

PROACTIVE MENTAL WELLNESS IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

*How to Implement a Comprehensive School-Based
Mental Health Intervention Program*





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The student mental health crisis is growing, and it's preventing students from accessing their education, hurting school performance, causing teacher burnout, and leading to tragedies such as suicides and school shootings. And experts predict the problem will escalate even more dramatically due to trauma and isolation associated with the pandemic.

While the problem affects the entire community, educators can drive change and make an impact, with the right training and support.

Experts recommend proactive school-based mental health intervention to create a safe and secure school environment and to improve outcomes for students struggling with mental health issues. A three-level intervention program targets the entire school community and seeks to change the school climate and values; provides educational outreach and resources to groups of students, parents, and teachers; and provides counseling services to support individual students and families in need.

This paper outlines how to start a program in your district, who should be involved, how to fund the program, and how to measure the results.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Why schools can't ignore the student mental health crisis
- What does a comprehensive mental health intervention program look like?
- Resources for providing direct mental health services
- Reducing out-of-district placements
- How to implement a successful mental wellness program at your school
- Who should be involved in implementation?
- Strategies for funding the program
- Measuring program impact





WHY SCHOOLS CAN'T IGNORE THE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

1. Increasing numbers of students are experiencing severe mental health issues

Everyone in education knows that teen anxiety and depression are reaching critical levels. **Studies suggest that more than one in five students between 13 and 18 will experience a severe mental illness at some point.** And, 25% of college age students are experiencing suicidal ideation. The issue is becoming widespread even among students in elementary grades. And it's happening across the board in every school district, regardless of the affluence of the community or the reputation of the school.

Robert Ferullo, Principal of Weehawken High School in Weehawken, NJ, and a former Director of Special Services, shared the following insight on our podcast, **Conversations about Student Mental Health:**

"Any school district that thinks that they don't have those problems (mental health issues) is fooling themselves. They need to look a little deeper because it exists everywhere in this country, especially in this day and age. If they don't put the resources to correcting it, the school shootings or suicides are going to become very real for those places. And it's going to be unfortunate because they will be thinking, 'Oh, if only we had done this, this tragedy could have been averted.' "



2. Mental health issues are preventing students from accessing education

Schools are required by law to address any issues that interfere with a student's ability to access their education. If a student is not emotionally stable due to mental health issues, the student is not available for learning. Mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, not only make it difficult for students to learn and be present in a classroom setting, but increasingly result in school avoidance, which makes it all but impossible for them to receive their education.

While there are many theories about the cause of the problem, there's no doubt about the effect: more and more students are failing and are not prepared for life upon graduation, due to mental health problems.

It's important to realize that mental health issues do not discriminate and they are not only affecting the special education population. Students face an excruciating academic load and pressure to get into top-tier colleges. Many are overbooked with athletics, tutoring sessions, and after-school activities. As a result, students are cracking under the stress. Schools have a responsibility to develop a solution to support and ensure the success of all of their students.

3. Overlooked mental health problems can turn into tragedy

When we fail to address student mental health issues head-on, the result can be what we all fear the most: school tragedies such as suicides and shootings which will forever change families and communities.

With the sense of urgency we feel about preventing school tragedies, the temptation has been to harden schools by adding armed guards or even arming teachers.

However, **a recent eight-point plan signed by over 2,300 experts and educational thought leaders**

recommends that making schools softer is more likely to create a safe and secure school environment.

An important part of this "softer" approach is addressing student mental health proactively which will serve as the best line of defense in stopping school tragedies.



4. Student mental health impacts school performance

School administrators face escalating pressure to maintain and improve school performance:

- They must prove the quality of the education they provide (via test scores, graduation rates, and prestigious college placements) so the town can justify the cost of property and taxes to current and potential new residents.
- To maximize performance statistics, they must keep high-performing students in district rather than choosing private schools.
- They must meet state and federal standards for inclusion (educating students in the least restrictive environment) or face the possibility of losing funding.
- They must keep suspensions and disciplinary actions low to protect the safety and reputation of the district.

With increasing numbers of students struggling and failing academically due to mental health issues, school performance measurements suffer. A proactive mental health intervention program can turn things around and provide assurance for any school administrator that they are fulfilling their responsibilities to the students and the community.

