Worksheet

Early Action Planning for Sustainability of School-Based Mental Health Programs

It can be challenging to sustain school mental health (SMH) programs beyond a period of initial grant support, even when the program has been successful and is valued by schools. The time to begin planning for long-term sustainability is at the beginning of program implementation. This worksheet will review five key steps to plan for sustainability:

1. Organize support.

2. Identify and leverage resources.

3. Collect data to support your cause.

4. Communicate successes.

5. Institutionalize the program into your system.

> **School Mental Health and Behavioral Health**
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> **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.

Action planning tables and exercises are included to facilitate this process. These five steps assume that your organization has conducted an initial assessment of student mental health needs in your educational agency, targeted specific populations and/or age groups within that assessment, and selected one or more evidence-informed programs (or continua of programs) that can meet those needs. Please see the companion document *Implementing School Mental Health Supports: Best Practices in Action* for information on implementing best practices. This resource features exemplars from educational organizations adopting school mental health programs with federal funding. Likewise, the National Center for Healthy Safe Children has compiled numerous exemplars from school districts in seven states in the _Quick Reference Guide: Strategies to Sustain and Expand SMH Services at the Local/Community Level_.

Step 1: Organize Support

Create an Implementation Team

An implementation or management team provides the infrastructure to carry out implementation of the school mental health program(s) and to ensure that it is delivered as intended. The team meets regularly to (a) review data on program access, delivery quality, and outcomes; (b) identify and address implementation challenges; (c) regularly communicate and collaborate with stakeholders, community partners, and school administrators; and (d) develop and enact a sustainability plan.

Implementation teams should include individuals with knowledge of the specific program being delivered as well as those with knowledge of the school culture and climate. Implementation teams should also include leadership or administrators who have the ability to allocate resources and create policies and practices to support teachers and school mental health professionals implementing the programs. Consider whether any existing school-based teams (e.g., student support team) could be leveraged for the implementation team.

Questions for the Implementation Team

- How often will the implementation team meet?
- How will plans, decisions, and changes be documented and communicated to all relevant stakeholders?
- How will needs and successes be communicated to leadership?
- What policies or practice changes are needed to support implementation?

Who will be on your implementation team (typically three to five people)?

Name	Role
1.	School administrator
2.	School-based mental health staff
3.	
4.	
5.	

🔗 After your implementation team is in place, this *Beginning with Implementation Teams worksheet* can help your team think through tasks and processes.

Engage Stakeholders in Meaningful Partnerships

Many different stakeholders are likely invested in students' mental health, including university faculty, hospital mental health staff, and community mental health and public health agencies in addition to teachers, student support staff, families and, of course, students themselves. Nontraditional stakeholders such as business leaders and faith organizations might also have interests that overlap with your program's goals.

Community stakeholders are valuable to the success and sustainability of school-based programs when they have expertise and resources to share. For example, students in psychology, social work, and counseling at a local university might be able to support your program as part of their postsecondary training.

Engagement of potential community partners will be most effective in the context of identifying a shared vision, and articulating mutual benefits of the program with their interests in mind.

Teacher buy-in is really important. Teachers are often asked to deliver programs or change their practices in identifying and approaching students with mental health challenges. If their needs and priorities are not considered, then programs might not be delivered well and are unlikely to generate their intended outcomes. For example, teachers asked to use restorative practices in their classrooms to manage disruptive or disrespectful student behavior might have concerns without training and coaching support.

Obtaining input from families and students can help ensure the program will match their needs, thereby making it more likely to be utilized and sustained over time. Program leaders should consider connecting with existing parent organizations in the school and community, and should developing mechanisms for students to share their perspectives (e.g., through a youth leadership council where mental health concerns are discussed).

Questions to Consider for Engaging Stakeholder Groups
■ What perspective does this group have that could enhance the implementation of your program?
■ What specific opportunities or resources does this group offer?
■ How does your program align with the group's mission and vision?
■ What communication strategies would be helpful with this group?
■ What communication barriers might need to be addressed?

See the companion document, What do school staff and community stakeholders need to know about school mental health?, for more information on this activity.

