

How can schools support mental health literacy?

Students are facing a mental health crisis, with [1 in 5 U.S. students struggling with a mental health condition](#). Half of all mental health disorders begin before the age of 14, and 70% by the age of 18. In fact, the [mental health of Oklahoma children has worsened](#) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The brain – particularly the developing brain – is unable to learn new information when in a stress response. When school staff and students learn to recognize and respond to signs a student may be experiencing difficulty, students can learn how to self-regulate, freeing their brains to learn.

The information in this document was developed to provide guidance on how to foster mental health literacy to ensure effective interventions that enable students' brains to learn.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Mental health is brain health. Prioritizing mental health and wellness is as important as being physically healthy. In the school community, understanding the difference between typical developmental anxiety and depression and a more serious mental health condition can aid in reducing stigma surrounding mental health.

School-aged children often worry that expressing mental or emotional struggles may mean they will be considered “weird.” Adults can reduce fear and stigma by sharing their understanding of social and emotional learning (SEL) with students. This can minimize the amount of time students spend dysregulated – managing their emotional responses in an inappropriate way – and shift focus from misbehavior to activities that help students regulate their behavior and get back on track to learn.

Adults who model positive self-regulation can help students learn how to manage their own disruptive emotions and impulses. When students, staff and families understand how to recognize [the signs leading to student dysregulation](#), the environment becomes more conducive to teaching and learning. Additionally, teachers can more effectively intervene on behalf of individual students whose struggles may be acute.

It is important that educators promote positive behaviors and implement [restorative practices](#) by giving students opportunities for redos and repairing relationships.

Professional development can facilitate a broader understanding of how to recognize, respond to and support students who are struggling mentally and further enhance mental

KEY INSIGHTS

- Establish positive relationships with students and community mental health partners.
- Engage with families to ensure equity when creating student supports.
- Use appropriate, person-centered language surrounding mental health.
- Prioritize mental health as much as physical health to help reduce stigma.
- Implement social and emotional learning throughout the school community.
- Conduct universal screening and use data to develop strategic plans to address student needs.
- Ensure educators and other school staff collaborate and consult with mental health professionals as needed.

SEE ALSO

- [How can schools implement systems that foster social and emotional learning for students?](#)
- [How can social and emotional learning and mental health supports be incorporated into summer learning?](#)
- [Oklahoma School Counselor Corps initiative](#)

health literacy. The [Youth Mental Health First Aid](#) course includes common youth mental health challenges, a review of typical adolescent development and a five-step action plan to help young people in crisis and non-crisis situations. The training is free to every Oklahoma school district and can be requested [via this link](#).

A [U.S. Department of Education report](#) provides an overview of supports for student mental, social, emotional and behavioral health, including targeted information, resources and best practice case studies.

ATTENDING TO EQUITY

Educators should strive to use [person-centered language](#) as opposed to labeling language in describing mental health issues.

Unconditional positive regard – assuming the best, rather than the worst, about individual behavior – is a must when interacting with staff, students and families. It's better to express concern to an individual directly rather than make an assumption about their mental health.

Focusing on mental health should always be done through an inclusive lens. Educators should make every effort to provide services that are culturally appropriate for the diverse populations in the school community. These efforts should encompass student behavior styles to ensure no group of students is overidentified due to behavior style alone. Addressing language barriers and ensuring access to written and verbal communication in preferred languages is also important.

RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

- Create an environment where students feel safe to share. Practicing vulnerability and empathy promotes these feelings of safety. Allow students to see adults making and correcting their own mistakes. When students feel safe and supported, they are more likely to engage in learning and have better academic outcomes.
- Conduct a universal screener to help identify students who may need social, emotional or behavioral support. A site-level team can review the resulting data and link students to appropriate resources in and outside of school. Create an account on the [School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation System website](#) to access sample screeners.
- Establish a procedure for school staff to refer students in need of outside services. This supports a culture of mental health safety.
- Implement an [evidence-based social and emotional learning curriculum for all students](#) to help support consistent exposure to mental health literacy. In addition, establishing partnerships with external community mental health providers enhances services and supports to students, educators and staff.

