

## WHAT EDUCATORS, SCHOOL STAFF, AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS CAN DO

The experiences children and young people have at school have a major impact on their mental health. At school, children can learn new knowledge and skills, develop close relationships with peers and supportive adults, and find a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and belonging. They can also find help to manage mental health challenges. On the other hand, children can also have highly negative experiences at school, such as being bullied, facing academic stress, or missing out on educational opportunities (for example, due to under-resourced schools). Mental health challenges can reveal themselves in a variety of ways at school, such as in a student having trouble concentrating in class, being withdrawn, acting out, or struggling to make friends. In light of these factors, below are recommendations for how schools, educators, and staff can support the mental health of all students:

- **Create positive, safe, and affirming school environments.** This could include developing and enforcing anti-bullying policies, training students and staff on how to prevent harm (e.g., implementing bystander interventions for staff and students), being proactive about talking to students and families about mental health, and using inclusive language and behaviors.<sup>140, 141</sup> Where feasible, school districts should also consider structural changes, such as a later start to the school day, that support students' wellbeing.<sup>142, 143</sup>
- **Expand social and emotional learning programs and other evidence-based approaches that promote healthy development.** Examples of social, emotional, and behavioral learning programs include Sources of Strength, The Good Behavior Game, Life Skills Training, Check-In/Check-Out, and PATHS.<sup>144, 145, 146, 147</sup> Examples of other approaches include positive behavioral interventions and supports and digital media literacy education.
- **Learn how to recognize signs of changes in mental and physical health among students, including trauma and behavior changes. Take appropriate action when needed.**<sup>148</sup> Educators are often the first to notice if a student is struggling or behaving differently than usual (for example, withdrawing from normal activities or acting out). And educators are well-positioned to connect students to school counselors, nurses, or administrators who can further support students, including by providing or connecting students with services.<sup>149</sup>
- **Provide a continuum of supports to meet student mental health needs, including evidence-based prevention practices and trauma-informed mental health care.** Tiered supports should include coordination mechanisms to get students the right care at the right time.<sup>150</sup> For example, the Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education) program provides funds for state, local, and tribal governments to build school-provider partnerships and coordinate resources to support prevention, screening, early intervention, and mental health treatment for youth in school-based settings.<sup>151</sup> School districts could also improve the sharing of knowledge and best practices.

For example, districts could dedicate staff at the district level to implementing evidence-based programs across multiple schools). Districts could also implement mental health literacy training for school personnel (e.g., [Mental Health Awareness Training](#), [QPR training](#)).

- **Expand the school-based mental health workforce.**<sup>152</sup> This includes using federal, state, and local resources to hire and train additional staff, such as school counselors, nurses, social workers, and school psychologists, including dedicated staff to support students with disabilities. For example, a lack of school counselors makes it harder to support children experiencing mental health challenges. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends 1 counselor for every 250 students, compared to a national average of 1 counselor for every 424 students (with significant variation by state).<sup>153</sup> The American Rescue Plan's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds can be used for this purpose and for other strategies outlined in this document.<sup>154</sup>
- **Support the mental health of all school personnel.** Opportunities include establishing realistic workloads and student-to-staff ratios, providing competitive wages and benefits (including health insurance with affordable mental health coverage), regularly assessing staff wellbeing, and integrating wellness into professional development.<sup>155</sup> In addition to directly benefitting school staff, these measures will also help school personnel maintain their own empathy, compassion, and ability to create positive environments for students.<sup>156</sup>
- **Promote enrolling and retaining eligible children in Medicaid, CHIP, or a Marketplace plan, so that children have health coverage that includes behavioral health services.** The Connecting Kids to Coverage National Campaign also has [outreach resources](#) for schools, providers, and community-based organizations to use to encourage parents and caregivers to enroll in Medicaid and CHIP to access important mental health benefits. Families can be directed to [HealthCare.gov](#) or [InsureKidsNow.gov](#). Schools can use Medicaid funds to support enrollment activities and mental health services.<sup>157</sup>
- **Protect and prioritize students with higher needs and those at higher risk of mental health challenges,** such as students with disabilities, personal or family mental health challenges, or other risk factors (e.g., adverse childhood experiences, trauma, poverty).<sup>158</sup>

## RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS, SCHOOL STAFF, AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS

[Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs](#) (Dept. of Education): Guidance for schools, school districts, and education departments

[National Center for School Mental Health](#): Resources to promote a positive school climate

[StopBullying.gov](#): Learn about what bullying is, who is at risk, and how you can help

[Turnaround for Children Toolbox](#): Tools to drive change towards a more equitable, whole-child approach to school

[Design Principles for Schools](#): Framework for redesigning schools with a focus on supporting students' learning and social and emotional development

[Safe Schools Fit Toolkit](#) (National Center for Healthy Safe Children): Resources and guides to build safe and healthy schools

[Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network](#): School mental health resources