Supporting MENTAL HEALTH

Use your school psychologist to provide a multitiered system of support.

By Benjamin S. Fernandez and Kelly M. Vaillancourt
Mental health is developed early in life, and elementary school educators play a significant role in ensuring that students’ experiences at school contribute to their mental wellness and positive behavioral health. Access to school-based mental health services and supports directly improves students’ physical and psychological safety, social-emotional learning, and academic performance. Children who are struggling emotionally or psychologically simply cannot learn to their optimal ability.

Mental health issues not only affect individual students, they also influence school culture. Therefore, it is imperative that schools adequately address the mental and behavioral needs of individual students to ensure the best possible outcomes for the entire school population. Principals can help their staffs support student mental health by consulting with their school psychologist to identify critical needs and strategies at the individual, classroom, and building levels.

The Role of Schools
Mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness; it occurs on a continuum that also includes social, emotional, and behavioral wellness and the ability to face life’s challenges. The primary goal of schools is to provide students with the skills they need for college, career, and productive citizenship. However, to be successful, students require not just academic aptitude, but social and emotional skills, as well. Elementary school students must learn how to get along and work with others, manage their behavior, articulate their feelings, cope with challenges and disappointments, and participate in the school community. Schools are the ideal setting to promote mental wellness through skills building, prevention, and early intervention.

Additionally, as trained, caring adults, educators have the opportunity to both observe and respond to students’ more acute mental health needs. The Centers for Disease Control recently released data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, which monitors health and risk behavior in children and youth. Based on this data, it is estimated that between 13 percent and 20 percent of children experience a mental disorder in a given year. Only 16 percent of children who need mental health services receive them, and the majority obtain those services in the school setting. Students are more likely to seek help if they know school-based services are available, and if they are easy to access and are provided in a familiar environment by trusted adults. Parents may also be more accepting of mental health services provided at school because of a reduced sense of stigma.
Failure to meet students’ needs is linked to poor academic performance, behavior problems, violence, dropping out, substance abuse, special education referral, and suicide. Overall, the earlier mental health problems are addressed, the better. In addition, when the mental health problems of individual students go unaddressed, the resulting behaviors, whether externalized (such as aggression), or internalized (such as disengagement), can undermine the larger social and academic climate. One student struggling for self-control can upend a classroom lesson or unravel playground camaraderie. Symptoms that manifest as negative behaviors or attitudes can spread and infuse the “personality” of a student body.

Conversely, when students receive the supports they need, their social skills, behavior, engagement in learning, sense of connectedness, and overall well-being improve, all of which support an overall positive school climate. Academics benefit, as well, because the improved conditions for learning enable teachers to dedicate more time to instruction rather than classroom management.

Increasingly, schools are integrating mental health services into a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) that encompasses universal wellness programs, targeted interventions, and intensive supports for learning and behavior. MTSS aligns well with the mental health continuum, and school-employed mental health professionals are a critical resource in linking services across the tiers and issues.

MTSS involves providing the appropriate interventions and supports of varying intensity to meet the needs of all students. All staff members provide some level of support to students. Then children in need of more individualized services may be referred to specialists such as the speech language pathologist, the school psychologist, or the school counselor. In this model, every staff member helps to promote social emotional wellness by promoting and reinforcing positive behavior in the classroom. MTSS ensures that there is assistance in place for students who need additional supports beyond what is available to all students.

Data-based decision-making is an essential component of MTSS. Multi-disciplinary teams—consisting of the school improvement team, pre-referral team, and school safety team, for example—monitor data at both the systems and individual student level to ensure that problems are identified early and the appropriate supports are provided.

Identifying Mental Health Issues
The most common mental illnesses affecting children are anxiety disorders, disruptive behavior disorders, pervasive development disorders, and mood disorders. Identifying mental health issues in K-8 students can be difficult, because young children often cannot articulate what is bothering them, and many indicators mirror “normal” developmental behaviors or a wrong diagnosis (see pg. 15). For instance, symptoms of depression in children can include disruptive behavior, aggression, and difficulty completing tasks, which also can be signs of ADHD or oppositional defiance disorder. Sometimes, educators perceive students with a mental health problem as simply difficult, lazy, or unmotivated. Teachers with concerns about students are better able to seek advice when there are mental health professionals on staff, such as a school psychologist. School mental health staff also can provide counseling, work with teachers to develop classroom strategies, and connect students with significant needs with more intensive community supports.

Maximize Your School Psychologist
School psychologists have specific training to provide mental health support within the context of learning, ensuring that students are engaged and ready to learn when they enter the classroom. Additionally, they are able to identify individual and groups of students who are experiencing mental health difficulties, and then implement interventions. The mental health services and strategies outlined below are part of an overall MTSS approach to meeting students’ needs.

