

PROACTIVE MENTAL WELLNESS IN SCHOOLS





ABOUT THRIVE ALLIANCE GROUP

Thrive Alliance Group is a nationally-recognized expert in fostering K–12 mental wellness. Thrive provides a continuum of services to support schools, students, and staff throughout the journey toward mental wellness and school success, including:

- **Professional Development** courses to educate your staff to recognize common mental health issues
- **Coaching, Training and Certification** for staff members to build confidence and competence in mental health support and become Certified School Mental Wellness Specialists™
- **On-Site Services** that bring mental health experts into schools for triage, counseling, work with families, and support for staff
- **Mental Wellness Accreditation™** to track, measure and validate a district or school's sustained commitment to prioritizing mental wellness





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The youth mental health crisis is growing, and it's preventing students from accessing their education, hurting school performance, causing teacher burnout, and leading to tragedies such as suicides and school shootings. The problem has escalated dramatically due to trauma and isolation associated with the pandemic.

Experts recommend proactive school-based mental health intervention programs to create a safe and secure school environment and to improve outcomes for students struggling with mental health issues.

A three-tier intervention program benefits the entire school community with an improved school climate and values; educational resources for school staff, parents, and at-risk students; and counseling services to support individual students and families with the greatest need.

This guide outlines why and how to implement a mental health support program, who should be involved, how to fund the program, and how to measure the results.





TABLE OF CONTENTS

Impacts of the Student Mental Health Crisis	5
What Does a Comprehensive Mental Health Intervention Program Look Like?	10
Resources for Providing Direct Mental Health Services	14
Reducing Out-of-District Placements	15
Where to Start	16
How to Implement a Successful Mental Wellness Program at Your School.	16
Strategies for Funding the Program	17
Measuring Program Outcomes	18
Questions?	19





IMPACTS OF THE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

U.S. Surgeon General

1: Increasing numbers of students are experiencing severe mental health issues.

Everyone in education knows that teen anxiety and depression have reached critical levels. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, in 2019 one in three high school students (and half of female students) reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, which is an overall increase of 40% over a 10-year period. The issue has become widespread even among younger students in elementary grades. And it's happening across the board in every school district, regardless of the affluence of the community or the reputation of the school.

Robert Ferullo, Principal of Weehawken High School in Weehawken, New Jersey and a former Director of Special Services, shared the following insight on our podcast, Conversations about Student Mental Health:

“Any school district that thinks that they don’t have those problems (mental health issues) is fooling themselves. They need to look deeper because it exists everywhere in this country, especially in this day and age. If they don’t put the resources to correcting it, the school shootings or suicides are going to become very real for those places. And it’s going to be unfortunate because they will be thinking, Oh, if only we had done this, this tragedy could have been averted.”





2: Mental health issues are preventing students from accessing their education.

Schools are required by law to address any issues that interfere with a student's ability to access their education. If a student is not emotionally stable due to mental health issues, the student is not available for learning. Mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, not only make it difficult for students to learn and be present in a classroom setting, but increasingly result in school avoidance, which makes it all but impossible for them to receive their education.

While there are many theories about the cause of the problem, there's no doubt about the effect: more and more students are failing and are not prepared for life upon graduation, due to mental health problems.

It's important to realize that mental health issues do not discriminate and they are not only affecting the special education population. Students face an excruciating academic load and pressure to get into top-tier colleges. Many are overbooked with athletics, tutoring sessions, and after-school activities. As a result, students are cracking under the stress. Schools have a responsibility to develop a solution to support and ensure the success of all of their students.

3: Overlooked mental health problems can turn into tragedy.

When we fail to address student mental health issues head-on, the result can be what we all fear the most: school tragedies such as suicides and shootings which will forever change families and communities.

Here's what the [National Association of School Psychologists](#) recommends:

"Providing ongoing access to mental health services promotes school safety by helping students feel connected to their school community. This connection is critical in helping to identify students who may need more intensive services or who require immediate law enforcement intervention when the potential for violence is identified. In these cases, collaboration among school staff members, community members, students, and their families is essential to ensuring that children receive care and effective interventions. Improved access to mental health services in schools and continued relationship building are critical factors in preventing and responding to both violent acts directed at schools and the necessary school crisis response following exposure to trauma."



4:

Student mental health impacts school performance.

School administrators face escalating pressure to maintain and improve school performance:

- They must prove the quality of the education they provide (via test scores, graduation rates, and prestigious college placements) so the town can justify the high cost of property and taxes to current and potential new residents.
- To maximize performance statistics, they must keep high-performing students in-district rather than choosing private schools.
- They must meet state and federal standards for inclusion (educating students in the least restrictive environment) or face the possibility of losing funding.
- They must keep suspensions and disciplinary actions low to protect the safety and reputation of the district.

