

Advocating for Comprehensive School Mental Health

Including families in developing, planning, and implementing comprehensive school mental health systems achieves better outcomes.



Comprehensive school mental health systems

provide an array of supports and services that promote school climate, social and emotional learning, mental health, and well-being while reducing the prevalence and severity of mental illness. These systems are built on a strong foundation of district and school professionals, including administrators, educators, and specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, school nurses and other school health professionals), in strategic collaboration with students, families, and community health and mental health partners.

Why is school mental health important?

Children may be challenged with mental health concerns that can disrupt their learning and their peer relationships — and that can lead to immediate and lasting detrimental effects. ***Building comprehensive school mental health systems is one critical strategy to promote positive outcomes for our nation's children.***

Schools with a positive school climate and integrated social and emotional learning are more likely than comparison schools to achieve higher standards of school safety, including less bullying, less student isolation, more positive peer and teacher-student relationships, and less weapon threat and use in schools.

Children and adolescents are more likely to receive needed mental health care in their school than in any other setting. Of children and adolescents who receive mental health services, most receive them in school. Schools can offer a more accessible, less stigmatizing setting than traditional community-based mental health settings. Only a fraction of children, adolescents, and families who experience mental health concerns access outpatient care in traditional community mental health settings, and of those who access care, about 40%–60% drop out of treatment early.

MENTAL HEALTH

refers to the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of students.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

refer to activities, services, and supports that address the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of students, including substance use.

A COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

refers to an array of supports and services provided in school that promote school climate, social and emotional learning, mental health, and well-being.

Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems: A Three-Tiered Approach

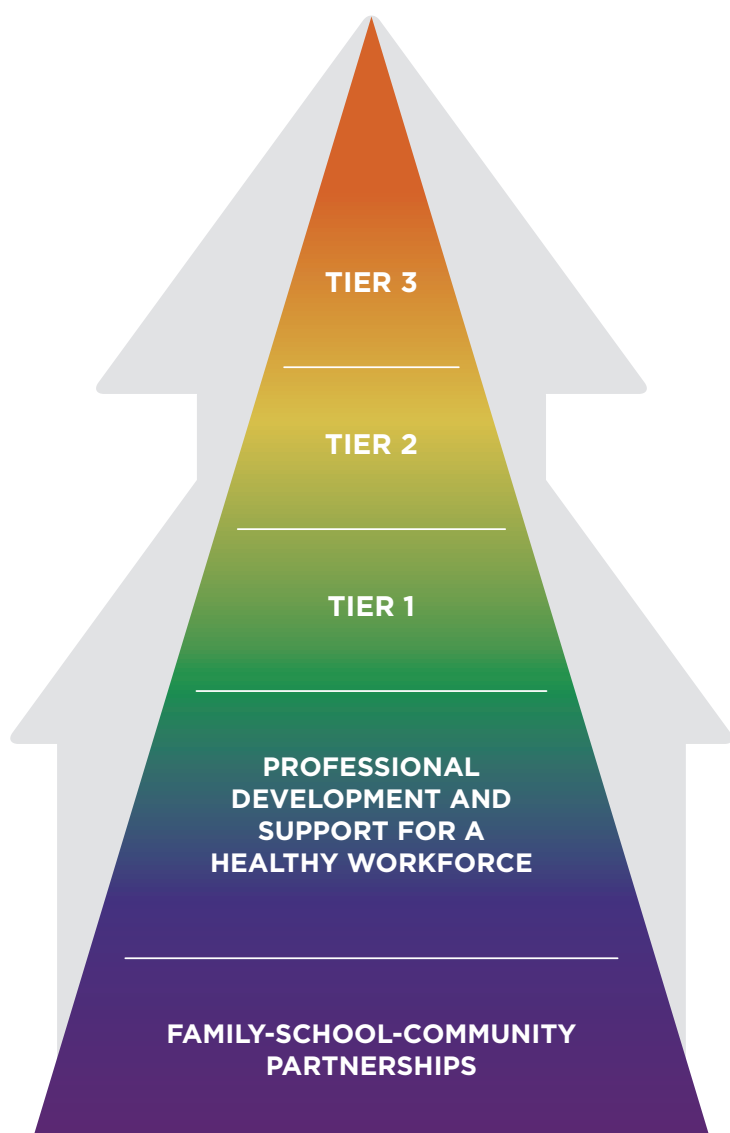
Comprehensive school mental health systems support students and staff through a tiered approach that promotes a positive school climate for all students, connects students who are at risk of mental health problems to early intervention services, and provides treatment for students with identified mental health needs. In partnership with communities, schools can offer a seamless continuum of supports students with and without mental health challenges.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL

WELL-BEING is a child's capacity to form meaningful relationships, regulate and express emotions, and learn new skills.

POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

fosters safety; promotes a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encourages and maintains respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school.



TIER 3

Treatment and support for students who need individualized interventions for significant distress, family or community crisis, and functional impairment.

Examples: *Individual, group, or family therapy for students who have been identified, and often diagnosed, with social, emotional, and/or behavioral health needs.*

TIER 2

Screening, referral, and early intervention for students who have been identified through a needs assessment may include activities conducted by the school mental health team in partnership with educators, youth, families, and community partners.

