



WHITEPAPER

Integrating Mental Health Into School Safety

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School Safety & Mental Health

Every child deserves a safe school in which to learn. School leaders are more aware than ever of the need to maintain an environment where educators can stay focused on teaching, and students can immerse themselves in learning without distraction. In a climate where gun violence on school campuses has dominated all too many headlines, addressing school safety *through a mental health lens* is critical to ensure safety for students, school staff, and their communities.

Defining School Safety

School safety encompasses many definitions. In recent legislative efforts, school safety and violence prevention are addressed by hardening schools - enhancing school security and hiring more school resource officers.¹ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention embraces a broader view. They take into account students' journey to and from school, the impact of bullying and gang violence on their daily routine, and physical activity safety like playground injuries and sports-related concussions. Students' mental health and safety from self-inflicted harm, such as suicide, are also taken into account.²

More expanded concepts of school safety focus on a school environment that supports every student's experience and allows them to best succeed academically. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments defines school safety as "schools and school-related



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- NATIONAL CENTER ON SAFE SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

activities where students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and substance use.”³ A recent framework from the American School Counselor Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and others recommends a **comprehensive approach** to school safety that does not isolate it from school climate and learning.⁴

A comprehensive approach to school safety does not solely focus on crisis response and individuals who choose to commit an act of violence. Instead, this approach establishes a school culture that promotes and supports physical *and* psychological safety. This culture fosters positive relationships that build communication and trust across a school while actively addressing behaviors like bullying, harassment, and substance use that make students feel unsafe and interfere with learning.

As calls for a comprehensive approach have increased, the conversation surrounding school safety is shifting towards incorporating a **mental health focus** within this approach. Mental health objectives can encompass managing emotions through social-emotional learning, destigmatizing mental illness through mental health literacy, preparing teachers and staff to recognize emotional and behavioral signs of distress among students, and increasing availability of mental health services and resources.

Connecting Mental Health to School Safety

Since the Parkland mass shooting in February 2018, over \$900 million has been invested nationwide into school safety.⁵ One year later, 43 states and the District of Columbia require a school safety plan at the school or district level.⁶

While student wellbeing and safety are not new topics of interest for educators and school administrators, a growing unease of external and internal safety threats in schools has led to increased pressure from parents, community leaders, and students themselves to know how schools are taking steps to keep students safe. As a wave of schools adopt safety plans, it remains unclear to what extent these plans balance psychological safety with physical safety and violence prevention.

Fortunately for schools, evidence shows that indicators related to psychological safety lead to better student outcomes. Students who come to school instead of choosing to stay home because they feel unsafe or fear disciplinary policies like suspension are more likely to see better academic outcomes from their increased attendance.⁷

The reverse is also true. Students who are victims of harassment, violence, or involved with substance use have a higher likelihood of poor attendance, lower academic performance, and dropping out of school.⁸ In fact, feelings of loneliness, fear, and

hopelessness have been cited as the three most significant threats to school safety.⁹

A meta-analysis of programs where students were exposed to social-emotional learning programs, curricula that is focused on emotions, relationships, and decision making, found that students performed better academically and had fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and less drug use - all indicators of school safety.¹⁰

Adult-student relationships also contribute to school safety. Students who perceive more school connectedness and support had higher academic achievement across grades, attendance, and discipline referrals.¹¹ Positive relationships among administrators, teachers, and students allow students to flourish with care that extends beyond academics to support the individual.¹² Students who feel a sense of belonging and respect in their school are less likely to engage in risk behaviors.¹³ Research on a non-punitive disciplinary strategy gaining momentum, restorative practices, supports these outcomes. Growing student-staff relationships builds a sense of community in the classroom that curbs misbehavior and reduces suspension rates.¹⁴ And students are not the only ones who feel more positive and connected to their school; school climate can contribute to teacher retention as well.¹⁵

For low-income students, psychosocial stressors and adverse childhood experiences tied to poverty can reduce students' resilience and make them more prone to post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.¹⁶ Access to a positive school climate is especially critical for these students, who may also

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lack mentorship. A study looking at low-income middle and high schools in California found that students who reported having a teacher or adult who cared about them were more likely to attend school.¹⁷

Students who feel safe in the classroom and more connected to their school are more likely to succeed in school and beyond. Research that makes the case for psychological safety in addition to physical safety helps explain why more schools are paying attention to school climate, incorporating practices like social-emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, and positive disciplinary policies into their schools.

