



Mental Health and Schools: Best Practices to Support Our Students

Implications for Policy, Systems, and Practice

Executive Summary

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Abstract

Created in partnership with local and national experts and community members, The Baker Center's report, *Mental Health and Schools: Best Practices to Support Our Students* explores the relationship between mental health and schools and identifies actionable strategies to promote student health and wellbeing in the midst of the national children's mental health crisis. The report summarizes the current mental health emergency, reviews current literature, identifies local and national best practices, incorporates stakeholder perspectives, and provides recommendations for practitioners and policymakers to improve outcomes across the Commonwealth.

Report Key Findings

Massachusetts consistently ranks among the top states in the nation for its high-quality kindergarten through grade twelve programs.¹ In addition to traditional academic education, Massachusetts is home to several nation-leading models and programs to address student mental health. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and school-based staff have been tasked with the near-impossible: providing students with stability during an unstable time. This has meant navigating the challenges of virtual and hybrid academic learning, as well as supporting student mental health amid a worsening children's mental health crisis. **Since 2020, depression and anxiety symptoms have doubled**, with one in four youth experiencing symptoms of depression, and one in

¹ McCann, 2020

five experiencing symptoms of anxiety.² Studies have also shown an increase in challenges such as eating disorders and substance use, and experts are especially concerned about youth suicide, which was already on the rise pre-pandemic.³ Increased need, coupled with long-standing provider shortages and insufficient student-to-staff ratios that have only worsened as professionals have left the field mean that **many children are not receiving the care they need.**

While a tremendous amount of work has been done, additional steps must be taken to address the increased need for mental health services and to ensure that students can thrive in the “new normal.” The Commonwealth has an opportunity to build on its strong foundation to ensure that every school in Massachusetts has the tools and resources to identify and respond to student behavioral health needs, and that students have access to high quality mental health services and supports.

“Before the pandemic, one in five children experienced diagnosable behavioral health challenges. Research suggests this need has only increased since 2020.”

Public schools serve over 90% of Massachusetts’ children and are an ideal setting to identify and address student mental health needs. Research has found that as many as **80% of children receiving behavioral health services do so in school; about one-third access care exclusively at school.**⁴ To promote the best

possible outcomes of students, a comprehensive array of supports and services is needed, including coordination and partnership between



² Murthy, 2021

³ Murthy, 2021; Panchal et al, 2021

⁴ Hoover, et al., 2019; Ali et al., 2019



school-based and community-based supports and services. Such “**Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems**” can be defined as school-district-community-family partnerships providing a continuum of tiered, evidence-based mental health services to students, families, and the school community. Research suggests that a tiered approach is best practice.⁵

What sets MTSS apart from other school-based initiatives is its emphasis on a comprehensive infrastructure and four essential elements:

- 1** Universal screening to identify levels of need for individual students.
- 2** Progress monitoring to guide the intensiveness of intervention moving forward.
- 3** Assessment methods and data strategies to govern use of data in decision-making.
- 4** Tiered interventions increasing in intensity to effectively identify and respond to the unique needs of each student.³⁷

The most prominent example of a tiered system is **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)**, a three-tiered model designed to identify and address student mental health needs, and promote positive social, emotional, and behavioral skills. When properly implemented, these systems function harmoniously with existing academic and social-emotional learning structures, working together to promote positive outcomes for all students. **MTSS is also**

an ideal model to facilitate the implementation of evidence-based practices.

Report Conclusions & Implications

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and related children’s mental health crisis, addressing student behavioral health needs must be a statewide priority. While there are several fundamental recommendations and cross-cutting strategies that can be universally applied, school mental health approaches are most effective when tailored to specific community strengths, capacities, needs and available resources to contextualize chosen strategies. Efforts must also **create fair and equitable access to services** and meet the needs of *all* students, with particular attention paid to historically overlooked communities.

