



On behalf of the U.S. Department of Education's (Department) Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, the Title IV, Part A Technical Assistance Center (T4PA Center) provides State education agencies (SEAs) and their State coordinators (SCs) with dedicated support for implementing the Title IV, Part A Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) program. This document details select efforts by the T4PA Center during its Base Year of operations to facilitate the achievement of program goals.

# Key Approaches for Strengthening School Mental Health: A Primer & Resource Guide

The purpose of this school mental health (SMH) primer and resource guide is to assist state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) in identifying key approaches for addressing mental health concerns in schools, particularly those in rural and under-resourced areas. Recommendations are aligned with the Student Support and Academic Enrichment program of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Title IV, Part A guidance and priorities, which specifies that "School mental health programs improve educational outcomes by decreasing absences and discipline referrals and improving test scores."<sup>1</sup>

## Consider Mental Health Needs and Opportunities

One in five students has a diagnosable mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder, yet the majority who need treatment do not receive it.<sup>2</sup> Common mental health concerns in children and youth include anxiety, Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, depression, and conduct problems as well as nonsuicidal self-injury and suicide. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of mental health professionals in many geographic areas across the United States<sup>3</sup> that contributes to a gap in service availability and access. In areas with high rates of poverty where many families lack adequate insurance, services may not be affordable, even if they are available.<sup>4</sup> As a result, schools may be the only place where students can receive needed mental health interventions.

A critical opportunity that school mental health services can help address is disparities in mental health treatment, with Hispanic and black youth being much less likely to receive interventions for anxiety and depression than white youth. Concerns related to stigma and cultural preferences and needs likely contribute to these disparities, and it would be helpful for schools to address them, particularly given the increasing diversity of the United States and, subsequently, public school systems.<sup>5</sup> The American Psychological Association provides several resources<sup>6</sup> to help practitioners address mental health disparities, including adopting culturally responsive practices and addressing contextual barriers such as discrimination, acculturation, immigration, and stigma. Adopting non-exclusionary discipline practices may also help promote the mental health of all students, including those who have experienced trauma and discrimination (see this [Educator's Guide](#) from the National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments [NCSSLE] for addressing the root causes of disciplinary disparities).



Families living in rural communities may have unique challenges in obtaining mental health services, such as the distance required to travel to a clinic. In recent years, there has also been notable increases in the Hispanic population in many rural communities, with the added challenge of language barriers that service providers have not faced before. However, rural communities have strengths that may help address unmet student mental health needs. These include strong social networks and supports including communities that are

closely connected to schools and educators who know students and families well.<sup>7</sup> Additional information on rural mental health is provided by the Rural Health Information Hub, a national clearinghouse supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## Build Mental Health Literacy Within Schools

Educators may have limited knowledge of mental health,<sup>8</sup> which impacts their ability to identify students needing supports and to promote emotional health in the classroom. Professional development for teachers and other school staff may increase their capacity in this area — strengthening overall school mental health supports. Table 1 lists resources that can be accessed by individuals or shared at faculty meetings.

**Table 1. Resources for Professional Development on School Mental Health**

RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION
<a href="#">National Association of School Psychologists</a>	Written and video-based resources on school climate, safety and crises, and mental health
<a href="#">Youth Mental Health First Aid</a>	National 8-hour, in-person training that teaches educators how to recognize students' mental health needs

## Invest in Early Identification and Screening

Early intervention is more effective and less costly than later treatment of mental health conditions, suggesting a benefit to systematically screening students for mental health needs. The National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland provides guidance on screening measures and procedures through the [SHAPE System Screening and Assessment Library](#).

Another important component of early identification is raising mental health awareness among educators and parents, particularly when there may be concerns of stigma. Table 2 provides toolkits, materials, and instructions for informing an educational campaign.

**Table 2. Mental Health Awareness Resources**

RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION
<a href="#">Bright Futures at Georgetown University, in collaboration with the National Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health</a>	Advice on when and how to seek treatment, plus developmental tools for families and child development professionals in a range of disciplines, including health, education, child care, and family services
<a href="#">Mental Health America</a>	Information on signs and symptoms of mental health conditions, including mental health in youth and minorities
<a href="#">National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)</a>	Information on warning signs of suicidal behavior and other mental health conditions; offers resources for specific groups (LGBTQ, racially diverse communities, etc.)
<a href="#">The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Current Topics Web Page</a>	Resources connecting reader to treatment options, practitioner training, or SAMHSA'S suicide prevention educational initiative

## Provide a Continuum of Services

Mental health interventions are more likely to be effective and reduce costs when they are part of a comprehensive continuum of services, from universal positive behavioral supports (Tier 1) to early intervention (Tier 2) to treatment (Tier 3). (For more information on tiered supports, see <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tiered-framework>.) A variety of evidence-based resources, programs, and practices exist. Resources supporting a continuum of services for mental health are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Resources to Support Providing a Mental Health Continuum of Services**

RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION
<a href="#">Department of Education (ED) Parent and Educator Guide</a>	Resources for Tier 1 interventions and supports for promoting a healthy school climate, including mental health supports
<a href="#">National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) Mental Health Topics Page</a>	Summary of evidence-based school mental health programs with information on target ages, implementation, and links to program Websites
<a href="#">University of Pittsburgh, School Based Behavioral Health, evidence-based programs brochure</a>	Guide to help school administrators understand and select evidence-based school mental health programs
<a href="#">What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) review of evidence-based behavior programs</a>	Website identifying specific interventions across tiers and their level of evidence; behavioral topics include those evaluating mental health outcomes

[School-based health centers](#) are another approach for increasing access to mental health services. Nontraditional mental health supports, such as behavioral health aides, may also be helpful in low-resource school settings.<sup>9</sup> For an example of a comprehensive school mental health approach that addresses concerns in rural communities, see [Colorado's School Mental Health Toolkit](#).

