

Promoting School Mental Health and Wellness

What is Mental Health?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their community. This definition requires a cultural shift that views mental health as an integral part of overall health.

Mental health includes:

- A sense of self-esteem and self-confidence;
- The ability to identify, express and regulate emotions;
- The ability to set and achieve goals;
- The ability to recognize one's creative skills;
- The ability to expand knowledge and skills;
- The ability to feel and show empathy for others; and
- The ability to create and maintain satisfying relationships

Schools promote mental health everyday by:

- Encouraging positive routines and practices;
- Promoting physical activity, exercise and play;
- Supporting good nutrition;
- Teaching stress management and problem solving skills;
- Caring relationships.

What schools can do to increase awareness about Mental Health and Wellness:

- Provide training to increase awareness for students and staff;
- Incorporate mindfulness meditation, brain breaks, movement exercises;
- Create "peace corners" and wellness toolkits for the classroom;
- Incorporate mental health topics in art, writing, drama;
- Display informational posters and resources in the hallways and classrooms;
- Organize wellness week;
- Organize student lead wellness clubs;
- Create hallway displays on topics related to mental health and wellness.

The relationship between Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mental Health:

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

(Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL))

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), has identified Five Core SEL Competencies:

- Self-Awareness,
- Self-Management,
- Social Awareness,
- Relationship Skills, and
- Responsible Decision-Making

SEL plays an important role in making schools safe and maintaining a caring school climate as well as helps to promote skills to enhance youth mental wellness.

The Relationship between School Climate and Mental Health:

School climate is the way school culture affects an individual's sense of safety, acceptance, and wellness and consequently is a critical determinant of their ability to achieve success in school and in life.

- A positive school climate helps students to feel safe and connected to teachers, peers, families, support staff, and administrators.
- A school climate that supports healthy emotional functioning involves structures that offer preventive and responsive supports that are available to all within the school environment. Elements of support include fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community.
- Creating an environment where the mental well-being of all is valued and fostered, free from stigma, is essential to helping students feel safe and accepted.
- Research has shown that the quality of the school climate may be the single most predictive factor in any school's capacity to promote student achievement¹⁶. Everyone within the school environment succeeds when everyone feels accepted, valued, and respected.

To achieve a positive school climate and culture, it is important to understand and promote social emotional learning to teach students the essential skills that affect every area of one's life, including understanding how to manage emotions, and how to establish and maintain positive relationships.

Additional practices that support Mental Health and Wellness in the classroom

Trauma-Sensitive/ Trauma-Informed Schools

Educating all school staff on trauma and its effects on students, families, and staff is an essential first step towards becoming a trauma-sensitive school. Trauma-Sensitive Schools considers the influence trauma has on students' learning ability to access instruction: According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning, Trauma Sensitive Schools seek to

- Understand trauma and its impact.

In a trauma-sensitive school, all staff share a common understanding of trauma and its impact on students, families, and staff and a joint mission to create learning environments that acknowledge and address the effects of trauma on school success.

- Believe that healing happens in relationships.

Trauma-sensitive schools believe that establishing safe, authentic, and positive relationships can be corrective and restorative to survivors of trauma and can be resilience-building for all. This principle encompasses relationships among and between school staff, students, and families.

- Ensure emotional and physical safety.

Trauma-sensitive schools are committed to establishing a safe physical and emotional learning environment where basic needs are met; safety measures are in place; and staff responses are consistent, predictable, and respectful.

- View students holistically.

Schools invested in taking a trauma-sensitive approach understand the interrelated nature of emotional and physical health and academic success and the need to view students holistically and build skills in all areas.

- Support choice, control, and empowerment for students, staff, and families.

Trauma-sensitive schools operate in a way that supports choice, control, and empowerment for students, families, and staff and empowers all by building skills that enhance sense of mastery.

For more info: <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/building-trauma-sensitive-schools>

Restorative Practices / Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is a theory of justice that can be employed both proactively to strengthen community by fostering communication and empathy as well as reactively in response to conflict and/or crime. The term restorative practices is often used to describe a continuum of restorative approaches that can be used in schools to build relationships between both student to student and student and teacher.

Restorative practices seek to address the needs of those who have been harmed, while encouraging those who have caused harm to take responsibility and repair the harm.

Restorative practices emphasize the capacity of all people for healing, growth, and transformation and, encourages accountability, self-determination, healing, and interconnection. Restorative practices have a range of applications within communities, schools, and the justice system.

Restorative Justice.

For more information: <https://www.iirp.edu/news/schools>