Supporting Student Mental Health: Key Takeaways From School and District Staff

Behavioral Health

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Editor's Note: This post is part of this year's "Back to School" series in which our experts and guest authors discuss the need to support the health and well-being of youth as they return to school. For more, follow our hashtag #PolicyLabGoesBacktoSchool on Twitter.

Mental health concerns among youth remain prevalent following the COVID-19 pandemic. Percentages of youth experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety or traumatic stress are particularly troublesome. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that almost 60% of public schools noted increases in youth requesting school-based mental health services last school year.

Given these rising mental health concerns, K-12 schools are an important setting to help address youth mental health needs. In particular, schools are well-suited to provide mental health prevention programs to support the well-being of all students, which are known as Tier I services, as well as to provide targeted interventions to those at risk, which are Tier II services.

Researchers from PolicyLab have worked closely with local school districts on several studies of Tier I and Tier II mental health programs and other initiatives. This connection provided an opportunity to build on these relationships to work together on the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Tri-County School Mental Health Consortium (SMHC). In SMHC, our team of CHOP researchers is partnering with the Chester, Delaware and Montgomery County Intermediate Units to support public schools' Tier I and Tier II mental health efforts. In Pennsylvania, Intermediate Units are regional education agencies that provide a range of services to schools

and districts.

During the first phase of this project, we wanted to learn from district and school leaders, teachers, and other student support staff who are on the front lines of supporting student mental health and well-being.

We surveyed school district leaders and conducted qualitative interviews with each of these groups of school professionals. Our goals were to learn about the current landscape of Tier I and Tier II mental health programming in this region. We also wanted to understand what programs are in place, what is going well, and what school and district staff see as key needs and priorities to help support students.

Through this phase of our research, we identified several key takeaways:

1. Regardless of their roles, school and district staff care deeply about student mental health and well-being.

Many educators we spoke with recognized that student mental health and well-being are closely linked with academic engagement. Although they shared that it can be challenging to support student mental health within the context of limited resources, competing demands, and schools' primary focus on academics, they also shared their dedication to doing so.

2. Schools and districts face continued challenges regarding unmet youth mental health needs.

Many of the school professionals we spoke with shared that they have seen increased mental health needs among students in recent years. Many educators expressed particular concern about anxiety among students. They frequently attributed this and related concerns to structural factors, including disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, stressors related to social media use, and academic demands.

One district leader emphasized the link between youth anxiety and increased school demands: *“I think anxiety is probably at the top of the list, and I think there’s a variety of reasons. I think there’s a lot of pressure around students being exceptional all the time.”*

3. Schools and districts are utilizing innovative and thoughtful approaches to support implementation of Tier I and Tier II programming.

School and district staff described approaches they use to garner buy-in from key parties in many roles, including students and caregivers. They also described the importance of using a “common language” within the school building and aligning programming to school and district structures and priorities.

4. Supporting youth mental health takes a team effort.

Educators spoke about the importance of partnerships: they highlighted the value of their partnerships with Intermediate Units and academic partners, and how much they benefit from collaborating with and learning from other schools and districts.

As one school principal shared, *“I think communication is critical, and just the partnerships between the different agencies…and make sure that the stakeholders that need to be at that table talking about this are at the table.”* Other educators highlighted the critical importance of being able to connect students to mental health resources in the community, including higher levels of care when necessary.

We were grateful to have the opportunity to learn from school and district staff, as these individuals have important perspectives about youth mental health needs and priorities for school-based programming.

Our learnings from this phase of the research highlight the importance of mental health prevention programming in schools, particularly given the level of mental health needs that school and district staff see during their day-to-day work. Our learnings also highlight the excellent work that schools and districts are already doing to support student mental health and well-being. We plan to disseminate these findings over the coming year, through presentations and publications aimed at both school and research audiences.

We hope that the next phase of the SMHC project, which includes learning collaboratives to inform and support Tier I and Tier II programs, can build upon these strengths to provide another layer of support for schools and districts in helping their students thrive.

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