With increasing numbers of students struggling and failing academically due to mental health issues, school performance measurements suffer. A proactive mental health intervention program can turn things around and provide assurance for any school administrator that they are fulfilling their responsibilities to the students and the community.





5: **School staff become overwhelmed and burned out.**

Teachers are not trained on how to support and engage students suffering from severe mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Some don't understand the issue and persist with strategies that exacerbate the problem. Others who try to help are burdened by increasing numbers of students turning to them for help inside and outside of the classroom.

Teachers and other staff members lack the tools and resources to provide effective support, and they feel frustrated and guilty when the students continue to struggle despite the extra help.

This situation is causing competent, professional people to become overwhelmed and burned out. It's also taking their time and attention away from other essential tasks and professional responsibilities.



6: **Parents are struggling, too.**

Parents (or guardians) often don't know how to help their children either, especially when it comes to the escalating issue of school avoidance. They may not know where to turn for help, or may not be in a position to pay for it.

Teens experiencing anxiety and depression often shut down rather than acting out, so parents may not even realize the extent of the problem. Parents might also be struggling with their own mental health or other problems that make it impossible for them to help their child.

So, when schools attempt to get parents involved, they may encounter avoidance or outright resistance. Mental health intervention that includes parent education and family counseling can make all the difference in helping students succeed. Promoting family involvement ensures the success of the whole child and begins to lay a more successful path for life after graduation.



7:

Educators can address mental health stigma.

Stigma (including self-stigma) associated with mental health problems can be a difficult roadblock to overcome, particularly in affluent communities where students face unrelenting pressure to succeed and get into prestigious colleges. Stigma is also common in some ethnic populations where people may have a cultural bias (or misunderstanding about) mental health care and resist help.

Sometimes stigma takes the form of denial, with schools and communities insisting that their students are not experiencing mental health problems. Students struggling with anxiety and depression may internalize their problems and withdraw, making them difficult to recognize. That makes it all too easy for schools to avoid dealing with the issue.

Recognizing and addressing student mental health is a community-wide problem, but one that educators are in the best position to address. After all, school districts have skilled, passionate, and well-respected teachers and administrators! They have the authority and the resources to share information in a compelling and persuasive manner. Schools have daily contact with students and parents, so they have the opportunity and the means to impact the culture of the school and the town. However, schools need the appropriate support and resources to do so.





WHAT DOES A COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTION PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

Given the critical need, the high stakes, and the responsibility of schools, how can schools and districts be prepared to meet the educational, social, and emotional needs of students struggling with mental health issues? And how can they do so proactively, to prevent the consequences discussed above?

Leading schools are working to improve student mental wellness by implementing a school-based intervention program with three tiers:

- **Tier 1 targets the entire school community and seeks to build a more supportive school climate and values.**
- **Tier 2 provides educational outreach and resources to groups of students, parents, and staff members.**
- **Tier 3 provides school-based counseling services to support individual students and families in need.**





TIER 1:

Build a school culture of trust and open communication.

Tier 1 intervention is all about creating awareness about mental health issues and building a school climate where people can speak openly without fear of retribution, ridicule, or shame. The goal should be for every student (and every staff member) to feel like they have belonging and significance in their school community. Strategies include:

Educate your staff about common mental health issues. Many school staff members don't understand the issues they are facing and don't know how to respond appropriately. Start by teaching your staff to recognize the most common mental health issues and understand the causes behind them. This level of awareness helps to reduce shame and blame across the entire school community, and sends a message about the value of mental wellness.

Establish policies in support of positivity, honesty, and trust. Take a hard look at your school policies (especially disciplinary policies) and consider whether those policies may be contributing to a negative culture that encourages secrecy and antagonism. How can you change things to build more trust between school staff, students, and families? Also, make sure classroom behavior expectations are consistent throughout the school. This sets students up for success because they have structure and a clear understanding about how they should behave in certain settings, limiting the opportunities for misbehavior.

Help teachers to build relationships with students. Teachers are trained to convey information and help students learn, but not necessarily to connect with them on a personal and emotional level. In fact, in the past, this type of connection has been actively discouraged. Let teachers know that this has changed, and provide coaching to help them do it more effectively. Often students who are unavailable to learn due to mental health issues will begin to become more engaged and present in the classroom once they feel a sense of belonging, especially from an authority figure. TIP: Encouraging teacher participation in coaching and leading extracurricular activities really helps to build relationships with students.