Addressing Student Mental Health in Schools

The odds are that mental illness touches at least one student in every classroom in the U.S. Childhood and adolescence are formative periods for students' emotional and mental health. Close to one in five young people experience an emotional, mental, or behavioral disorder like substance abuse, anxiety disorders, and depressive disorders.¹⁸ The onset of half of all lifetime cases of mental illness will occur by age 14.¹⁹

Meanwhile, young people in need of mental health treatment may not be getting it. Among youth with major depression, 64% do not receive any mental health treatment.²⁰ It is a common myth that those with mental illness are a high-risk population for committing violence or an unpredictable violent act. These views perpetuate stigma that discourages seeking of mental treatment and distracts from other contributory factors of violence.²¹

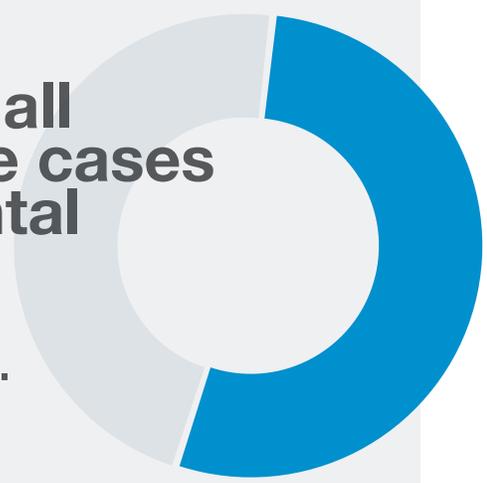
While those with a mental health disorder generally do not have an increased risk of acting violently, research shows that psychological distress or untreated mental health conditions among students can contribute to poor academic achievement, acting out behaviors in the classroom, poor graduation rates, and special education interventions that often have poor outcomes.²² Therefore, increasing access to treatment in school settings has a myriad of benefits.

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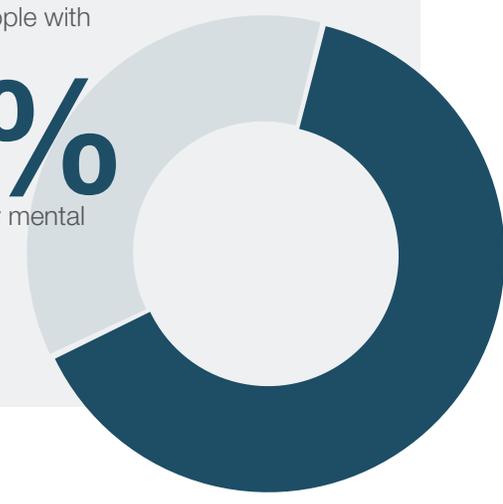


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Schools play an essential role in promoting protective factors and positive emotional development. A positive school climate that transforms a school's culture can make students feel safe at school, feel connected to school, and fosters support from peers and teachers. These protective factors encourage resilience and mental and emotional wellbeing.²³

Approaches to Integrating Mental Health

The STOP School Violence Act, signed into law in 2018, allocates funds for mental health, but only in the context of training for “responding to mental health crises” and acts of violence, a limited, non-preventive definition.²⁴ When making the case to focus on preventive school mental health within the constraints of a tight safety budget, there are a few cost-effective options available to states and districts.

support. Finally, individualized support focuses on students who need intensive behavioral or academic support. This tier usually involves longer term one-on-one counseling or treatment that, depending on resources, can take place within the school or is a referral to community-based services. By tailoring interventions, early identification and intervention help at-risk students get individualized attention sooner.

