

Paving the Way for Sustainable School Mental Health Programs With Participatory Planning

Why use a participatory planning approach?

- Ensure buy-in of students, families, educators, and the community.
- Support culturally and linguistically competent behavioral health supports.
- Agree on expectations, roles, and processes before things get complicated.
- Set up for high-quality implementation and sustainability.

Stakeholders should be involved throughout the process of planning school mental health programs. To help you think through how to involve partners across six steps of this process, be sure to consider the listed questions at each stage.



1. Establish Planning Partners | A broad array of potential partners, including school staff, family members, and community mental health professionals, can contribute their unique perspectives on students' behavioral health.

- How will you find planning partners outside of the school?
- Who will lead your planning group? What role will each partner play?
- Whose perspectives are not typically heard in your school? Consider people of different racial/ethnic and class backgrounds, people who speak different languages, and the LGBTQ community.
- How will you build trust among partners, especially among those whose voices have been marginalized in the past?



2. Map Existing Resources | Take an inventory of existing resources supporting students' behavioral health in your school and community.

- How will you leverage partners' knowledge of existing resources and their accessibility to different communities?
- How can you use existing resources to guide you, such as the **School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation System** and **CDC's School Health Index self-assessment and planning guide**?
- Have you considered the following potential resources: community mental health services, faith communities, funding sources, policy makers, and professional development opportunities?



3. Conduct a Needs Assessment | Now that you have an idea of the resources available in the community, assess what services are still needed.

- Do you have a **framework to guide your needs assessment**?
- Have you tapped into publicly available data resources, such as the **Office of Adolescent Health's mental health fact sheets**?
- Does your local health agency have helpful data?
- Whom will you need to collect new data from? Will it best be done in interviews, focus groups, or a survey?
- Have you disaggregated your data to look at subgroup needs?
- Are resources accessible to all? Available in multiple languages?



4. Prioritize Services | Information from the resource mapping and needs assessment activities can be used to identify what services are missing and prioritize student behavioral health supports.

- What are the goals of the school behavioral health program?
- How can you leverage resources in the community that are not being used to their full potential?
- How will you balance the need to build relationships for referral pipelines and the need to hire dedicated staff?
- How can new services be integrated into existing systems?
- What type of personnel or training will be needed?



5. Create an Implementation Team | Once you've identified the priorities of your school behavioral health program, you can create a school behavioral health team well poised to address them.

- How can you use existing resources, such as the **National Center for Healthy Safe Children FIT Toolkit**, or this **National Implementation Research Network module**, to guide you?
- Who will lead the implementation team?
- How frequently will the implementation team meet?
- How will you facilitate regular communication across the team?
- How will you keep the diverse set of voices from the planning partners engaged in implementation?



6. Develop a Comprehensive and Strategic School Mental Health Plan | A comprehensive and strategic plan will ensure that the school behavioral health program reaches its goals and becomes sustainable.

- How will you measure whether your program is working?
- Will you collect data in a way to determine whether it is working better for some students than others?
- How will you get input from your planning partners into the future, as goals and implementation changes?
- Did you leave room in your timeline for learning lessons?

Facilitating Family Engagement

- Hold meetings when and where they are convenient for families.
- Address logistical needs for families, such as by providing childcare at meetings.
- Ensure families feel that their voices are being heard.
- Engage with local family organizations and your PTA/PTO.
- Communicate directly with parents rather than relying on students to convey messages.
- Consider individual's preferred language and means of communication (email, phone, text, in-person meetings).