⁵ Hoover, et al., 2019

At the policy level, Massachusetts would benefit from prioritizing **resources to invest in a community-based behavioral health system of care** that focuses on early identification and intervention and implementing an effective continuum of treatment utilizing evidence-based, culturally responsive practices. Further, Massachusetts would benefit from developing a comprehensive **statewide plan to implement MTSS in all school districts** including goals, objectives, and benchmarks to monitor implementation and report outcomes, as well as mechanisms allowing for plan adaptation to address specific community strengths and needs. The plan will require inventorying and integrating existing services and supports available across the state.



The Commonwealth could further support the health and wellbeing of students by identifying and addressing current behavioral healthcare financing, reimbursement and licensure challenges that inhibit access to effective care. Policy level initiatives should **prioritize equity, recognize and work to dismantle structural racism, and seek to address other long-standing structural inequities.**

At the systems level, the Commonwealth would benefit from **inventorying the services, supports and resources available** to each community and school district, assessing the level of evidence supporting these services, and developing strategies to allocate needed resources and address identified gaps in the service array. Further, systems level initiatives would be strengthened through **investments in bolstering the workforce and infrastructure for workforce development**, training,



quality improvement and outcome monitoring to ensure families have access to and receive the highest possible quality of care.⁶

At the practice and community levels, effective strategies will **ensure children and families have access to high-quality services and supports** that are both aligned with broader state-wide objectives and tailored to individual community contexts. These strategies should include effective, evidence-based, culturally and linguistically responsive services that are organized under an MTSS framework and leverage school- and community-based resources. Community-based strategies would benefit from leveraging areas in which schools already excel and build additional capacity to address identified gaps and needs.

In the wake of COVID-19, the need for high-quality mental health supports and services is at an all-time high. **It is more important than ever that our schools and communities are equipped to support the mental health needs of our children.** Evidence-based decisions at the policy, systems and practice levels can have a broad-reaching, positive impact on the Commonwealth's students and families. **This can lead to better behavioral health outcomes for students, improved academic achievement in schools, higher access to and utilization of quality care, and more effective and efficient use of resources** leading to significant return on investment and mid- to long-term cost savings. Massachusetts is in a strong position to build upon its reputation as a national leader by ensuring that a continuum of evidence-based behavioral health services and supports are available to students and families across the state regardless of race, ethnicity, identity or zip code. By designing and implementing a statewide strategy to build upon the unique strengths and needs of each community, the Commonwealth can ensure that all children in Massachusetts thrive – now and in the future.

⁶ Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, 2018



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended to support state and local leaders working to promote positive outcomes for children and families. For a detailed list of recommendations and a summary of evidence-based practices appropriate for school settings, see the Evidence-Based Policy Institute's full report, *Mental Health and Schools: Best Practices to Support Our Students* (QR code below).

1. **Develop, implement, and sustain a comprehensive statewide and district-level school behavioral health strategic plan** that identifies and responds to the behavioral health needs of students, fills gaps in prevention, promotion and intervention services, builds upon existing state and local initiatives, and is responsive to individual community strengths and needs. This includes supporting the implementation of a **Multi-Tiered System of Support**.
2. **Increase access to comprehensive, evidence-based, culturally and linguistically responsive behavioral health supports and services** across Massachusetts; including responding to behavioral health needs resulting from, or exacerbated by, the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Partner with schools, behavioral health entities, families and state leaders to **reform staffing guidelines and policies to increase access to mental health services and supports in schools**.
4. **Develop, implement, and fund a robust workforce development strategy** to ensure school-based staff, including teachers, administrators, behavioral health providers and school resource officers are well prepared to identify and respond to routine behavioral health needs, crises, and/or potentially dangerous situations which threaten school safety.
5. Identify strategies to **elevate equity, advance multicultural frameworks and dismantle structural inequities and systemic racism** in student-focused policies, systems, and practices.
6. Use an array of media and strategies to **raise public and professional awareness** about the importance of understanding and addressing the behavioral health needs of all students.
7. **Develop financial strategies and incentives** to implement, support, and sustain evidence-based, culturally and linguistically responsive services and supports in schools and communities across Massachusetts.



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