Model respect for others. You can't merely explain to students that they can be open with you; school staff must earn their trust by demonstrating respect for everyone in the school community. That means speaking politely and positively, being inclusive (in your actions and word choice), and refraining from gossip. In disciplinary situations, that might mean offering positive alternatives to punishment, and being willing to give someone the benefit of the doubt.

Overcome stigma by promoting the value of emotional well-being. Every student and staff member should understand that, in your school, mental and emotional health is considered a priority that's essential for success in school and in life. With that value firmly in place, students will feel more comfortable sharing their struggles, and it will be easier for them to find someone who will listen, understand, and help. This extends to staff as well; your school culture must encourage teachers to seek support and help when they need it.

Practice clear and open communication. Establishing a habit of honest and proactive communication between administrators, teachers, and students sets the expectation that it's the norm to share thoughts, emotions, and problems openly.



TIER 2:

Educate the entire school community.

Tier 2 intervention involves building the capacity for your staff (and parents) to identify and support specific groups of students who may be at risk. Strategies include:



Provide ongoing training for counselors and teachers to recognize the warning signs of mental health issues and suicide risk. Teach them tools and strategies they can use to intervene. At this stage, you want to build on the awareness of mental health issues that you established in Tier 1.

For your staff to become confident and competent in their ability to help at-risk students (and provide guidance to other staff members), they need more than a one-time PD session. They need ongoing support where they can share about the issues they are facing and get feedback about how to handle problems that arise. This support can take the form of regular meetings with peers and ideally, coaching from mental health experts.

Share information with parents to help them recognize when their child may need some mental health intervention, and also provide resources to show them how to get the help they need. Give parents opportunities to meet and discuss common struggles, and provide them with solutions through different strategies and evidence-based practices.

Establish protocols and resources for school staff members. Make it clear what staff members should do when they notice a potential problem. Provide staff with support and a defined process, perhaps designating a point person for them to communicate concerns. Establishing this process for student referrals will make efficient use of staff time and get the students the appropriate help in a timely manner. Having established a culture of trust in your Tier 1 intervention makes it more likely that staff members will see the signs and report them.

Make students aware that mental illness is not something to hide. Let them know that anxiety and depression are increasingly common health issues and not a cause for shame or ridicule. Teach them the signs and what to do when they or someone they know might need help.

"If you surveyed our counselors, if you surveyed our families, they could now tell you a lot about different mental health disorders because of the education that they're getting from workshops and training. It's definitely changed the culture of our community."

-Walter Curioni, Randolph, New Jersey School District



TIER 3:

Educate the entire school community.

Tier 3 intervention is designed to provide direct mental health support from trained, school-based counselors to students and families in need. These are the components of Tier 3 mental health intervention:

Provide individual counseling and group counseling to students. Students showing signs of mental health issues that are negatively impacting their education need regular, personal therapeutic support from a trained counselor.

Work with parents and families. School-based student mental health intervention is most successful when it includes open communication with parents. Counselors must take the time to work closely with families to fully understand each child's issues and to direct a consistent action plan that includes family participation.

Have an expert resource available to school-based counselors. Best practice is to provide an expert resource for school counselors to ask questions and get guidance about difficult cases. This helps alleviate the burden on your staff by giving them access to practical advice from a clinical expert.

Data collection and reporting. To ensure you can track the results of your mental health intervention program, it's important to collect detailed data about each student receiving Tier 3 services. You'll need to track grades, visits to the school nurse, attendance, and disciplinary records as well as attendance of counseling sessions and records of communication with parents and outside clinical service providers.

School administrators sometimes struggle to understand their role in providing this level of mental health support. The way schools address mental health must be educationally based. No one is suggesting that the school become a clinic. However, properly trained resources are needed to make a real impact on student success in school.





RESOURCES FOR PROVIDING DIRECT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES



Many schools have school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors who are equipped to handle learning issues that arise with the typically developing child. Unfortunately, these school professionals often lack the clinical training and experience to handle the depth of mental issues we're all seeing in schools today, especially debilitating anxiety, depression, and school avoidance.

To effectively meet the needs of struggling students, school professionals need additional training to learn effective strategies and best practices for mental health counseling. Additionally, school-based mental health counselors need to be supervised by experts to ensure consistency and quality of care.

Partnering with outside mental health service providers for counselor training and supervision is an affordable and effective way to meet the growing need for Tier 3 student mental health intervention.



