

Student Mental Health and School Safety
Florida Children and Youth Cabinet – January 31, 2013

The Florida Department of Education, through the [Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services](#) and the [Office of Safe Schools](#) promotes a system of support, policies, and practices that focus on prevention and early intervention to improve student mental health and school safety. Student Services personnel (school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors) provide direct and indirect services at the district and school level. The *Facts about School Mental Health Services* and *Youth Mental Health and Academic Achievement* handouts provide a national perspective on the rationale for and benefits of school mental health services, which include: achievement gains, improved attendance, higher graduation rates, and fewer suspensions.

What do we know about student mental health and school safety?

- Statistically, schools are among the safest environments for school-age youth. The percentage of youth homicides occurring at school remained at less than 2% of the total number of youth homicides, and the percentage of youth suicides occurring at school remained at less than 1% of the total number of youth suicides over all available survey years (National Center for Education Statistics, [Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2010](#)). Incidents of school violence/harassment in Florida are tracked through the *School Environmental Safety Incident Report* (SESIR).
- National research indicates that approximately 20% of youth have diagnosable mental health concerns (Merikangas et al., 2010). There are nearly 2.7 million public school students in FL. Given a prevalence rate of 20%, we would expect over 500,000 children and adolescents in Florida to have mental health issues; 10% of them with a serious mental disorder causing significant functional impairment (*Florida Adolescent Mental Health Fact Sheet*). Of the estimated 20%, 65,000 of Florida's students are identified as having significant social, emotional, and/or behavioral impairments, which may require mental health supports.
- [The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#) (YRBSS) monitors health-risk behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death and disability among youth, including behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence. The [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) is a statewide survey of Florida high school students that is administered every other year. The 2011 Survey indicates that sadness and hopelessness, bullying and harassment, and suicide ideation and attempts are relatively common. Suicide was the 2nd leading cause of death for 5-14 year olds, and the 3rd leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds in 2011 ([Florida Vital Statistics Annual Reports](#), Department of Health).

What is currently in place to address mental health and school safety?

- [System of Support](#) (refer to Color Graphic, *System of Supports for School-based Mental Health Services*). This graphic illustrates a system of support designed to meet the needs of all students and by providing a continuum of interventions and efficiently allocating resources according to student need, and focusing on prevention and early intervention.
 - 1) Continuum of support:
 - a. School-wide supports that are prevention focused and foster positive, healthy school environments (All Students) – Most efficient use of resources.
 - b. Targeted, supplemental interventions for groups of students needing additional supports (Some Students)
 - c. Intensive, individual interventions for students whose mental health problems are the most severe (Few Students) – For many of these students, school mental health services must be integrated with community services on a continuum of care.

- 2) Level of support is matched to student need.
 - 3) School-based problem-solving teams use a data-based, problem-solving process to identify, develop, implement, and monitor interventions.
 - a. The Department promotes use of an [Early Warning System](#) to systematically identify students needing additional support by using universally collected data such as grades (GPA), attendance, and Office Discipline Referrals (ODR).
 - b. For students with disabilities, the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) Team may include counseling as a related service on the student's individual plan (DPS: 2011-134, [Counseling as a Related Service](#)).
- [Student Support Services](#). Student Services personnel (school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors) are credentialed professionals responsible for providing school-based mental health services which may include individual counseling, group counseling, suicide assessment, bullying prevention intervention, and crisis intervention. (See handout, *An Overview of School-Based Mental Health Services*). Other mental/behavioral health specialists include contracted mental health professionals and behavior analysts. Crisis Intervention Teams are responsible for crisis intervention and response to student/faculty deaths, suicides, and natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes). Student Support Services and Safe Schools (FDOE) collaborate to provide guidance/resources to educators and families in crisis situations. Mental health prevention and intervention practices are included in the Student Services Personnel Evaluation Model.
 - [Office of Safe Schools](#). The Office of Safe Schools promotes safe learning environments by addressing issues of student safety by focusing on prevention and fostering positive school climates. The Office of Safe Schools personnel provide guidance and technical assistance to school districts for bullying and harassment prevention and reporting. The office is currently collaborating with the [National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments](#) (NCSSE) to offer free training on two modules – *Understanding and Intervening in Bullying Behavior* and *Creating a Supportive Classroom Climate* – to assist school personnel in understanding, responding to, and preventing bullying behaviors. The U.S. Government Center for Disease Control and Prevention hosts a webpage with safe school resources at <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/safeschools/>.
 - Two Florida Department of Education funded projects – [Florida's Positive Behavior Support Project](#) (FLPBS) and [Florida's Problem Solving Response to Intervention Project](#) – provide integrated support to assist schools implement a comprehensive, multi-tiered system of support. This tiered system of support uses a data-based, problem solving approach and includes school-wide positive behavior supports and more intensive interventions for students whose behaviors require more specialized assistance (e.g., emotional and behavioral disorders, mental health). The [RtI:B Database](#), an online behavior database, is available for Florida schools to enter and analyze information related to student behavior.
 - [Multiagency Network for Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities \(SEDNET\)](#). Facilitates a network of key stakeholders committed to assisting in the provision of a quality system of care for students with or at-risk of emotional and/or behavioral challenges. SEDNET encourages the use of Wraparound, which is a comprehensive strategy for community-level service planning and implementation, to link children and families to services that will assist them in reaching their goals.

