Support for All

Principals know how just one student who struggles with managing behavior can disrupt his or her class—but imagine the even greater impact if that student also faces grief or other challenging mental health issues. Students’ mental health issues “can impact not only their own learning experiences, but also the entire school culture,” write authors Pete Hall and Kristin Souers, who address in this issue the impact of trauma on student learning. Because of this, it is important to take a schoolwide and comprehensive approach that will support all students. Hall and Souers go on to argue that students learn best when they arrive at school “free from distracting external stressors.” These stressors can include traumatic incidents such as parental discord or divorce, homelessness, or bullying, as well as grief from the loss of a loved one.

During this era of heightened focus on accountability and assessment, it’s important for principals to keep sight of the elements that keep all kids ready to learn, such as multitiered systems of support for mental health and social/emotional learning. Maximizing school counselors and psychologists can help in this effort, as the opening roundtable discussion, “Mental Health Matters,” explains. But many schools lack resources for mental health personnel, leaving principals feeling as if they are on their own in this area. The good news is that more support for school leaders is emerging as the connection between mental health and student achievement is better understood. This issue of Principal presents the latest thinking on, as well as practical strategies for, addressing student mental health. Here are four quick tips to jump-start your school’s initiatives.

1. On working with school counselors and psychologists: Support all learners by committing to a schoolwide, proactive, data-driven school counseling program. When communicating with families about their child’s mental health issues, start with the assumption that the parents love their children and are doing the best they can with them. (“Mental Health Matters,” page 8)

2. On addressing students’ trauma and helping educators avoid burnout: Explore students’ behavioral motives, especially as those behaviors relate to impulses to flee, fight, or freeze. Encourage educators to develop strategies to remain calm, even during classroom disruptions. (“Address Trauma With Calm, Consistent Care,” page 14)

3. On helping students with challenging behaviors: Encourage teachers to create community-style classrooms that offer much-needed consistency. Teachers should also be proactive about maintaining classroom structure by planning for breaks. (“When Students Act Out,” page 24)

4. On training and support for grieving students: Send a message to your school community that supporting grieving students is a priority. Staff trainings should address cultural differences in handling grief and social media implications, to name a few topics. (“Grief Support Is on the Way,” page 18)

Finally, principals should not leave themselves out of the equation of mental health and well-being initiatives. Make sure to factor your own self-care into the plan so that your schoolwide supports will truly benefit all. —Kaylen Tucker