CLASP
The Center for Law and Social Policy

ADDRESSING THE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS THROUGH EQUITABLE SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES

Young people are experiencing a mental health crisis, with the U.S. Surgeon General, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children's Hospital Association all recognizing the severity. Bolstering school-based mental health is one key strategy for addressing this crisis.

All students can learn—even as they develop their academic skills—how to understand their emotions, show empathy to others, and develop decision-making skills. Addressing student wellbeing is critical, as these skills are useful and relevant to young people's everyday lives and will serve them in the long term. Further, students are better able to learn when schools attend to their mental wellbeing.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH?

Here's why providing mental health services in school settings is so important:

- School-based health is accessible and affordable. Young people are more likely to access care in a school-based setting than in other community-based settings.

- Schools can provide "tier 1 supports"—universal supports that focus on prevention and early intervention, both of which are key to addressing the mental health crisis. Social Emotional Learning (as defined below) is one example of a tier 1 support.

- By making care accessible to everyone, tier 1 supports can help destigmatize seeking mental health care.

- School-based health can help young people develop positive help-seeking habits, which have beneficial, long-term impacts on their health and wellbeing.

WHAT IS SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning **defines** Social Emotional Learning as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." This definition of Social Emotional Learning closely matches what young people **think** of as mental health.

Photo Credit: FG Trade / Getty

HOW CAN SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH BE EFFECTIVE FOR STUDENTS?

To be effective, schools must offer services that students want and trust. Services must align with young people's understandings and definitions of mental health and wellbeing.

To meet the needs of students, school-based mental health services must:

✓ Keep in mind the impacts of community, family, and intergenerational trauma. This includes trauma related to gun violence; physical, sexual, and verbal abuse; lack of family support; and discrimination.

✓ Be strengths-based and work toward a positive sense of self-esteem, wellbeing, and social inclusion. Services should prioritize community wellbeing and social connection.

✓ Recognize the unique context of each student and school, paying attention to culture, environment, and family structure.

✓ Include a continuum of support and providers with diverse identities and credentials.

✓ Authentically engage young people in the design and implementation of services.

✓ Clearly state what care is confidential. When young people know care is confidential, they are more likely to seek health services, disclose risky behaviors, and return for follow-up care.

In addition to practices that schools should adopt, here are a few that schools should avoid:

✗ Approaches that criminalize or police students.

✗ Strategies that are disciplinary, transactional, or hierarchical.

✗ Only offering supports like medications, psychiatrists, and clinical social workers.

✗ Requiring a diagnosis to access supports.

HOW CAN SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT YOUTH POPULATIONS THAT ARE VULNERABLE?

The youth mental health crisis is not equitably felt, with BIPOC young people, LGBTQIA+ young people, and disabled young people all at greater risk for mental health challenges due, in part, to racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism.

Young people will not trust mental health services that don't acknowledge or address their lived experiences—and therefore such services won't effectively tackle the youth mental health crisis. Services must be culturally responsive, gender and neurodivergent affirming, trauma informed, and healing centered.

Some student populations have mental health needs that schools can be particularly effective in meeting.

Young people living in rural areas have access difficulties.

- Rural areas are **often** mental health deserts, so young people living there may lack access to mental health providers outside of school-based settings.

Young people of color, LGBTQIA+ young people, and disabled young people need services that respond to their particular needs.

- Culturally responsive services and non-Western providers offer young people services they may be more likely to trust and that are more aligned with their own definitions of health and wellbeing.
- Students will not be safe in schools where they are criminalized or policed. Increases in mental health services will be **counteracted** by school hardening measures, such as increased surveillance and police presence in schools.

Young people who are systems-connected need seamless access.

- Young people who have been impacted by the foster care system, criminal legal system, and other systems should have automatic access to mental health programs and supports. Schools are often the most accessible and non-stigmatized place for these services.

The pandemic and other phenomena (like mass shootings, the racial reckoning, political polarization, climate change, and more) have exacerbated to a youth mental health crisis. Schools can and should play a key role in meeting the needs of young people to help them along a path to overall wellbeing.
To be effective, school-based mental health must acknowledge the root causes of the mental health crisis. In failing to do so, schools' risk, at best failing to meet the needs of all students, and at worst harming the mental health of students and worsening the crisis.