5. Teachers struggle to engage students with mental health issues

Teacher education programs do not include training on how to support and engage students suffering from severe mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

As a result, some teachers don't understand the issue and persist with strategies that exacerbate the problem.

On the other hand, the more emotionally accessible and sympathetic teachers are burdened by increasing numbers of students turning to them for help, academically and emotionally, outside of the classroom and also by having a preponderance of these students placed in their classrooms.

These teachers try to help, even though they lack the tools and resources to do so, and they feel frustrated and guilty when the students continue to struggle despite the extra help.

This situation is causing competent, professional people to become **overwhelmed and burned out**. It's also taking their time and attention away from other essential tasks and professional responsibilities.



6. Parents are struggling, too

Parents (or guardians) often don't know how to help their children either, especially when it comes to the escalating issue of school avoidance. They may not know where to turn for help, or may not be in a position to pay for it.

Teens experiencing anxiety and depression often shut down rather than acting out, so parents may not even realize the extent of the problem. Parents might also be struggling with their own mental health or other problems that make it impossible for them to help their child.

So, when schools attempt to get parents involved, they may encounter avoidance or outright resistance. Mental health intervention that includes parent education and family counseling from qualified school staff can make all the difference in helping students succeed. Promoting family involvement ensures the success of the whole child and begins to lay a more successful path for life after graduation.

7. Educators can address mental health stigma

Stigma (and self-stigma) associated with mental health problems can be a difficult roadblock, particularly in affluent communities where students face extreme pressure to get into prestigious colleges. Stigma is also common in some ethnic populations where people may have a misunderstanding or cultural bias about mental health care and resist help.

Sometimes stigma takes the form of denial. Schools and communities insist their students are not experiencing mental health problems. Struggling students may internalize their problems and withdraw rather than acting out, making them difficult to recognize. That makes it all too easy to ignore the issue.

Recognizing and addressing student mental health is a community-wide problem, but one that educators are in the best position to address. Schools have skilled, passionate, and well-respected teachers and administrators, and the authority and resources to share information in a compelling and persuasive manner. Schools have daily contact with students and parents, so they have the opportunity and the means to impact the culture of the school and the town. However, schools need the appropriate support and resources to do so.



WHAT DOES A COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTION PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

Given the critical need, the high stakes, and the responsibility of schools, how can districts be prepared to meet the educational, social, and emotional needs of students struggling with mental health issues? And how can they do so proactively, to prevent the consequences discussed above?

Leading school districts are working to improve student mental wellness by implementing a school-based intervention program with three levels.

- 1** The **first level** targets the entire school community and seeks to change the school climate and values.
- 2** The **second level** provides educational outreach and resources to groups of students, parents, and teachers.
- 3** And the **third level** provides school-based counseling services to support individual students and families in need.



Level 1: Build a school culture of trust and open communication

Level one intervention is all about creating a school climate where people can speak openly without fear of retribution, ridicule, or shame. The goal should be for every student to feel like they have *belonging* and *significance* in their school community.

Strategies include:

Establish policies in support of positivity, honesty & trust.

Take a hard look at your school policies (especially disciplinary policies) and consider whether those policies may be contributing to a negative culture that encourages secrecy and antagonism. How can you change things to build more trust between school staff, students, and families?

Also, make sure classroom behavior expectations are consistent throughout the school. This sets students up for success because they have structure and a clear understanding about how they should behave in certain settings, limiting the opportunities for misbehavior.

Help teachers to build relationships with students.

Teachers are trained to convey information and help students learn, but not necessarily to connect with them on a personal and emotional level. In fact, in the past, this type of connection has been actively discouraged.

Let teachers know that this has changed, and provide coaching to help them do it more effectively. Often students who are unavailable to learn due to mental health issues will begin to become more engaged and present in the classroom once they feel a sense of belonging, especially from an authority figure.

TIP: Encouraging teacher participation in coaching and leading extracurricular activities really helps to build relationships with students.



Level 1 Strategies (continued)

Model respect for others.

