

Brief

Partnering With Colleges and Universities to Improve Your K–12 School Mental Health System

Introduction

Developing and sustaining comprehensive school mental health systems should be a shared endeavor between schools and community partners; the task should not rest solely on the shoulders of the K–12 education sector. Community partners, including health and behavioral health providers, can augment the continuum of services available to students and families by offering services directly in schools, and by facilitating referral pathways when students need support outside of the school building.¹ Colleges and universities are also critical community partners in building comprehensive school mental health systems. They can foster a robust workforce, offer professional development, provide mental health services, and engage in research and evaluation to study impact and inform quality improvement. This brief describes each of these opportunities for partnership with colleges and universities and highlights strategies and exemplars to help accelerate innovation and advancement in K–12 school mental health systems.

Workforce Development

The widening shortage of mental health professionals available to offer a continuum of supports to students is a growing concern among school leaders. School- and community-employed mental health professionals are in high demand. Many job postings are unfilled due to a limited workforce. A key long-term strategy for enhancing K–12 school mental health programming is to partner with colleges and universities to expand the workforce pipeline. Outreach to and engagement of students early in their career decision-making process is key to growing a robust workforce. Education and behavioral health leaders can reach out to high schools and institutions of higher education to share information about school mental health professions. Exposure to the day-to-day roles and critical functions of school mental health professionals can be an impactful experience for students who are still deciding majors or are taking introductory coursework. Shadowing and mentorship opportunities for new undergraduate and graduate students can spark interest and investment in school mental health professions. Furthermore, for those most interested, building in externship and other practicum opportunities beyond initial engagement can lead to full-time positions and dedicated careers in school mental health.

Exemplars

BHECN Ambassador Program

<https://www.unmc.edu/bhecn/programs/ambassador-program/index.html>

Starting as early as high school, the Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska (BHECN), supported by a [Mental Health Services Professional \(MHSP\) Demonstration Grant](#) (funded by the U.S. Department of Education), creates a pipeline of Nebraska students interested in behavioral health. It follows students from high schools through undergraduate, then graduate or professional schools, and ultimately on to careers in behavioral health professions, including school mental health. More than 2,000 students have participated in the BHECN Ambassador program since its inception in 2013. BHECN focuses especially on students in rural communities. The program recruits and mentors students from rural high schools and offers activities aligned with mental health careers, including an annual College Ambassador Conference to introduce students to career opportunities. High school and college students in the Ambassador Program lead mental health awareness and stigma reduction efforts in their local communities.

Corbin Independent School District

The Corbin School of Innovation in Corbin County, Kentucky, a MHSP grantee, is a Montessori program that offers counseling and health sciences among its 12 career pathway programs (<https://www.corbininnovate.org/6-12>). Corbin High School and Corbin School of Innovation are among 43 high schools chosen to participate in the Teen Mental Health First Aid Program pilot expansion supported by Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation. The Corbin County team is working to create a more direct pipeline for students from those programs to their higher education partners. The team envisions a capstone dimension to the continuum through which seasoned and retired school mental health professionals will guide, mentor, and support students from early interest in high school through their college studies and into their early professional careers.

Mental Health Services and Supports

Accredited mental health graduate programs, including counseling, social work, psychology, and psychiatry, can augment school and community mental health staffing. These programs offer numerous opportunities to better advance unfunded or underfunded mental health services and supports. As many trainee placements are unpaid, there is less pressure to bill for services, allowing more emphasis on the educational experience and exposure to the full continuum of mental health services and supports. Unique to the school mental health training experience are opportunities to provide not only treatment but also mental health promotion and prevention, as well as consultation to school staff. Clinical staff gain supervisory and professional growth opportunities when working with trainees, as well as potential co-leaders for school, classroom, and small-group mental health activities. In addition, higher education trainees represent a hiring pipeline. Trainees who distinguish themselves become attractive candidates for employment, constituting a great recruitment resource as positions become available.

Exemplars

Humboldt County, California Mental Health Service Professional Grant Program

Eureka City Schools in Humboldt County, California, has secured a planning MHSP grant and are creating their vision for a school-based wellness center that will also support mental health workforce development. The planning team includes high school students and leaders from the local federally qualified health center, the school system, and the Humboldt State University Social Work Department. They have two primary goals: increasing mental health services throughout the school district and creating a school to clinician pipeline. The school-based wellness center will train Humboldt State University interns seeking master's degree in social work. After graduation, these students will be employed by the wellness center to provide mental health services to students while earning clinical hours toward licensure.

The University of Maryland School Mental Health Program (SMHP)

The University of Maryland School Mental Health Program is affiliated with the [National Center for School Mental Health](#). The SMHP partners with several local universities to offer graduate students in diverse mental health disciplines 1-year practicum placements in school mental health in an urban Maryland school district. Master's-level and doctorate trainees in counseling, social work, psychology, and psychiatry engage for full-year placements. Trainees are supported by licensed school mental health professionals. Under direct supervision, practicum students offer a full array of services to students, including universal mental health promotion, prevention, and mental health treatment services. As part of the clinical experience, students receive training in evidence-based interventions and culturally responsive and equitable clinical practice. SMHP staffing has benefitted tremendously from its training programs. Approximately half of its licensed clinical staff are former graduate trainees from the program. The SMHP is an approved site for the National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program, which reinforces interest in remaining in the clinical program after graduation. This program offers health professionals loan repayment in exchange for providing health care in urban, rural, or tribal communities with limited access to care.