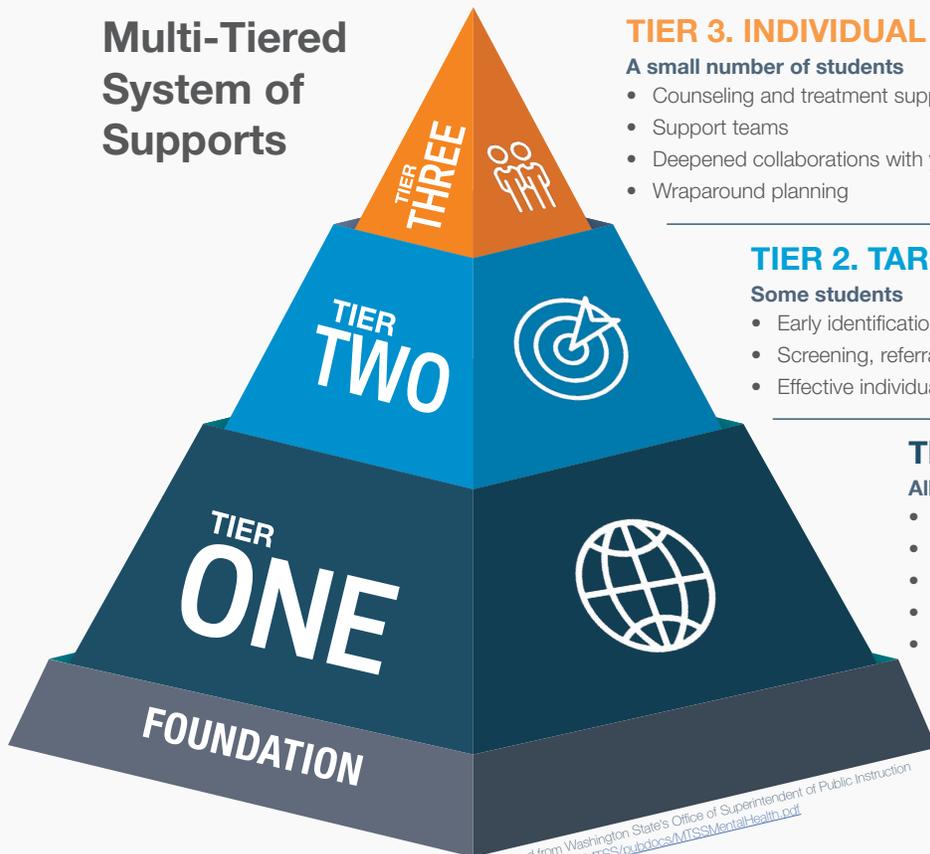


Tiers of Intervention

One model of best practice in prevention is a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), a framework that integrates mental health with academic, behavioral, social, emotional, and physical concerns. In this model, schools provide a continuum of services, represented in a pyramid model. In the bottom tier, universal interventions touch every student in the school. Moving up, the next tier focuses on group instruction for students who need additional

Research shows that an MTSS decreases behavioral problems while improving student success.²⁵ Reducing individual students’ behavioral issues can improve the school climate, reduce suspensions, and enhance school safety. Along with having layers of support in place, integrating school safety issues, like trauma-informed disciplinary policies or bullying prevention, is critical at all levels. In addition, school leadership, communication with families and communities, and evidence-based practices are all components of implementing an MTSS that will drive improvements in school safety.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports



TIER 3. INDIVIDUAL SUPPORTS

A small number of students

- Counseling and treatment support services for individuals
- Support teams
- Deepened collaborations with youth, families, and community providers
- Wraparound planning

TIER 2. TARGETED GROUP SUPPORTS

Some students

- Early identification, rapid access, and process monitoring
- Screening, referral, and case management
- Effective individual and group interventions

TIER 1. UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS

All students

- Caring, interpersonal relationships
- Social emotional learning
- Trauma-informed practices
- Behavioral health literacy for staff and students
- Universal Screening

FOUNDATION

Integrating Behavioral Health Supports

- System-wide investment
- Collaborative approaches
- Effective partnerships

Adapted from Washington State's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
<http://k12.wa.us/MTSS/publicdocs/MTSSMentalHealth.pdf>



A Focus on Universal Interventions

Forty-seven states and Washington, D.C. currently do not meet the recommended student-to-counselor ratio of one counselor to 250 students.²⁶ As states and districts work to secure funding to fill this targeted intervention and critical gap for supporting students, they might overlook areas of opportunity in the lower tiers.

Universal interventions are where interpersonal relationships, social-emotional learning, trauma-

informed practices, and mental health promotion can reach every student in a school at the classroom level. This begins with efforts to equip teachers and all school staff with mental health knowledge and skills. Strengthening the skills of the “eyes and ears” of the school can create a profound change. Students who can benefit but would otherwise be undetected from mental health efforts are captured, and there is a stronger foundation for identifying students who need tailored interventions.