You can't merely explain to students that they can be open with you; school staff must earn their trust by demonstrating respect for everyone in the school community. That means speaking politely and positively, being inclusive (in your actions and word choice), and refraining from gossip.

In disciplinary situations, that might mean offering positive alternatives to punishment, and being willing to give someone the benefit of the doubt.

Overcome stigma by promoting the value of emotional well-being.

Every student and staff member should understand that, in your school, mental and emotional health is considered a priority that's essential for success in school and in life. With that value firmly in place, students will feel more comfortable sharing their struggles, and it will be easier for them to find someone who will listen, understand, and help.

This extends to staff as well; your school culture must encourage teachers to seek support and help when they need it.

Practice clear and open communication.

Establishing a habit of honest and proactive communication between administrators, teachers, and students sets the expectation that it's the norm to share thoughts, emotions, and problems openly.



Level 2: Deliver information and training to the entire school community

Level 2 intervention involves creating awareness about mental health issues, and building the capacity for your staff and for parents to identify and support students who are struggling.

Strategies include:

Share information with all parents.

Help them recognize when their child may need some mental health intervention, and also provide resources to show them how to get the help they need. Give parents opportunities to meet and discuss common struggles, and provide them with solutions through different strategies and evidence-based practices.

Train school counselors and teachers.

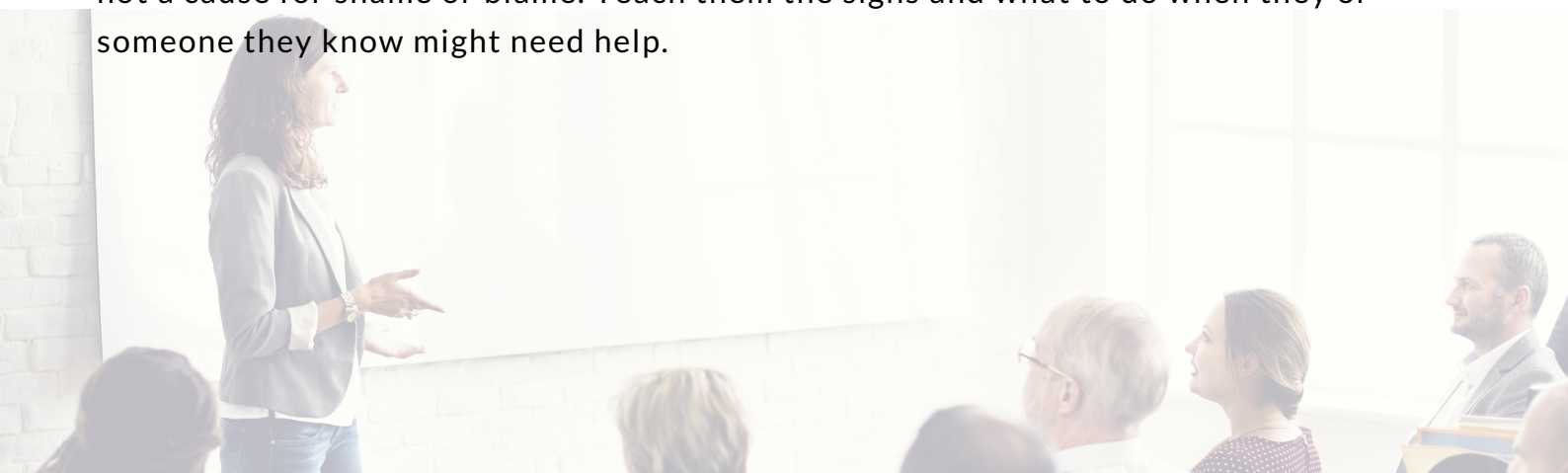
Teach them to recognize the warning signs of mental health issues and suicide risks.

Establish protocols and resources for school staff members.

Make it clear what staff members should do when they notice a potential problem. Provide staff with support and a defined process, perhaps designating a point person for them to communicate concerns. Establishing this process for student referrals will make efficient use of staff time and get the students the appropriate help in a timely manner. Having established a culture of trust in your Level 1 intervention makes it more likely that staff members will recognize the signs and report them.

Make students aware that mental illness is not something to hide.

Let them know that anxiety and depression are increasingly common health issues and not a cause for shame or blame. Teach them the signs and what to do when they or someone they know might need help.