## Use Technology to Increase Access

[Telehealth](#) is an approach to service provision that provides long-distance delivery of mental health care through telecommunications technologies. This typically involves counseling sessions held via live video, and may also be a mechanism for students and families without clinics nearby to access mental health services. Most states allow for at least some reimbursement of telehealth services (with limitations), and there is a growing trend for large private insurance companies to cover this service delivery approach. Telehealth resources and technical assistance can be obtained through the [National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers](#).

In addition, mobile health technologies that provide downloadable applications (apps) are a rapidly growing tool designed to prevent mental health disorders and promote the use of health and coping strategies. Although few of these apps have been evaluated to determine their benefits, there is reason to believe they may have improved some mental health symptoms.<sup>10</sup> Table 4 on the next provides a selection of apps, with some designated for use with middle and high school students.

**Table 4. Selected Mobile Technology Apps to Support Mental Health**

RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION
<a href="#">Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) Reviewed Mental Health Apps</a>	Addresses symptoms of depression and anxiety
<a href="#">Psychiatry Advisor Top 10 Mental Health Apps</a>	Addresses symptoms of trauma and depression, bullying, anxiety, and cognitive behavioral therapy techniques
<a href="#">Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Mobile Apps</a>	Addresses opioid use disorder, suicide, bullying, disaster response, and underage drinking

## Connect With Community Partners

Partnering with a wide range of community stakeholders can increase resources available to students with the potential to improve their well-being. Community partnerships are especially important when school-based mental health resources are limited. Potential partners include primary care providers, faith-based organizations, and recreational programs that work with youth outside of school (e.g., through YMCAs or sports leagues). Such organizations and providers often have shared goals related to enhancing students' well-being, and working with them can help promote students' behavioral health. Schools may also benefit from partnering with the public health, juvenile justice, and child welfare systems that often provide or link families to various types of mental health services. For traditional mental health resources, schools can locate services by zip code through SAMHSA's [Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator](#).

When schools collaborate with health agencies, parents, and communities to promote the physical, emotional, and behavioral health and educational success of a child, they are using a "Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child" (WSCC) approach. Ideally, policies, practices, and processes across these support systems would be coordinated and aligned, with the child's needs prioritized. For further information on the WSCC approach, visit the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Adolescent and School Health](#) Website.

## Investigate Funding Opportunities for Mental Health Supports

Activities specifically referenced as allowable for use of [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) funds in the [Title IV, Part A nonregulatory guidance](#) include providing school-based mental health services and counseling. Several other activities are referenced in this guidance, including school climate, family engagement, community partnerships, and the transition of justice-involved youth, as well as reducing the number of dropouts and incidences of bullying and violence. In addition, funding for related mental health services may be available through the Individuals with Disabilities Act and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Schools can also access funds for mental health and substance use services (including telehealth) through third-party reimbursement, including Medicaid. These funds may be used to reimburse community mental health specialists who work with students within schools or in clinics. Finally, applying for grants may provide short-term resources as a bridge to more sustainable funding.

Further guidance on addressing mental health and substance use in schools is provided in a Joint Information Bulletin issued by SAMHSA and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

To request additional information on this topic, please visit the [T4PA Center Website](#). You can also contact the T4PA Center at [info@t4pacenter.org](mailto:info@t4pacenter.org) or call (833) 404-4845.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Jennings, J., Pearson, G., & Harris, M. (2000). Implementing and maintaining school-based mental health services in a large, urban school district. *Journal of School Health, 70*, 201-205, as cited in U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Non-Regulatory Guidance: Student Support and Academic Achievement Grants, Washington, DC, 2016.
- <sup>2</sup> Merikangas, K. R., He, J. P., Burstein, M., Swendsen, J., Avenevoli, S., Case, B., ... & Olfson, M. (2011). Service utilization for lifetime mental disorders in US adolescents: Results of the National Comorbidity Survey-Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 50*(1), 32-45.
- <sup>3</sup> Andrilla, C. H. A., Patterson, D. G., Garberson, L. A., Coulthard, C., & Larson, E. H. (2018). Geographic variation in the supply of selected behavioral health providers. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 54*(6), S199-S207.
- <sup>4</sup> Wilger, S. (2015). Special considerations for mental health services in rural schools. Now Is The Time Technical Assistance Center [Issue Brief]. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- <sup>5</sup> Parker, K., Horowitz, J., Brown, A., Fry, R., & Cohn, D. (2018). *What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities: Amid Widening Gaps in Politics and Demographics, Americans in Urban, Suburban and Rural Areas Share Many Aspects of Community Life*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/05/22/demographic-and-economic-trends-in-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Addressing Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Youth Mental Health Resources: <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/disparities-mental-health>.
- <sup>7</sup> Bauch, P. A. (2001). School-community partnerships in rural schools: Leadership, renewal, and a sense of place. *Peabody Journal of Education, 76*(2), 204-221.
- <sup>8</sup> Whitley, J., Smith, J. D., & Vaillancourt, T. (2013). Promoting mental health literacy among educators: Critical in school-based prevention and intervention. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology, 28*(1), 56-70.
- <sup>9</sup> McCance-Katz, E., & Lynch, C. (2019). Guidance to states and school systems on addressing mental health and substance use issues in schools. Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- <sup>10</sup> Chandrashekar, P. (2018). Do mental health mobile apps work: Evidence and recommendations for designing high-efficacy mental health mobile apps. *mHealth, 4*, 6. doi:10.21037/mhealth.2018.03.02