FREDLA
Family-Run Executive Director
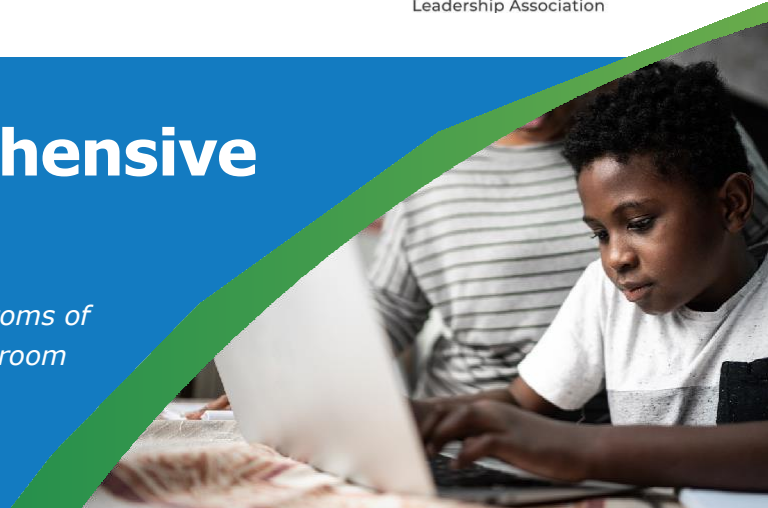Leadership Association

Advocating for Comprehensive School Mental Health

Up to one in five children in the U.S. shows signs or symptoms of a mental health disorder in a given year. In a school classroom of 25 students, five may be struggling with issues of depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, or more.

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.

Comprehensive school mental health systems support the academic success and emotional well-being of students

Children may be challenged with mental health concerns that can disrupt their learning, their peer relationships, and that can lead to immediate and lasting detrimental effects. 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 often 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.

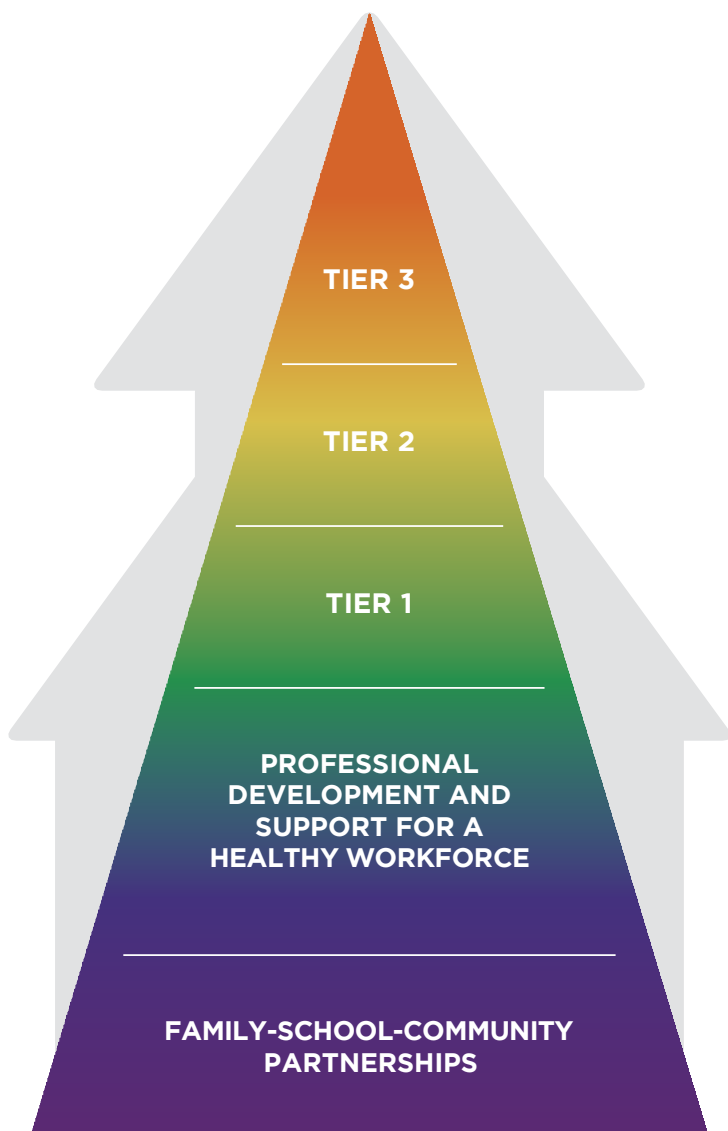# Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems: A Three-Tiered Approach

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 to 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