🔗 The [Phase 3: Sustain & Expand of the Framework Implementation Toolkit, from the National Center for Health Safe Children,](#) offers tips on sustaining and expanding school mental health services through partnerships at the local community and state levels.

What stakeholders will you engage and how will you engage them?

	Who?	How?
Youth	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	
Families	4. _____ 5. _____ 6. _____	
School staff	7. _____ 8. _____ 9. _____	
Community organizations	10. _____ 11. _____ 12. _____	
Other	13. _____ 14. _____ 15. _____	

Step 2: Identify and Leverage Resources

How will your team secure resources to ensure that mental health programs are diligently implemented and sustained over time? Qualified personnel, time, funding, materials, physical space, and systems infrastructure are among the assets you might need to support ongoing implementation. Sometimes costs will decrease over time, but unplanned costs can arise (such as needing to train new school staff or having to convert training and coaching modalities to fit challenging circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic).

Conducting a resource mapping exercise can identify existing resources that could be dedicated to support program implementation, identify gaps in services, and identify duplication of efforts in providing school mental health services.

Resource Mapping Exercise

1. Identify all resources needed for successful program implementation. Carefully review program manuals. Consult with program trainers and others who have program experience to identify costs that may not be obvious.

2. Create a list of all resources needed (ideally in an electronic spreadsheet that can be updated), including each of the following categories:

   a. Personnel, including time needed and skills/expertise from those inside and outside the school. Include time for implementation support and implementation team members in addition to program delivery.

   b. Materials, including both those required for start-up and those that will be needed for each student served or group delivered.

   c. Costs for training and coaching, considering needs that may arise related to staff turnover over time.

   d. Space for program delivery that considers students' needs for privacy when talking about mental health issues, for easy access, and for safety.

   e. Other infrastructure needs such as technology, communications, and data management.

3. For each resource identified, specify the following in the spreadsheet:

   a. Does this resource currently exist in your school or within a partnership?

      i. If yes, who makes decisions about allocating this resource?

   b. If this resource does not currently exist, where or how could it be obtained or created?

   c. Will this resource continue to be available or needed over time?

4. Identify action steps to begin leveraging resources and filling gaps.

Action steps will likely involve securing long-term funding among many other strategies (e.g., blending and braiding funding streams) are essential to ensure long-term sustainability. Your implementation team should start researching such options and seeking related opportunities during the planning phase. Below are some approaches other school districts have found helpful.

Resource Options to Fund and Sustain Mental Health Programming

Seek Reimbursement for Services

Determine whether mental health providers in your community can be reimbursed by Medicaid or private insurance for providing therapy services to students at school.

- What are the reimbursement processes and requirements, and how can you incorporate these into your program?

- Does your state have a Medicaid reimbursement code for school-based mental health services?

Pursue Funding Opportunities

Proactively take steps to increase the chances that your school or district will receive funding in the future.

- Share data with your state and local legislators demonstrating need and benefits of continued funding for your programs.

- Register for School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation (SHAPE) recognition to increase opportunities for funding.

Braid Funding Streams

Reduce your reliance on a single source of funding by braiding together funding from a variety of sources. For example, consider funding sources such as the following. Check off those that are available in your community.

- Local community funds (e.g., community business coalitions, local non-profits)

- Public agency funds (e.g., Department of Health)

- Foundations

Step 3: Collect Data to Support Your Cause

Evaluation data can be used to demonstrate the value of your program for future funders as well as the administrators who make decisions about resource allocation. Regularly sharing data with stakeholders also helps engage them and can fuel their ongoing support. In addition, collecting and reviewing data on an ongoing basis can improve the quality of your program, which also increases the likelihood that it will be sustained over time. Data can be used, for example, to determine which program elements are effective and should be retained, and when and where implementation changes might be needed.

Typically, program evaluation data addresses both how well a program is implemented and how it impacts student mental health (sometimes called *process* and *outcome* data, respectively). Different types of data might be of particular interest to different stakeholder groups. To ensure that your evaluation plan will achieve your long-term goals, including sustainability, you should consider several evaluation questions.