***What are challenges related to student mental health and school safety? AND
What future strategies/ideas might be implemented to address these challenges?***

Challenge: The lack of policies that address barriers to learning and that establish coordinated, comprehensive mental health and behavioral supports in schools. ([School Mental Health Project](#), UCLA; [Center for School Mental Health](#), University of Maryland).

- Require that each district to develop and implement a Comprehensive Student Services Plan that supports student mental health with a multi-tiered, prevention/intervention framework.
- Promote a continuum of services that includes school-wide mental health prevention programming and intensive interventions, implements anti-bullying and violence prevention programs.
- Increase alternatives to suspension and improve student engagement, behavior, and achievement.
- Ensure that each school and district has a multi-disciplinary Threat Assessment Team, which includes school administration, school psychologist, school counselor, school social worker and representation from law enforcement, when needed.
- Provide *school-wide* programs to promote social-emotional development, prevent mental health and psychosocial problems, and enhance resiliency and protective factors.
- Promote student awareness campaigns and peer support programs.

Challenge: Systematic screening for mental issues is not a common practice. Schools are more proficient at screening and collecting data on disruptive behavior problems. Identifying youth with internalizing (anxiety, depression, social phobias) problems remains more challenging, in part, due to the sensitive nature of mental health information:

- Annually assess school climate.
- Require universal screening for mental health and behavioral issues at the school level.
- Build capacity of all school staff to promote healthy development and recognize when social-emotional and behavioral barriers to learning are present.

Challenge: School-based mental health professionals (school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors) are typically assigned to multiple schools and too often used for *crisis response* as opposed to *crisis prevention*:

- Expand school-based mental health services to focus on early identification and use of evidence-based interventions for social-emotional issues.
- Use Student Services personnel (school social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors) to provide school-based mental health interventions.

Challenge: School-based mental health professionals have limited access to professional development opportunities that address mental health issues, and are frequently required to attend trainings provided by professional organizations and community-based providers on their own time and expense:

- Support professional development and access to relevant trainings provided by professional organizations and community-based providers for Student Services personnel to enhance evidence-based strategies and intervention skills addressing student mental health issues.

Challenge: Fragmentation of services within schools and between school and community-based services:

- Support a System of Care approach for coordination and continuity of mental services between schools, agencies, and community providers, especially for those youth who are involved in multiple agencies.
- Support professional development and access to training to build capacity of school staff in building awareness of trauma-informed care, promoting the implementation of trauma-informed practices and adoption of trauma informed care environments in the delivery of broad range programs and services in school environments.
- Develop school-community partnerships and interagency collaboration.

The Removing Barriers to Learning and Improving Student Outcomes: The Importance of School-Based Mental Health Services and *NASP Recommendations for Comprehensive School Safety Policies* handouts provide additional recommendations.