts or behaviors have shown that **there is no risk** associated with mental health screening. Just as math screenings do not cause math learning difficulties, mental health screening does not cause mental health issues.

HOW DOES SCREENING WORK?

Our school is working with a local nonprofit, Rural Behavioral Health Institute (RBHI), which specializes in digital school-based mental health screening. RBHI works closely with MERET Solutions, a leader in mental health screening for the medical industry. RBHI and MERET Solutions received a grant that will provide free computerized mental health screening to all 6th-12th grade students in our school in the 2025 school year.

Our school will send you a form if you wish to opt your child out of screening. Our school will also provide opportunities for students and their families to give feedback about their experience. Please see the opt-out consent form attached to this letter.

Participation is voluntary. School and healthcare officials hope that all families will want to be a part of the screening. It will help identify and offer help to any students who may need extra support. It will also help the school determine how well programs are working.

Each student will be assigned a unique code. This will keep results strictly confidential. The day of screening, students will logon with a computer or smartphone and enter their codes to access the screener. The screener takes about 5 to 15 minutes. Any student who wishes to stop during the process of screening will be told they can before screening starts.

The counseling department will have access to the codes associated with the students' names. They will only access an individual student's results if the results indicate the student could benefit from additional support. Parents and guardians may request their child's results. The parent or guardian may also grant permission for the school to share their child's result with their doctor or therapist. In the unlikely event that a student is in danger of self-harming the parent or guardian will be notified the day of the screening. Rural Behavioral Health Institute will have therapists available to meet with the student. This service is free to the student.

IS SCREENING SAFE?

Yes. There has been a lot of research on screening for mental health in children and adolescents. All the research shows that asking whether someone is experiencing thoughts about depression, anxiety, or suicide does **NOT** cause suicide or make a youth feel worse. To the contrary, students often report they feel better knowing support is available if they need it.

DOES YOUR CHILD HAVE TO TAKE PART IN SCREENING?

No. This screening is considered part of the school's health program. While we view this as one of several helpful health screenings and encourage all students to participate, if you do not want your child to participate in screening, they do not have to.

If you change your mind and do not want us to keep your child's screening information, please call or email the school office. You and your child will **not** be identified in any report about the intervention. Your child's data can be deleted permanently at any time.

Each grade will have a separate screening day, your student will come home with a letter letting you know when they will participate.

If you have questions or would like more information please call or email, additional information will be provided on the school website under counselors corner tab.

mmichels@charlottesville.com or call 406 644-2206X221.

OPT OUT FORM

By signing below, I do not provide my permission for my child to participate in the mental wellness screening offered by my child's school.

I do NOT want my child to participate in the mental wellness screening.

Printed Full Name of Student

Parent or Guardian Signature

Date

Please print your name on the line above (only one parent or guardian needs to sign)