Evaluation Questions
■ Did you train and serve the numbers and populations you targeted?
■ Was the program delivered as it was intended to be (i.e., with fidelity)?
■ If adaptations were made, were the core components retained?
■ How useful and helpful was the program from the perspective of those who were served?
■ How feasible was the program from the perspective of those who delivered it?
■ How did the program impact student mental health or well-being?
■ How did the program impact students' educational outcomes such as grades or discipline referrals?
■ To what extent did the program prevent costs for more expensive services that would have otherwise been needed (e.g., special education, home schooling, foster care, or hospitalization)?

Use this chart to identify key questions for your program evaluation, with an eye toward sustainability:

What evaluation questions are most important to administrators who make decisions about program funding?	
What questions would be most valuable to your youth and families?	
What questions would be of greatest interest to your community partners?	
What questions will help you improve the quality of your program?	

Step 4: Communicate Successes

Given the importance of buy-in and engagement of a wide range of stakeholders to sustain school mental health programs, you should develop strategies to communicate program successes to build and strengthen their support. Successes can include how well the program has been delivered; how well it has been received by those being served; how well it has reached groups with specific needs; and how it has measurably benefited students, families, and schools. Sharing data to demonstrate these successes in visually appealing ways can be very persuasive—so can personal success stories that help to put a human face on statistics.

A variety of strategies can be used to communicate successes, such as newsletters, presentations at stakeholder meetings, media spotlights through local news outlets, social media outlets, and video-recorded testimonials. If your organization has a communications or marketing team, work with that team to develop a communication plan to achieve your sustainability goals.

Seek out and help to prepare individuals to "champion" your program—that is, to promote and advocate for its initial and sustained implementation. Champions can be found among students and parents who have benefited from the program; teachers, administrators, or other school staff who have seen (or experienced) beneficial impacts; and program providers who can share success stories.

> **Communication Planning Questions**
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> - Who are the key audiences with whom you should communicate successes?
> - What data do you have (or will you collect) that can demonstrate the success of the program?
> - Who could effectively share a "success story" about the program?
> - What is the best way to communicate this?
> - Who are your program "champions"?

🔗 The eight-step process described in this guide to *Communication Planning for Sustainability* and in this series of three self-paced online learning modules can help you think through your goals, intended audiences, communication methods, and desired action plan.

Step 5: Institutionalize the Program Within Your System

In planning for sustainability, reflect on which aspects of your programming you want to prioritize and identify the critical functions of those program components. Such analysis will help you focus more broadly than simply on funding specific staff positions, or on a single, specific program. Decisions about prioritizing should consider program impact, implementation essentials, and supports needed from partners and from leadership.

Develop protocols to integrate critical school mental health program functions into your educational system and partnership network. Incorporating new programming into existing staff roles and infrastructure helps to generate a new "business as usual." This will require engaging program leadership to adapt or develop new policies, practices, and procedures and to (re-)allocate resources, as needed. Regularly evaluate such support for systems change over time and take action to strengthen such support when indicated.

Building staff capacity to support key program functions is also critical. This might call for identifying specific skills and expertise for new hires, and growing program champions, mentors, and new leaders within your organization. To support smooth transitions in the face of inevitable turnover, make sure that these functions are well-documented in a procedural manual or guide for program delivery staff. Try to ensure that multiple individuals hold all essential expertise as insulation against loss through attrition.

Finally, in order to ensure sustainability, incorporate key program components, functions, and resources into your organization's strategic plan. Update those plans whenever the organization's needs, activities, and/or relevant external conditions might significantly change.

> ## Possible Program Functions to Prioritize
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> - Educating teachers about students' mental health difficulties
> - Reducing exclusionary discipline practices
> - Decreasing bullying or incidents of violence at school
> - Enhancing school climate and student–teacher relationships
> - Addressing emotional and behavioral crises quickly and effectively
> - Increasing family engagement and parenting support
> - Providing more intensive supports for students with significant mental and emotional health difficulties

🔗 This sustainability resource guide walks through each step in the sustainability planning process, with worksheets for each step.

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14557_04/21