National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

Safe Supportive Learning
Engagement | Safety | Environment

What do school staff and community stakeholders need to know about school mental health?

Students do better in school when they feel safe, supported, and healthy, both physically and mentally. The Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) program of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has a key focus on improving conditions for student learning by creating a positive school climate and providing supports to address the social and emotional needs of all its students, including increasing access to mental health services for all students.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that, in typical times, about one in five children and adolescents experience a mental health problem (e.g. anxiety, depression, substance abuse) during their school years, and serious problems, such as self-injurious behaviors and suicide, are on the rise (NASP, 2016). Estimates and self-reports of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts among young people all soared in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21, and the concurrent social justice demonstrations in response to widespread reports of grave injustice and racial tension (CDC National Center for Health Statistics, 2020).

> ### School Mental Health and Behavioral Health
>
> **School mental health** refers to specific emotional or behavioral needs that may be associated with a clinical condition and can be framed in terms of resilience to violence and trauma. **Behavioral health** is often used synonymously with mental health, although it can be defined more specifically as the conditions caused by problematic behaviors including substance use. In this brief, we use the term "school mental health" to encompass the full range of such conditions.

School mental health efforts work best when there is broad buy-in from the school community. The more adults to whom a student can turn for help, the more likely they are to get connected with support and any indicated treatment. Connecting with adults is especially important because youth are not always getting the supports that they need. For example, an estimated 13% of youth ages 12 to 17 are affected by major depression, yet 60% of these youth receive no treatment (NIMH, 2019).

The purpose of this worksheet is to help school and district leaders think through what their staff and key community stakeholders and partners, such as parents and mental health workers, need to know about school mental health. School and district leaders should fill out this worksheet and then discuss the information together to guide professional development activities for staff and community stakeholders. This worksheet contains three activities that will take 30–60 minutes to complete.

1. First, name the types of school staff and community stakeholders who might benefit from knowledge of the school mental health services.

2. Second, think through what knowledge of mental health services each staff role and stakeholder might benefit from.

3. Finally, brainstorm professional development ideas to appropriately reach all of these staff and stakeholders.

These activities will prepare you to design a professional development program that serves an array of staff and stakeholders, empowering them to support your school or district's efforts to address students' mental health needs.

Activity 1: Which school staff and community stakeholders need to know about school mental health?

Any adult who interacts with students may be able to identify a student's mental health needs, use that knowledge to interact with them appropriately, and help them access supports, if indicated.

To begin, create a list of school staff and community stakeholders in the education system who interact with students and might benefit from knowing about mental health problems, and the school-based and community mental health supports available to students. The next step will help you narrow down which type of knowledge each group needs. Be sure to consider people who interact with students in the classroom, and during on-line instruction; people who interact with students in and around school; and people in the community who would interact with students in a mental health crisis or traumatic situation. Check off the roles that are relevant to your school and add additional staff and community stakeholders to accurately reflect your situation. Remember to include all personnel who may interact with students, potentially including virtually everyone in your school.

School staff and community stakeholders who should receive mental health information

☐ School Staff

☐ District leadership

☐ School leadership

☐ Teachers

☐ Teaching assistants/aides

☐ Office personnel

☐ Cafeteria and custodial personnel

☐ Bus drivers

☐ Sports coaches

☐ Counseling/Guidance personnel

☐ Information technology technicians

☐ School resource officers

☐ Board of Directors

☐ Crossing guards

☐ Student peers

☐ School nurse, related service therapists

☐ School social worker

☐ Other: _____

☐ Other: _____

☐ Community Stakeholders

☐ Parents/family members

☐ Before- and after-school program personnel

☐ Pediatricians

☐ Juvenile Justice

☐ Law enforcement

☐ Child welfare

☐ Community mental health providers

☐ First responders (police, firefighters, EMT)

☐ Faith-based leaders

☐ Other: _____

☐ Other: _____

☐ Other: _____

☐ Other: _____

☐ Other: _____

Activity 2: Who needs to know what?

