

Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup

Recommendation to the State Superintendent of
Public Instruction

2015

Recommendation # 4

Student Mental Health Training for School Staff and Community Members

Background:

The human tragedy resulting from acts of school violence dominates the evening news and captures the attention of the nation. But while violent acts committed by a few individuals attract nationwide attention, the needs of thousands of other students go unnoticed. These are the students who suffer in silence, often dropping out of school, falling victim to addiction, homelessness, suicide, or other tragic outcomes due to unaddressed mental health issues.

In 2012, State Superintendent of Public Instruction (SSPI) Tom Torlakson convened the Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup (SMHPW) to develop policy recommendations that promote early identification, referral, coordination, and access to quality mental health services for students. The SMHPW is supporting increased training for earlier identification and intervention to meet the needs of California's students. Mental health training for educators and other adults working with students can help identify mental health issues early, allowing students the opportunity to grow and thrive by receiving the support they need to overcome barriers to their education.

To date, the SMHPW has moved to support student mental health by promoting inclusion of mental health standards in California's credentialing programs, to prepare new educators to collaborate with school-level teams, district-level teams, and community partners to link students with mental health challenges to appropriate services. In a continuing effort to support students, the SMHPW now is turning its attention to educators and staff who already are working in the school community.

While some of the state's vulnerable youth are in specialized programs, most of the students with mental health challenges are in regular classrooms. In both

situations, many of the educators and staff for these programs lack training to identify students in need, make referrals, and, as appropriate, to help students overcome or manage mental health barriers they face every day of their lives. Adding to the problem, these staff may become stressed and overwhelmed.

An estimated 714,000 children identified as having a "serious emotional disturbance"— and many more have not yet been identified and are suffering in silence. The total percentage of children with mental health issues is estimated at 20%, with 80% of those undiagnosed and untreated. The lack of attention to their mental health needs impact not only school achievement but life outcomes as well.

Statewide action is needed to expand training throughout California so that all school administrators and staff can become "gatekeepers" and "first responders" who help address the significant student mental health needs in all regions. School-based, family-oriented services should be emphasized in order to reduce stigma and increase follow through with referrals to improve student mental health.

Student Mental Health Training: Maximizing an Opportunity

While some parts of the state have benefitted from mental health training on a small scale, limited budgets have restricted the reach of training that is critically needed in all districts.

Federal grant funds are now available for pilot programs in district and county offices to help disseminate mental health training throughout the state.

The California Department of Education (CDE) has been authorized to administer the "Now is the Time" AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education) State Agency Program (NITT-AWARE-SEA) grant.

The purpose of this funding is to build and expand statewide awareness of mental health issues among

school-aged youth. It will support training for school personnel and other adults who interact with school-aged youth to identify and respond to mental health issues in children, youth, and adults, and connect them to appropriate services.

Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA), the training funded by the NITT-AWARE-SEA grant, is designed to teach parents, family members, caregivers, teachers and other school staff, and community members to identify and help an adolescent (age twelve through eighteen) who is experiencing a mental health or addictions challenge or is in crisis.

The goal of YMHFA courses is to train educators and community members throughout California to help all students who are experiencing barriers to mental health—and to be aware of barriers we may inadvertently be creating in how we work with youth and design school environments.

YMHFA courses introduce common mental health challenges for youth, review typical adolescent development, and teach a five-point action plan that includes strategies to help young people in crisis and non-crisis situations. Topics covered include anxiety, depression, self-harm, substance use, disruptive behavior disorders (including Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), eating disorders, and disorders in which psychosis may occur. To maximize this new opportunity for YMFA training on a statewide basis, cross-system collaboration is required. As the state management team for the grant, the SMHPW can work with the SSPI to provide guidance to grant recipients to optimize its impact on school-aged children and expand the reach of its programs throughout the state.

While not all districts in the state are direct recipients of this federal funding, pilot districts will have the opportunity to create regional training opportunities provided through this grant. The CDE and local educational agencies that receive these funds will coordinate with the SMHPW and the SSPI to help expand mental health service access and training throughout the state.

Implications and Policy Recommendations:

The SMHPW sees a critical role for the SSPI in drawing attention to training opportunities and in making it a priority to provide increased access to mental health accommodations and services to all students in need.

The SMHPW recommends that the SSPI encourage all local educational agencies in California to collaborate in this initiative to provide professional development to educators and other community members, so they can identify mental health issues as they arise, especially during adolescence.

This training promoted by the SSPI should include accommodations that can be made for students in the context of academic and social expectations that may intensify stress at any time—especially for emotionally fragile children or youth with disabilities.

Educators need to have an understanding of multi-tiered systems of support to provide students with the appropriate level of intervention. Different tiers require different types of services and different levels of intervention. Also, training must include culturally and linguistically appropriate strategies which are trauma-informed.

Ongoing training can enable both school administrators and other school staff to intervene at the earliest possible point, to help develop schoolwide systems for student Support, and provide the basis for development of school climates and behavioral intervention systems that support resiliency in youth. These opportunities in professional development can facilitate strategies to promote restorative practices, schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports, social-emotional learning, and character based curriculum. Training also should include referral methods that enable teachers and other school personnel to link children and families to experts in youth mental health services.

Only by providing high-quality training for caring adults can we ensure that our children will be prepared to meet the demands of California's future. The SMHPW considers the support and leadership of the SSPI as critical in the efforts to accomplish this goal statewide.

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