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Where to Start

A simple approach for mental health promotion within a school is destigmatizing conversations about mental health and treatment through school-based communication. When school leaders and staff set a tone that models kindness and respect, they start to transform a school beyond a place of learning into a space that supports individuals and creates a sense of belonging. A nurturing school climate can encourage students to ask for help or seek mental health services that will strengthen their learning and success.

Another solution is through professional development. The CDC suggests professional development that gives every school employee a role in promoting a safe and healthy school, not just the mental health professional.²⁷ According to a national survey on school crime and safety, about 53% of public schools provide training for school staff on intervention and referral strategies for students with signs of mental health disorders.²⁸

Gatekeeper training is a solution that equips educators with the skills to identify the signs that a student might be struggling. Further, it gives staff the tools to know how to talk with students struggling with mental health and refer them to school-based or community mental health resources.

Some schools and districts are finding that gatekeeper training is the most effective way to ensure that no student falls through the cracks, while also expanding awareness and building the skills of all personnel. With an emphasis on close communication, gatekeeper training also fosters positive student-teacher relationships. These connections promote feelings of safety, security, and trust for students and can drive them to utilize teachers and staff as a supportive resource in addition to family or friends.

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Core Elements of Safe & Supportive Schools

Engagement. Strong relationships between students, teachers, families, and schools and strong connections between schools and the broader community.

Environment. Appropriate facilities, well-managed classrooms, available school-based health supports, and a clear, fair disciplinary policy.

Safety. Schools and school-related activities where students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and controlled-substance use.



Adapted from The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/safe-and-healthy-students/school-climate>



Making the Case for Funding

When asked to name the cause of limitations to mental health services to students, 75% of public schools nationally cited **inadequate funding** along with access to mental health professionals, community support, and other barriers.²⁹

For the resource-constrained, gatekeeper professional development, especially programs that are evidence-based and easily accessible, can be an effective and cost-efficient early step in a comprehensive approach to address school safety. Staff equipped with mental health skills are key

for a strong, sustainable foundation that will only strengthen other school safety initiatives.

Compared to physical safety interventions that are easier to implement more immediately, investment in universal mental health efforts may take more time to show benefit. If implemented effectively, building the foundation to support student mental health can ultimately show stronger long-term gains across student achievement, chronic absenteeism, career readiness, and graduation rates that result from safer classrooms and safer schools.

Common Objections

Talking Points

Child and adolescent mental health is not a pressing issue.

Students are in increasing need of support and not receiving it. Untreated mental health conditions among students can contribute to poor academic achievement, acting out behaviors in the classroom, poor graduation rates, and special education interventions that often have poor outcomes.

I don't hear mental health coming up as an issue at our school.

Mental health stigma can inhibit conversations about mental health and can discourage students from reaching out for help. Interventions in social emotional learning and gatekeeper training can work to shift school climate and encourage conversations among school staff and students.

Addressing mental health doesn't need to happen at school, there are community resources for that.

Addressing student mental health in schools leads to better school performance. Students spend the majority of the hours of their day in school, therefore schools are a unique access point for support.³¹ When school-based services are available, students are more likely to seek support.

There isn't a good return on investment when it comes to investing in prevention, wellness, and mental health.

Investing in these programs benefits schools through better academic performance, higher graduation rates, and decreased discipline problems.³² In addition to physical safety, psychological safety must be included as part of a comprehensive plan that improves school climate and safety so that students can succeed in school and life.

75%

of public schools nationally cited inadequate funding as the cause of limitations to providing mental health services to students.

Refocusing the Safety Conversation

Currently, 14 million students attend a school with a police officer but no mental health staff - a school counselor, nurse, social worker, or psychologist - to support students.³⁰

As more school safety funding goes towards hardening schools, many are aware that an approach to physical school safety is only one part of a comprehensive approach. School safety efforts focused on psychological safety and school environment - via more invisible changes like open communication and destigmatizing mental health - can accompany security measures like metal detectors, cameras, and armed personnel.

While school leaders have a number of school safety options and approaches to consider, some districts and schools have funding in related areas such as violence prevention but no funding allocated to mental health. A safe school depends on a prevention mindset to mental health that includes establishing mental health literacy for all in the school community. Academic success, positive behavior, adult-student relationships, and a safer environment cannot reach the full potential of improvement without sufficient access to mental health resources.

To improve school safety, school leaders and policymakers must be ready to turn their focus to prevention with a mental health lens.



14 million students

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