



The Role of the School in Promoting Mental Health

As part of a community-wide effort, schools can play an important role in promoting the mental health of their students by:

- creating a psychosocial environment in the school that is conducive to learning and acceptance through comprehensive and coordinated programs and services
- working with parents, community organizations and mental health agencies to support positive youth development and to be responsive to the needs of challenged youth
- addressing barriers to learning so that all students have an equitable opportunity to succeed
- establishing and enforcing policies and procedures in the school that encourage respect and trust
- involving their students in school decision-making
- encouraging student leadership, peer helper and mentoring programs
- teaching students about mental health issues, relationships and personal development
- adapting or creating programs for specific needs such as teen suicide and stress
- training teachers and counsellors to recognize mental health problems and to be more aware of the importance of mental health
- involving parents in their child's learning and school activities as well as offering information on mental health issues
- working with local mental health and voluntary agencies and advocating for child/youth mental health services
- offering staff wellness programs.
- organizing schools and facilities so that students are more likely to find a trusted adult with whom they can relate or be able to relate to their peers in more positive ways

As with other health issues, the school can create and maintain a healthy environment for all students and staff and thereby promote the emotional well-being of all students. The school can also work closely with other agencies and professionals to respond to various forms of mental illness and disorders in a caring and respectful manner.

Dewitt et al (2003) have described the [critical role of school culture in student success](#) and presented a framework for understanding the "school as a community. According to this framework, students are unlikely to experience academic or behavioural problems if they are exposed to a school culture in which students and teachers respect, trust, and support one another and where students have a strong say in school decision-making matters. This Canadian work could be considered as the "promotion" side of the mental health issue.

Fewer problems are expected because socially cohesive and democratic school cultures instill in students a sense of school membership where they experience feelings of communal acceptance and belonging and attachment to school life. Specifically, environmental conditions shape individual student feelings and attitudes that in turn exert a direct impact on their academic performance, mental health, and behavioural tendencies. The "Schools as Communities" framework is built on the following qualities and principles:

- belonging
- equality
- fairness
- respect
- caring
- cooperation
- trust
- recognition
- shared beliefs and values

The UCLA [Centre for Mental Health in Schools](#) offers a variety of web-based resources about mental health. They have summarized an approach to the “treatment and assistance” side and address various forms of mental illness in an “[introductory packet](#)” of materials. Their overview, [Mental Health in Schools: Guidelines, Models, Resources, & Policy Considerations](#) is an excellent overview.

They point out that among some segments of the populace, schools are not seen as an appropriate venue for MH interventions. The reasons vary from concern that such activity will take time away from the educational mission to fear that such interventions are another attempt of society to infringe on family rights and values. There also is the long-standing discomfort so many in the general population feel about the subject of mental health because it so often is viewed only in terms of mental illness. And, there is a historical legacy of conflict among various stakeholders stemming from insufficiently funded legislative mandates that have produced administrative, financial, and legal problems for schools and problems of access to entitled services for some students.

Despite some reluctance, school policy makers have a long-history of trying to assist teachers in dealing with problems that interfere with school learning. Prominent examples are seen in the range of counseling, psychological, and social service programs provided by schools. Similarly, policymakers in other arenas have focused on enhancing linkages between schools and community service agencies and other neighborhood resources. Paralleling these efforts is a natural interest in promoting healthy and productive citizens and workers. This is especially evident in initiatives for enhancing students' assets and resiliency and reducing risk factors through an emphasis on social emotional learning and protective factors.

The following checklist of school-based and school-linked policies, programs, services and practices has been developed by integrating the principles and guidelines developed by the UCLA [Centre for Mental Health in Schools](#) with evidence-based practices based on [Comprehensive School Health](#) approaches to promoting wellness.

A. Create and Maintain a Positive, Caring School Culture

- Create an understanding of the influence of school culture on learning among staff and students and actively maintain a positive, caring school climate through a variety of means.
- Develop comprehensive and coordinated policies on school discipline, staff development, student participation in decision-making and other issues that promote a positive school culture and provide the leadership and resources to implement and promote those policies.
- Develop and coordinate a variety of programs and services within the school within a comprehensive, “whole-school” approach
- Participate in community and agency mental health programs and activities.
- Develop and implement specific programs and link to related services for particular needs such as ADHD students, behaviourally disordered students, and students who may be considering suicide.

B Adjust and Improve Curriculum and Instruction

- Ensure that life and social skills are well taught to all students and that mental health issues are adequately addressed in relevant curricula and instructional programs.
- Ensure that all students are taught specific skills such as anger and stress management and where to find help, support and crisis services.
- Include coverage of specific life transitions (adolescence, etc) and specific life challenges (e.g. parents divorce) in programs teaching health, wellness and personal/social development.
- Address barriers to learning for specific types of students, especially those who may be close to dropping out of school.
- Develop teacher skills, practices and methods that enhance student participation in class and that are responsive to the diverse learning styles of students.

C. Promote a variety of forms of social support for students

- Establish and enforce school discipline policies and procedures that are respectful of student rights as well as responsibilities.
- Encourage all students to participate in decision-making and student life.
- Designate a school safety coordinator.
- Involve parents in instruction, homework, volunteers, advisory committees, information meetings and special events.
- Establish mentoring programs for students with staff, senior students and adult volunteers.
- Address staff burn-out, morale and overall wellness.

D. Provide Early Identification & Referral, Link to MH Agencies and Professionals

- Establish transition services for identified preschool students coming into the school as well as for students graduating from school.
- Establish early identification procedures for signs of stress and mental health problems and train staff to recognize those symptoms.
- In cooperation with local MH agencies and professionals, develop a range of appropriate services for your students. Ensure that staff, students and parents are aware of those services. In particular, define and describe the role of the school psychologist.

- Establish procedures and protocols with social workers and public health nurses for appropriate referrals and coordination with MH agencies and professionals in the community.
- Define the roles and appropriate procedures for guidance and counselling staff in the school.
- Establish protocols and procedures for coordinated case management with MH, guidance, counselling, social work and other school staff.
- Establish procedures for emergency response and treatment of students experiencing a relapse or episode.
- If necessary, establish protocols and procedures for administering medications to students during the school day.
- Establish programs, procedures and other supports for re-integrating students with mental health problems back into school after or during treatment.

E Maintain a Safe, Caring Environment through Organization and Facilities

- Ensure that school organization (e.g. teams of classes to reduce the impact of large schools, assigned time for homeroom teachers, timetables etc) and school practices (e.g. not displaying students experiencing difficulties in hallways) reflect a respectful and caring atmosphere.
- Improve facilities and spaces in the school environment to maximize their comfort and friendliness for students (e.g. greening school grounds)

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February, 2004