

While schools are primarily concerned with education, mental health is essential to learning as well as to social and emotional development. Because of this important interplay between emotional health and school success, schools must be partners in the mental health care of our children” (p. 58).

What Is Mental Health?

Mental health, like physical health, may be viewed as existing on a continuum from healthy living to chronic illness. In 2001, the U.S. Surgeon General defined mental health as “the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

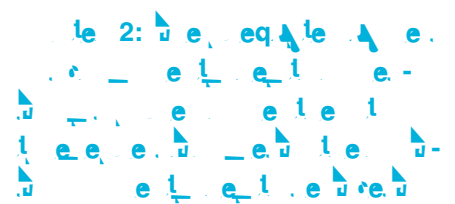
A person with positive mental health uses interpersonal assets and skills to function successfully in his or her daily life. Mental health problems emerge when these assets and skills begin to deteriorate, resulting in a struggle to cope with life’s challenges and responsibilities.

The continued deterioration of these skills signals the onset of mental illness as significant distortions to thinking, coping, and responding dominate personal functioning and impair a person’s ability to perform the activities of daily life. All people fall somewhere on this continuum on any given day.

Why Is It Important?

The specific mission and purpose of school has long been debated; however, there is general agreement that schools should promote learning for the purpose of creating productive citizens. In the era of the No Child Left Behind Act, schools are held accountable for academic

to interact positively with all students, including those with severe emotional and behavioral needs. Principals must ask specific questions, such as, Are staff members familiar with the early warning signs of emotional and behavioral health problems? Do staff members know how to respond when students share sensitive personal information? Do staff members know who the mental health professionals in their building are and how they can help students? Do the policies and procedures of the school help teachers and students respond to mental health needs, including those that reach crisis proportions?



The National Association of School Psychologists, the American School Counselor Association, and the School Social Work Association of America all have recommended ratios for the maximum number of students to each professional. The average ratio in the United States is currently 2–3 times greater than the maximum levels recommended by each of these groups, which are 250 students per counselor, 400 per social worker, and 1,000 per psychologist (American Counseling Association et al., 2006). These poor staffing ratios compromise the ability of professionals to sufficiently address the mental health needs of students.

providing mental health services in the school setting. Certainly, both sets of professionals are capable of assessing and responding to the mental health needs of students, and community-employed providers can be a valuable resource. Only school mental health professionals, however, are required to have specific training in school systems, educational learning theories, school law, and intervention and prevention in school environments. It is imperative that school administrators and school-based mental health professionals work collaboratively to support students. When community-based professionals provide services in schools, they should coordinate closely with their school counterparts.

education. These services include direct interventions, such as counseling and behavior planning and support, as well as consultative and transitional services for families, teachers, and community providers. When the severity and intensity of student needs exceed the capacity of the school staff, schools must partner with community professionals to adequately meet student needs. The UCLA Center for Mental Health in the Schools suggests that policymakers and school staff members work together with community providers and families to build integrated interventions and supports that will meet student needs no matter where they fall on the mental health continuum (Adelman & Taylor, 2006).

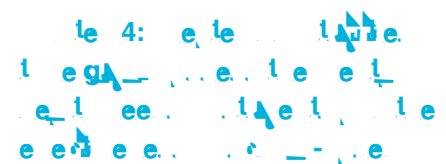


Figure 4: Informal and Formal Methods of Assessment. Assessing the mental health needs of students involves both informal and formal methods. Informal approaches can be as simple as checking in with students of concern daily, observing and listening to student interactions in the lunchroom and hallways to determine how people are doing, or setting aside a specific time in weekly leadership meetings to discuss student needs and issues.

It is also important for schools to consider formal methods that are designed to measure mental health. Collecting data that examine school climate

variables (such as class participation and attendance; the frequency, intensity, and duration of misconduct; and ongoing progress monitoring conducted as part of a response to intervention process) is a necessary activity for any school. Voluntary screening for depression or other mental health problems also can be a useful way to assess student needs. Schools may also want to query student beliefs and behaviors through formal surveys (such as the Youth Risk Behavior survey), observational data, or student satisfaction data. Principals should work closely with school mental health providers to ensure that data is regularly collected and to examine the extent to which services were available, were accessed by students and adults, and effectively promoted positive mental health in students.

Conclusion

Principals are responsible for promoting a caring school community that includes high expectations and support resources for students and staff members who are struggling to cope with the demands of daily life. Caring school communities emphasize the need to reach and teach the whole child (i.e., academic, behavioral, and social-emotional facets) within their whole environment (i.e., the school, the family, and the community). Princi-

standardized test scores and grades? *Journal of School Health*, 75, 342–349.

High Desert Education. (2005).