Professional Development and Training

Higher education programs offer numerous professional development and training opportunities for current school mental health staff and for the future workforce. Faculty from colleges and universities have unique knowledge and skills, including of evidence-based programs and practices related to child and adolescent mental health and well-being. Schools offer a bidirectional learning opportunity between researchers and providers that promotes a rapid translation of research to practice. Researchers can teach frontline providers the science in the field, and in turn learn from the real-world experience of frontline providers. Such reciprocal relationships afford researchers an understanding of how best to translate their research into day-to-day practice, including identifying needed adaptations and determining the implementation supports required to ensure fidelity to the evidence-based programs and strategies.

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Virginia Partnership for School Mental Health

<https://education.virginia.edu/faculty-research/centers-labs-projects/youth-nex/projects/virginia-partnership-school-mental-health>

The Virginia Partnership for School Mental Health (VPSMH) is a statewide partnership among the Virginia Department of Education, the University of Virginia, school divisions, and university training programs across the Commonwealth. VPSMH activity is supported by two U.S. Department of Education grants (MHSP and the [School-Based Mental Health Services program](#)). The partnership aims to work alongside school districts to expand support for school mental health services. In addition to offering research support and workforce development for school mental health professionals in Virginia, the VPSMH leverages university partnerships to offer professional development to pre-service and in-service school mental health professionals. Activities include telementoring opportunities; provision of asynchronous, web-based modules covering topics such as evidence-based mental health interventions; supervision of graduate student trainees; and interprofessional collaboration and advocacy. The partnership works with school districts to produce new knowledge related to effective support and provision of school mental health services.

Research and Evaluation

University researchers are often eager to engage with practice settings to conduct evaluation and research that can build their own portfolio while simultaneously informing the field with empirically driven work. University scholars may be unsure how to engage with school systems to conduct research but are receptive when schools reach out to engage them in answering critical problems of practice. Universities can offer evaluation services to school mental health programs. They often have data infrastructure and expertise not readily available in many school mental health systems. As schools increasingly focus on being able to demonstrate outcomes of clinical services, there are numerous opportunities for school systems and university researchers to collaborate to develop research and evaluation questions that can inform effective and efficient service provision for youth and families. Collaborations with university partners may offer new opportunities to access funding support for school mental health from federal agencies like the National Institute of Mental Health, Institute of Education Sciences, and Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute.

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School Mental Health Assessment Research and Training (SMART) Center

<https://smartcenter.uw.edu/>

The overarching mission of the SMART Center at the University of Washington is to promote quality improvement of school-based mental and behavioral health services. One strategy for achieving this mission is to offer research and evaluation support to local school districts in Washington. To support the center's research goals, it maintains a "local laboratory" in Seattle, King County, and the Puget Sound region. That living laboratory supports active learning by schools and providers, continuously informed by SMART evaluation of their innovative methods of service delivery and quality improvement.

Seattle's Minority Engagement and Discipline Reduction Research Collaborative (MENDR) is an example of strategic partnership between local schools and the SMART Center. MENDR's goal is to develop an authentic research

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partnership between Seattle Public Schools and the SMART Center focusing on the problem of racial and ethnic disproportionality in discipline practices. MENDR is improving the Seattle Public Schools' capacity to apply research (i.e., to identify schools with disproportionality and causes of disproportionality) and engage in a joint effort to develop, implement, and test an approach for disproportionality prevention and reduction.

Conclusion

As emphasized by the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Center for School Mental Health, "When it comes to school-employed and community partners supporting school mental health: It is not either/or. It is both/and." Colleges and universities are essential community partners that can collaborate with schools to introduce, develop and grow the workforce for comprehensive school mental health systems. K-12 school systems and colleges and universities can leverage each other's strengths, can learn from one another to better advance school mental health research, and can discover and document best practices to support the mental health and well-being of students and families. Investing in partnerships between school systems and higher education can contribute to a more highly skilled workforce that offers a natural pipeline from high school to college or university to school mental health professionals.

Reference

- ¹ National Association of School Psychologists & National Center on School Mental Health. (2021). *Effective school-community partnerships to support school mental health*.
<http://www.schoolmentalhealth.org/media/SOM/Microsites/NCSMH/Documents/Resources/Effective-School-Comm-Partnerships-to-support-SMH-Final.pdf>

Preferred Citation

Lever, N., & Hoover, S. (2021). *Partnering with colleges and universities to improve your K-12 school mental health system*. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.

The contents of this National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments product was assembled under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools to the American Institutes for Research (AIR), Contract Number ED-ESE-16-A-0002. The contents of this product do not necessarily represent the policy or views of the U.S. Department of Education, nor do they imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.