Addressing Mental Health and Substance Use Issues in Schools

Communities throughout Ohio are experiencing an increasing demand for mental health and substance use services. This demand extends into schools where students, parents, educators, administrators, and others have identified a growing need for social and emotional supports in schools. The Ohio Council of Behavioral Health and Family Services Providers reports that “today, almost half of all Ohio districts and school buildings have access to behavioral health services through school-community behavioral health provider partnership.” Throughout Ohio’s communities, availability of services in schools and in partnership with schools varies. The current focus on the critical need for these services and the focus on building strong partnerships provide opportunities for schools, local ADAMH Boards, behavioral health providers, and other partners to come together to identify the most effective methods to establish, enhance, and sustain mental health and substance use services in schools and for students.

Background from SAMHSA and CMS

There is an urgent need to identify children and adolescents who have or are at risk for mental disorders, including SUDs, and connect these children and adolescents with other services they need. Schools can fill a critical role in both identifying such children and adolescents and connecting them with treatment and other services they need. An estimated ten percent of children and adolescents in the United States have a serious emotional disturbance (SED), yet approximately 80 percent of those children and adolescents with an SED do not receive needed services. Approximately 80 percent of children and adolescents with mental health diagnoses have unmet mental health needs.

Substance use rates among adolescents remain concerning, with over 16 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 17 reporting illicit drug use during 2017, and more than 31 percent of adolescents endorsing use of tobacco or alcohol during the same timeframe. Further, during 2017, four percent of 12 to 17 year olds met criteria for a substance use disorder, with 82.5 percent of those adolescents not receiving needed care.

Intervening early is critical, given that half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14 and three-fourths by age 24. Research has shown that early identification and treatment improves outcomes. For example, early interventions conducted by comprehensive school-based mental health and substance treatment systems have been associated with enhanced academic performance, decreased need for special education, fewer disciplinary encounters, increased engagement with school, and elevated rates of graduation.

However, most communities and schools lack high quality, comprehensive treatment for children and adolescents. Many areas of the nation entirely lack or have insufficient numbers of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and other professionals, especially those with experience in treating children and adolescents, to meet the growing needs. Navigating complex systems to seek care often presents challenges for families and caregivers, such as long wait times, insufficient available services, and poor insurance coverage.

Based on the aforementioned access challenges, schools are particularly critical in identifying and supporting students with mental health issues. Unfortunately, schools often lack the capacity to both identify and adequately treat mental disorders including SUD needs of their students. School principals report that student mental health needs are one of their biggest challenges. Despite these challenges, integrating evidence-based mental health and SUD services into schools can provide many benefits, including increased access to care and decreased stigma when seeking treatment.

~ Adapted from the Joint Informational Bulletin “Guidance to States and School Systems on Addressing Mental Health and Substance Use Issues in Schools” issued by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services on July 1, 2019.
Mental health and substance use challenges negatively affect how well children and adolescents can learn, and there is an urgent need to identify students at risk or experiencing these challenges to connect them with appropriate prevention and treatment services. Early intervention improves outcomes, and comprehensive school mental health systems have been associated with multiple positive educational and performance outcomes. No single funding source can adequately support all mental health and substance-related prevention and treatment needs of students and their families and caregivers; however, federal, state, and community-level resources can be leveraged with philanthropic and other funding streams to ensure appropriate levels of support. Providing these services within schools increases the likelihood of children and adolescents receiving needed services, thus better ensuring academic and life success.

~SAMHSA, CMS Guidance to States and School Systems on Addressing Mental Health and Substance Use Issues in Schools, July 1, 2019

Building Partnerships to Address Challenges

As communities work to collectively address challenges related to mental health and substance issues in schools, solutions must be designed to:

- Provide adequate and stable funding and support for prevention, consultation, early intervention, and connection to treatment services.
- Promote school-community partnerships that will benefit students inside and outside of classrooms.
- Prioritize coordination of school and community services and supports for students and families.
- Utilize evidence-based and evidence-informed practices and programs that most effectively meet student needs.
- Address barriers faced by individuals in need of care, including decreasing stigma and increasing access to care.

National School Mental Health Curriculum: Guidance and Best Practices for States, Districts, and Schools

Implementing comprehensive school mental health policies and practices is a complex task that has the potential to positively affect the lives of many students. To help states, districts, and schools across the United States understand the core components of comprehensive school mental health, as well as engage in a planning process, the Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC) Network Coordinating Office and National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH) developed a national school mental health curriculum focused on the following core features of effective school mental health initiatives:

- **Roles for Educators and Student Instructional Support Personnel** who are well-trained to support the mental health needs of students in the school setting.
- **Collaboration and Teaming** that ensure schools, districts, and community partners have agreements in place and meet regularly to develop and implement SMH plans that answer the needs of all students across universal/school-wide, indicated, and intensive levels.
- **Multi-Tiered System of Supports** that promotes mental health and reduces the prevalence and severity of mental illness.
- **Evidence-Informed Services and Supports** that are backed by scientific and/or practice-based evidence of implementation success and achieving the desired outcomes.
- **Cultural Responsiveness and Equity** to ensure access to mental health supports and services in a manner that is equitable and reduces disparities across all students.
- **Data-Driven Decision Making** to monitor student needs and progress, assess the quality of implementation, and evaluate the effectiveness of supports and services.

The curriculum along with additional resources and tools can be accessed at [https://mhttcnetwork.org](https://mhttcnetwork.org)