TIER 2

TIER 1

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT FOR A HEALTHY WORKFORCE

FAMILY-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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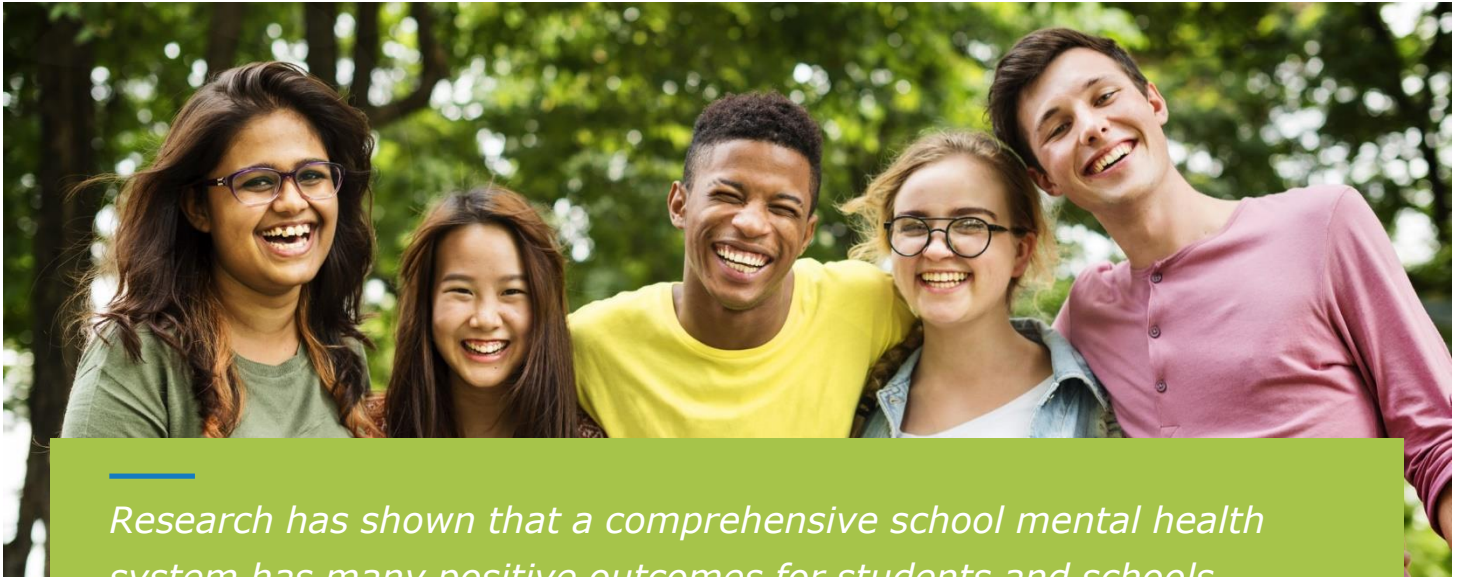
Research has shown that a comprehensive school mental health system has many positive outcomes for students and schools.

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 the 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

Everyone has a stake in advancing school mental health services. Decision-makers, legislators, school administrators, families, youth, and community partners can all play a significant role in promoting, planning, and bringing comprehensive school-based mental health services to every school for every child. 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.

Local School Districts

can engage the wider community and diverse stakeholders to gain buy-in for the value and need for implementing a comprehensive school mental health system.

Local school districts can:

- Conduct a needs assessment and resource mapping
- Designate time and resources to build, enhance and sustain comprehensive school mental health systems.
- Engage in data collection, reporting, dissemination, and continuous quality improvement.

States

are important partners with local districts seeking to implement school mental health systems.

State Departments of Education and Behavioral Health Administrations can:

- Develop statewide training and implementation support
- Promote cross-sector engagement, goal setting, and decision-making
- Align planning and funding by Medicaid, private insurance, and managed care organizations at the state level to support school mental health
- Convene a coordinated school mental health "council"

Legislators

support legislation and funding to implement a comprehensive school mental health system across their local jurisdiction or state.

Potential legislative actions to support school mental health

- Require professional development for all school staff on adversity, trauma, toxic stress, and cultural responsiveness
- Designate funding support for districts to conduct mental health screening and monitoring
- Require mental health awareness programs, including mental health literacy, for staff and students

Families and Youth

are major partners when advocating for comprehensive school mental health services and are also vital to be at the table when developing, planning, and implementing comprehensive school mental health systems. Families and youth will help to ensure that services meet the needs of families and youth and schools in their communities.

- Educate families and youth on the importance of mental health in schools
- Meet with families to listen to experiences and concerns
- Enlist families to advocate with the local school board and state legislators on the need for comprehensive school mental health
- Invite families to help develop, plan and implement comprehensive school mental health systems
- Hire family navigators in schools to promote school mental health services

Resources

Below are some national guidance documents related to advancing comprehensive school mental health systems.

- **Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems Guidance from the Field.** (2019). National-Federal School Mental Health Workgroup. http://www.schoolmentalhealth.org/Resources/Foundations-of-School-Mental-Health/Advancing-Comprehensive-School-Mental-Health-Systems--Guidance-from-the-Field/

- **National School Mental Health Best Practices**: **Implementation Guidance for States, Districts, and Schools.** (2019). The National Center for School Mental Health & Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network, https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mhttc-network-coordinating-office/national-school-mental-health-implementation-guidance

- **Guidance to States and School Systems on Addressing Mental Health and Substance Use Issues in Schools.** (2019). Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, https://store.samhsa.gov/product/guidance-states-and-school-systems-addressing-mental-health-and-substance-use-issues?referer=from_search_result

Acknowledgements

FREDLA
Family-Run Executive Director
Leadership Association
www.fredla.org

NCSMH
NATIONAL CENTER FOR
SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH
www.schoolmentalhealth.org

References

Astor, R. A., Jacobson, L., Wrabel, S. L., Benbenishty, R., & Pineda, D. (2017). Welcoming practices: Creating schools that support students and families in transition Oxford University Press.

Rones, M., & Hoagwood, K. (2000). School-based mental health services: A research review. Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 3(4), 223-241.

Haggerty, R. J., & Mrazek, P. J. (1994). Reducing risks for mental disorders: Frontiers for preventive intervention research National Academies Press.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 82(1), 405-432.

National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments. School References Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems • 43 Climate. (2019). Retrieved from https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/safe-and-healthy-students/school-climate

Wellander, L., Wells, M. B., & Feldman, I. (2016). Does prevention pay? Costs and potential cost-savings of school interventions targeting children with mental health problems. J Ment Health Policy Econ, 19, 91-101.

Werner-Seidler, A., Perry, Y., Calear, A. L., Newby, J. M., & Christensen, H. (2017). School-based depression and anxiety prevention programs for young people: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Clinical Psychology Review, 51, 30-47.