Level 3: Provide school-based mental health services to students in need

Level 3 intervention is designed to provide direct mental health support from trained, school-based counselors to students and families in need. These are the components of Level 3 mental health intervention:

Provide individual counseling and group counseling to students.

Students showing signs of mental health issues that are negatively impacting their education need regular, personal therapeutic support from a trained counselor.

Work with parents and families.

School-based student mental health intervention is most successful when it includes open communication with parents. Counselors must take the time to work closely with families to fully understand each child's issues and to direct a consistent action plan that includes family participation.

Have an expert resource available to school-based counselors.

Best practice is to provide an expert resource for school counselors to ask questions and get guidance about difficult cases. This helps alleviate the burden on your staff by giving them access to practical advice from a clinical expert.

Data collection and reporting.

To ensure you can track the results of your mental health intervention program, it's important to collect detailed data about each student receiving Level 3 services.

You'll need to track grades, visits to the school nurse, attendance, and disciplinary records as well as attendance of counseling sessions and records of communication with parents and outside clinical service providers.

School administrators sometimes struggle to understand their role in providing this level of mental health support. The way schools address mental health must be educationally based. No one is suggesting that the school become a clinic. However, properly trained resources are needed to make a real impact on student success in school.



RESOURCES FOR PROVIDING DIRECT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Many schools have psychologists, social workers, and school counselors who are equipped to handle learning issues that arise with the typically developing child. Unfortunately, these school professionals often lack the training and experience to handle the depth of mental issues we're all seeing in schools today, especially debilitating anxiety, depression, and school avoidance.

To effectively meet the needs of struggling students, school professionals need additional training to learn effective strategies and best practices for mental health counseling. Additionally, school-based mental health counselors need to be supervised by experienced clinicians to ensure consistency and quality of care.

Partnering with outside mental health service providers for counselor training and supervision is an affordable and effective way to meet the growing need for Level 3 student mental health intervention.



REDUCING OUT OF DISTRICT PLACEMENTS

Without Level 3 support in place, schools have little choice but to place struggling students in out of district therapeutic environments. In addition to the expense, there's the question of whether that choice is truly the least restrictive environment for the student, which districts must provide by law.

While there will always be students who need the intensive level of support in a therapeutic school, more students can stay in district when school-based services are available. Plus, students who improve after a year or two in a therapeutic school have the option to return to the district when support services are available to help them transition back.

What's more, with the complete three-level intervention protocol in place, it becomes easy for schools to make the determination that a student needs out of district placement: when a student is not successful after receiving all three levels of in-district intervention, that student needs a higher level of care.

Out of district placement decisions become data driven and consistent (as opposed to being left up to an individual case manager), which is very helpful in the event of legal issues.



COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Robert Ferullo shared this insight about the impact of school-based mental health intervention on his community:



"Parents recognize that the district has gone to great lengths to assist the family. It goes beyond words to say what that does in a community. People know the school district is a place of trust. It's a place of safety. It's a valuable resource for the family, so mom and dad don't feel like it's just them battling to help their child."



HOW TO IMPLEMENT A SUCCESSFUL MENTAL WELLNESS PROGRAM AT YOUR SCHOOL

As educators, we want to feel comfortable that we have done everything we can do (and everything we are required to do) to help students succeed. So how can school districts put a successful mental health intervention plan in place?

Where to start? It may seem counterintuitive to start with Level 3, but it actually makes perfect sense for a few reasons:

- Implementing Level 3 therapeutic counseling services allows you to triage and address the most urgent issues to start seeing results quickly.
- Providing mental health counseling services sets the stage for your Level 1 and Level 2 programs. Providing this service shows students, parents, and staff that mental wellness is a priority in your school because it supports student success. Students now have a resource to turn to and no longer need to hide their problems. And, staff members have a resource that can help them better support struggling students.
- Partnering with a mental health training and supervision service can help you to develop your Level 1 and Level 2 support programs. They can be a resource not only for training your staff to counsel students in crisis, but also for educating and supporting staff and parents. These professionals can teach you strategies for building a culture of trust in your school.