Examples: *small group-level interventions; mentoring; brief individualized interventions; low-intensity classroom-based supports*

TIER 1

Promotion of positive social, emotional, and behavioral skills and overall well-being for students and staff.

Examples: *Schoolwide curricular lessons and grade-level or classroom presentations for all students; mental health literacy resources for educators and school staff.*



Research has shown that a comprehensive school mental health system has many positive outcomes for students and schools.

Benefits of Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems

Positive impact on academic and psychosocial outcomes:

Students who participate in social and emotional learning programs demonstrate improvements not only in self and social awareness, decision-making and relationship skills but also in academics, including standardized testing.

Positive school climate and safety:

Comprehensive school mental health systems foster a positive school climate, including an increased sense of safety and promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment.

Early identification and intervention: Early identification and treatment are associated with positive outcomes for both students and the community, including cost savings, providing early access, promoting wellness, strengthening community connections, and reducing the need for more costly and intensive psychological services.

Improved access to care: The school setting is familiar and convenient to parents and caregivers and school-based care does not require the caregiver to take the student out of school for appointments, leading to

increased access to care when compared with more traditional community-based settings. Services can be offered using direct school-based services, co-located school-based health centers and services, school-linked community-based care, and through tele-mental health provided by school or community-hired staff. Further, schools can reduce bias and normalize mental illness and treatment by providing training and education to teachers, parents, and peers on mental health literacy and how to seek help.

Engagement of families and youth: Meaningful partnership with families and youth is essential to the success of comprehensive school-based mental health. Families and youth can provide valuable input into needs assessments, designing services and programs, providing feedback, and assisting in promoting awareness of children's mental health needs and available services in the school. Additionally, parent support providers who are trained family members can support other parents who may have concerns about their child. Parent support providers can also link families with community resources and supports based on the unique needs of each family.

Take Action

Most school districts have pieces of a school mental health system whether it is school-employed staff, contracts with community providers, or mental health training for educators. ***The challenge is to build on the existing components and mobilize stakeholders to develop a vision for comprehensive school mental health.***

Everyone has a stake in advancing school mental health services and ***families play a key role in promoting, planning, and implementing comprehensive school mental health systems to every school for every child.***



Families as Advocates

Families can and do make a difference! By educating school administrators, boards of education, and state legislators, you can help bring awareness to the need for comprehensive school mental health services. Join with other parents in your school or mental health advocacy organizations in your community or state to meet with decision-makers and communicate key points about the need and benefits of comprehensive school mental health services.



Example “Asks”

Increase **mental health staffing in schools**

Establish **partnerships with community behavioral health providers** to provide school-based mental health services and referral pathways to care in the community

Provide **professional development** on adversity, trauma, toxic stress, and cultural responsiveness

Implement **universal social-emotional learning** programs across all grades

Expand **mental health awareness programs**, including mental health literacy for staff and students, to prevent stigma

Incorporate **evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention, and intervention activities**, including for students experiencing traumatic stress

Leverage diverse **funding** streams and resources to support a full continuum of services



Talking and Data Points for Meetings

Talking Points	Supporting Data
Each day in the U.S., millions of children and adolescents go to school with mental health concerns that threaten their well-being.	13%–20% of children meet the criteria for a mental disorder and approximately 5% of adolescents meet criteria for a substance use disorder.
Most youth do not receive services for mental health concerns.	Only 12% of youth with mental health and/or substance use concerns receive services.
Mental health concerns threaten academic performance.	Mental, behavioral, social, and emotional health issues are a leading contributor to chronic absenteeism. Chronic absence, or missing 10% or more of school days, is an early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout.
Offering mental health services in schools increases access and treatment completion.	Of children and adolescents who receive mental health services, most receive them in school. Youth are 6 times more likely to complete evidence-based treatment when offered in schools than in other community settings.
Universal mental health promotion activities, such as Social-Emotional Learning, improves academic performance.	Social and emotional learning programming has been found to improve students' achievement test scores by 11 to 17 percentile points.

Resources to Share with Decision Makers

- The [Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems](#) report offers collective insight and guidance to local communities and states to advance comprehensive school mental health systems.
- The [School Mental Health Action Alert](#) outlines the importance of advancing school mental health as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- [Tip Sheet for Decision Makers](#)
- The [School Mental Health Quality Guides](#) provide guidance to school and district school mental health systems to advance the quality of their services and supports.
- The [School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation \(SHAPE\) system](#) is a public-access, web-based platform that offers schools, districts, and states a workspace and targeted resources to support school mental health quality improvement. This [one-pager](#) offers a glimpse of what the SHAPE System offers.

Advocacy Tips: *Let your voice be heard! Tell your story!*



E =

Engage

Get your listener's attention with your story. Think about the key messages you want others to remember and focus on those as you share your story. Check out FREDLA's tip sheet, [The Power of Telling Your Story](#)



P =

State the Problem

Present key talking points about children's mental health needs and the specific need for comprehensive mental health systems in schools.



I =

Inform About Solutions

Inform the listener about and benefits of comprehensive school mental health systems for children's well-being and improved school climate and teacher support.



C =

Call to Action

Now that you've engaged your listener, presented the problem, and informed them of a solution, state what you want the listener to do. Use the "example asks" in this tip sheet.

Note: The EPIC format is trademarked by the grassroots advocacy organization RESULTS (www.results.org).

Acknowledgements

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