1. Ensure that your school psychologist is an active member of child study or pre-referral teams.
Many learning, social/emotional, and behavioral difficulties first appear during the elementary school years. Often, the classroom teacher is one of the first to notice and raise concerns about a student. It is important that your school psychologist is a member of child study or pre-referral teams to ensure that early identification and early intervention services are provided to students who need them.

Your school psychologist can also provide tips to help teachers support specific students and to help parents support their child at home. For example, the school psychologist can help a teacher construct a behavior management plan for a student who has difficulty staying on task. The school psychologist can develop strategies, assist with the implementation of interventions, and monitor student progress based on the plan.

2. Allow your school psychologist to inform teachers and students.
To identify students with mental health needs and facilitate

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**Principal ONLINE**
Access the following Web resources by visiting Principal magazine online: [www.naesp.org/NovDec13](http://www.naesp.org/NovDec13)

- Review six policy recommendations in “A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools,” a brief by NAESP and five partner organizations.

- Read the National Association of School Psychologists’ series of articles for principals and administrators on mental health.

- Find mental health articles grouped by topic (such as violence prevention and funding strategies) on SchoolMentalHealth.org.
early intervention, teachers need to know what to look for. Staff members should also be aware of the services that school psychologists provide. Invite your school psychologist to present this information at a staff meeting so that your staff feel empowered to seek assistance when they are concerned about a student.

Students are also more likely to seek help when they know it is available. Consider allowing your school psychologist, in collaboration with other school-employed mental health professionals, to provide age-appropriate education for students so that they know how to ask for help if they need it.

For example, the school psychologist can contribute to a schoolwide anti-bullying initiative by educating students about respect and teaching specific strategies for appropriately addressing bullying situations. The school psychologist can also help individual students learn how to cope with significant loss, facilitate groups where students with deficits in social skills learn how to interact with peers, and regularly check in with students who struggle with behavior.

3 Involve school psychologists in school improvement and safety teams. School safety includes both physical and psychological measures and is a critical component of a positive and supportive school culture. Students need to feel safe at school in order to perform to the best of their ability. By engaging your school psychologist in school improvement, safety, and climate efforts, you ensure that the most appropriate systems and supports are in place to meet the needs of your school community.

4 Allow time for regular consultation between the school psychologist, the school counselor, and the school social worker. Just as teachers spend time together planning and collaborating, it is important that school-employed mental health professionals do the same. Through this collaboration, support services can be delivered more efficiently, and students in need of more intensive services can be identified quickly.

5 Allow time during the school day for delivery of mental health services. Many schools set aside the first 30 minutes of each day for educators to provide extra academic support or enrichment to small groups or individual students. It is also important that students receive instruction in social-emotional learning. Consider dedicating every other morning to social-emotional learning.

Your school psychologist can collaborate with teachers to help plan a curriculum that teachers then implement in the classroom. During this time, students who need individualized support can meet with the school psychologist without missing academic instruction. Research demonstrates that school-based social-emotional development programs improve students’ decision-making skills, attitude toward school, and academic achievement, while reducing disruptive behavior.

6 Consider providing a dedicated work space for the school psychologist. Providing dedicated office space makes the school psychologist a more visible and accessible resource, protects student privacy, and provides more opportunities for parent, teacher, and student consultation.

You can accomplish this by reserving a conference room for use by the school psychologist at specific times each week. Alternately, consider providing one office for your school psychologist and other professionals who work on an itinerant basis. Based upon mutual agreement, this space would be reserved for these professionals at certain times each week, and used as communal office space when privacy is not needed.

Students gain critical foundational knowledge during their first years of school, which includes skills that promote mental wellness. Schools must provide early identification and interventions for mental health, social, and behavioral difficulties. Access to these services allows teachers to focus on instruction, ensures that students are engaged in the classroom, and facilitates a positive school culture where students can thrive.

Principals need effective strategies for shaping what is truly an interdependent relationship among mental health, school culture, and academic achievement. Effectively maximizing your school psychologist can help ensure that you are meeting the academic and mental health needs of your students, while simultaneously fostering a positive and supportive school culture.

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Signs of Mental Illness

**DEPRESSION**
- Persistent sad or irritable mood
- Loss of interest in activities
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping

**ANXIETY**
- Excessive worry
- Irritability
- Perfectionism
- Task/situation avoidance

**ADHD**
- Impulsive/disruptive behaviors
- Difficulties with peer interaction
- Distractibility
- Over-activity

**AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS**
- Significant impairments in social interaction and communication
- Restrictive, stereotyped behaviors
- Lack of social/emotional reciprocity