NEXT STEPS: Review policies and identify opportunities to encourage trust, respect, and communication. Model your new values and publicly reward students and staff who take them to heart and act on them.





WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN IMPLEMENTATION?

Level 1 intervention programs intended to change the school's climate and culture must be driven by school governance (Boards of Education) who have the authority to set policies and by leadership (Superintendents, Principals and Vice Principals) who have the authority to implement new expectations and practices.

It is crucial that schools develop and implement policies and programs in consultation with the Director of Special Services, school psychologists, social workers, and staff members who are trained to provide mental health counseling. In fact, it is often the savvy Director of Special Services who gets the Board and leadership to see the need for and benefits of Level 1 intervention.

Level 2 programs intended to educate staff, students, and families about mental health issues will typically be driven by the Director of Special Services with support from school leadership. School-based counselors can develop content and implement the training. It's also smart to engage a cohort of teachers who are passionate about the issue and can model values and evangelize the cause to students, other staff members, and even parents.

Level 3 intervention that provides services to individual students and families should be driven by school administrators who may need to work with the Superintendent and Business Administrator.





STRATEGIES FOR FUNDING THE PROGRAM

School districts are operating on tight budgets and striving to maintain a 2% cap on spending increases. That's why school administrators, while understanding the need for school-based mental health intervention, might feel helpless to make it happen.

The good news is, school-based mental health intervention does not have to be prohibitively expensive. Especially when you take advantage of the resources you already have — your talented staff — and train them to do the job, with the safety net of expert supervision. Here's how smart educational leaders are doing it today:

- **Reducing out of district placements** (saving the district upwards of \$90,000 per student per year), where students can be served in a less restrictive environment with school-based intervention programs. That can mean both keeping students in-district who are currently being evaluated for therapeutic placement, and returning students to district who have improved in a therapeutic school. The money saved by serving even ONE struggling student in-district (instead of paying for outside therapeutic placements) is typically much more than the cost to train your staff to provide school-based counseling.
- **Applying for federal, state, or non-profit grant funding** to pay for the first year of the program, until cost savings from reducing out of district placements is realized.
- **Starting with a small program in the school with the most need.** Once you can demonstrate improvement and how the program is impacting the students and the school community, it's easier to get buy in to expand the program throughout the district.



MEASURING PROGRAM IMPACT

To ensure that your program is meeting its goals and to secure funding for ongoing training and supervision, it's important to measure and continuously monitor results. As you design and build your student mental health intervention program, you'll want to set up a methodology for tracking the impact.

Having these reports will also make your school board more comfortable that you're doing everything you can to educate each student in the least restrictive environment as required.

Anecdotal reports from school leaders and staff can be meaningful and encouraging, but you also want to track important statistics and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) about student and school success, including academic performance, attendance, and disciplinary actions.

There may be other factors you want to track, such as interaction and feedback from parents. You'll want to see how these KPIs change over time, both for the individual students you're serving with Level 3 support, and for the student body as a whole (which speaks to the success of your Level 1 and Level 2 programs).



PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Click the image to watch the video.



Questions?

If you have questions or concerns about specific mental health-related issues impacting your school or district, don't hesitate to reach out for a confidential conversation.

We're here to help.

Contact Pat Hovey at phovey@sagethrivetoday.com or (862) 701-5110.



ABOUT SAGE THRIVE

What we do and why we do it

We believe that every student should have access to qualified mental health support within their home school district, leading to improved educational achievement for students and lower costs for school districts.

Sage Thrive has developed a unique and affordable solution to help schools support student mental health. Our program puts your district in the driver's seat and leverages the resources you already have: your talented school staff.

Our clinical expertise combined with our experience providing mental health services in schools make Sage Thrive uniquely qualified to teach your staff how to improve outcomes for your students.

Student mental health training & certification

Our training and certification program teaches your school psychologists, social workers, teachers, and other staff to help students manage mental health issues that interfere with learning. The training program consists of a series of online modules and assessments developed by clinical experts.

Ongoing consultations with clinical experts

Even after your staff members earn their certification, they are never left without an expert resource to turn to with questions. Our model also provides regular, one-on-one therapeutic consultations with a clinical expert for ongoing guidance and advice.