REDUCING OUT-OF-DISTRICT PLACEMENTS

Without Tier 3 support in place, schools have little choice but to place struggling students in out of district therapeutic environments. In addition to the expense, there's the question of whether that choice is truly the least restrictive environment for the student, which districts must provide by law.

While there will always be students who need the intensive level of support in a therapeutic school, more students can stay in-district when school-based services are available. Plus, students who improve after a year or two in a therapeutic school have the option to return to the district when support services are available to help them transition back.



What's more, with the complete three-tier intervention protocol in place, it becomes easy for schools to make the determination that a student needs out of district placement: when a student is not successful after receiving all three tiers of in-district intervention, it's clear the student needs a higher level of care. Out of district placement decisions become data driven and consistent (as opposed to being left up to an individual case manager), which is very helpful in the event of legal issues.



STRATEGIES FOR FUNDING THE PROGRAM

The good news is, school-based mental health intervention does not have to be prohibitively expensive. Especially when you take advantage of the resources you already have — your talented staff — and train them to do the job, with the safety net of expert supervision.

Here's how smart educational leaders are doing it today:

- Take advantage of a wealth of funding opportunities for mental health support. Due to the impact of the pandemic and the surging need for youth mental health support, there are now many more funding opportunities available to schools to pay for mental wellness programs. For more information, download our guide to [**Funding Student Mental Health Programs in Schools**](#)
- Reducing out-of-district placements (saving the district upwards of \$100,000 per student per year), where students can be served in a less restrictive environment with school-based intervention programs. That can mean both keeping students in-district who are currently being evaluated for therapeutic placement, and returning students to the district who have improved in a therapeutic school. The money saved by keeping struggling students in-district can be more than enough to pay for your mental health support programs.
- Starting with a small program in the school with the most need. Once you can demonstrate improvement and how the program is impacting the students and the school community, it's easier to get buy-in to expand the program throughout the district.
- Create a tuition-based enrollment program with neighboring communities that brings in revenue for the district.

Thrive Can Help

Thrive's education funding experts work with you to uncover federal, state, and local funding that you can use to pay for our services. We clarify the intents and nuances of various funding sources and show how to make the best use of all the sources available to you.

Contact us for a free consultation and to get personalized advice about how to work through your district's specific needs and challenges.

[CONTACT US](#)



HOW TO IMPLEMENT A SUCCESSFUL MENTAL WELLNESS PROGRAM AT YOUR SCHOOL

As educators, we want to feel comfortable that we have done everything we can do (and everything we are required to do) to help students succeed. So how can school districts put a successful mental health intervention plan in place?

Where to Start

Schools are tempted to start with triage: hiring professionals to work with the highest-need students. And it does make sense to bring in resources with the expertise to handle the emergencies. But as a long-term strategy, you need to be more proactive:

- Build a more supportive school climate and culture, so you can identify problems before they become emergencies
- Raise the competence of your entire staff to nurture student mental wellness
- Reduce stigma by educating students and families

That means you need to begin implementing Tier 1 and Tier 2 programs while also managing the highest need cases. In fact, Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports help to reduce the need for Tier 3 intervention. Start with these steps:

- Begin educating your staff
- Create support groups for collaboration and sharing of ideas and strategies
- Trained staff can teach others to work with students at risk, and can help to create educational programs for parents
- Bring in expert coaches
- Get started on reviewing your policies and procedures and identifying opportunities to encourage trust, respect, and communication in your school
- Model your new values, and publicly reward those (both staff and students) who take them to heart and act on them

Partnering with Thrive Alliance Group can help you to develop a range of programs across all three tiers of support.



MEASURING PROGRAM OUTCOMES

To ensure that your program is meeting its goals and to secure funding for ongoing support programs, it's important to measure and continuously monitor results. As you design and build your student mental health intervention program, you'll want to set up a methodology for tracking the impact.

Having these reports will also make your school board more comfortable that you're doing everything you can to educate each student in the least restrictive environment as required.

Anecdotal reports from school leaders and staff can be meaningful and encouraging, but you also want to track important statistics and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) about student and school success, including academic performance, attendance, and disciplinary actions. There may be other factors you want to track, such as interaction and feedback from parents.

You'll want to see how these KPIs change over time, both for the individual students you're serving with Tier 3 support, and for the staff and student body as a whole (which speaks to the success of your Tier 1 and Tier 2 programs).





QUESTIONS?

If you have questions or concerns about specific mental health-related issues impacting your school or district, don't hesitate to reach out for a confidential conversation. Thrive is here to help.

thrivealliancegroup.com
info@thrivealliancegroup.com
(862) 701-5110



CONTACT US

THRIVEALLIANCEGROUP.COM