School staff and community stakeholders interact with students in different capacities and have different levels of interaction with school mental health services. For example, teachers interact with students every day and may have insight into their personal lives. Law enforcement and some youth- and family-serving organizations are more likely to interact with students while they experience trauma. To be effective in their respective roles, staff and stakeholders might need different types or amounts of knowledge about mental health and the school-based mental health supports available to students. Training topics might include the following:

- Warning signs of mental health conditions

- Trauma-informed care, potentially addressing grief or loss, historical trauma, and social injustice

- Mental health first aid

- School-based and/or community mental health resources, services, or organizations (if applicable)

- Services available

- Cost of services (and how needed services can be funded/paid for)

- Referral process and eligibility

- Confidentiality considerations

- Where to get more information

This activity encourages you to think through types of knowledge that can benefit each of these staff and stakeholders. First, insert the types of staff and stakeholders that you identified above into the first column in Tables 1a and 1b (insert additional rows as needed). Then, working across each row, click to put an X in the appropriate columns to indicate what types of knowledge would benefit that group of staff of stakeholders. If staff and stakeholders may need to know additional information in your school or district, then add additional columns.

The gray text provides an example to get you started. Teachers may need to know warning signs of mental health conditions, trauma-informed care, mental health first aid, the location of the school mental health center (if it is in the school), services offered there, how to refer students, how students' confidentiality will be protected, and where to get more information. They don't necessarily need to know how much each service costs, though. Other staff and stakeholders who interact with students in less regular ways may need to know less information.

Table 1a. What do school staff need to know?

School Staff	Warning signs of mental health conditions	Trauma-informed care	Mental health first aid	School mental health center location	Services available	Cost of services	Referral process	Confidentiality considerations	Where to get more information
Ex. Teachers	☐	☒	☒	☒	☒	☐	☒	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Table 1b. What do community stakeholders need to know?

Community Stakeholders	Warning signs of mental health conditions	Trauma-informed care	Mental health first aid	School mental health center location	Services available	Cost of services	Referral process	Confidentiality considerations	Where to get more information
Ex. Parents	☒	☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐	☒
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Activity 3: How might school staff and community stakeholders learn about school mental health?

Now that you've thought through who needs to be knowledgeable about school mental health and what they need to know, the next step is to figure out how to make sure they receive that information.

To make the knowledge transfer as effective as possible, and to ensure learning is an ongoing process, consider the following best practice training methods in building staff and stakeholder capacity:

1. School- and district-wide trainings reinforced with ongoing professional learning communities.

2. Combinations of in-person and online participatory learning events versus asynchronous online and other distance-learning approaches.

3. Coaching from psychologists or counselors embedded in the education system, or community-based providers who are aware of the school contexts.

4. Supports for staff well-being so that they can sustainably address their students' needs, which may include training around secondary trauma and opportunities for self-care.

To begin developing a training and learning plan, review Tables 1a and 1b that you created in Activity 2 and look for groups or clusters of staff and stakeholders who need the same or similar sets of knowledge. Fill the roles in these clusters into the *Staff and Stakeholders* column of Table 2. The table includes rows for four groups, but you can use fewer or add more as you see fit. Rows will expand as you type. Then, brainstorm specific professional development ideas and strategies that are pertinent to each group. Be sure to include strategies that are ongoing or annual rather than one-time events.

Table 2. Learning Activities

Group	Staff and Stakeholders	Professional Development Ideas and Strategies
1		
2		
3		
4		

By completing these activities, you will have thought through who would benefit from professional development focused on school mental health; considered who needs to know what; and brainstormed strategies to get these staff and stakeholders this knowledge in a sustainable way. To continue this momentum, use these worksheets as a springboard to plan the professional development strategies identified in Activity 3 and empower staff and stakeholders to support your school or district's efforts to address students' mental health needs.