Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and the Importance of Promoting Student Well-being

The number of young people in the U.S. who are struggling with mental health challenges has risen over the last decade, and these challenges remain the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in youth.[1]

> In 2021, 42% of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year, 22% seriously considered attempting suicide, and 10% attempted suicide. Female students and LGBTQ+ students were more likely to report these feelings than their peers.[2]

> From 2011-2021, the percentage of students who reported feeling sad and hopeless increased from 28% to 42% among all racial groups.[3] During this same period, more female students; Black students; Latinx, Latino(a), and Hispanic students; and white students reported seriously considering suicide.[4]

The COVID-19 pandemic saw many students struggling with mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety, leading the American Academy of Pediatrics, Children's Hospital Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry to release a joint letter declaring a "national state of emergency in children's mental health."[5] The data show that:

- One-third of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the pandemic.[6]

- More than 40% of high school students reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless during the 2020/21 school year.[7]

- Impulsivity, irritability, and other negative emotions and behaviors moderately increased. [8]

- Emergency Department visits related to mental health concerns from March to October 2020 increased 24% among children aged 5-11 years and 31% among adolescents 12-17 years, in comparison to this same time period in 2019. [9]

- A longitudinal study found the number of adolescents aged 12-13 who demonstrated "problematic symptoms" related to mental health jumped to 22.9% during the pandemic from 3.3% pre-COVID-19. [10]

- Public school leaders reported that the pandemic negatively impacted student socio-emotional development.[11]

Given the student mental health crisis documented above, there is a critical need for schools to support student well-being and address mental health challenges to ensure positive academic and health outcomes. However, school leaders need more support for student and staff mental health, including training on social-emotional development. [12] This document provides an overview of the use of a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support framework to promote student well-being.

What Are Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)?

A multi-tiered system of support can help schools implement cohesive evidence-based programs and practices that promote the development of social and emotional competencies, which can support positive academic and mental health outcomes. These programs serve the needs of both general education and special education students.

The three tiers of the MTSS framework, shown at right, offer a continuum of supports of increasing intensity to promote social and emotional competencies among all students, as well as to ensure that students with social, emotional, or mental health challenges are identified and supported.
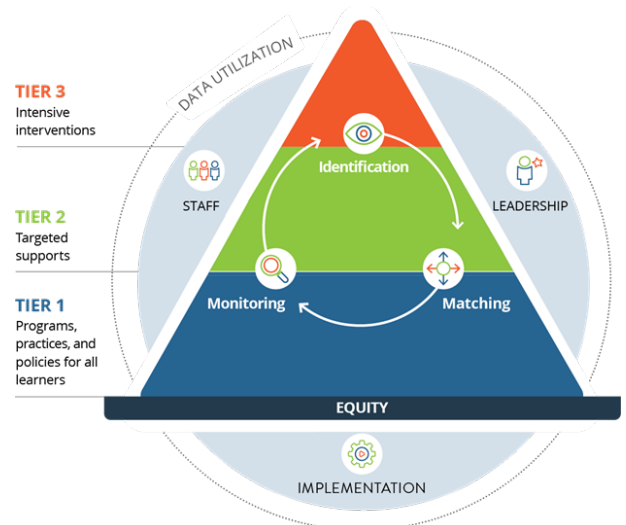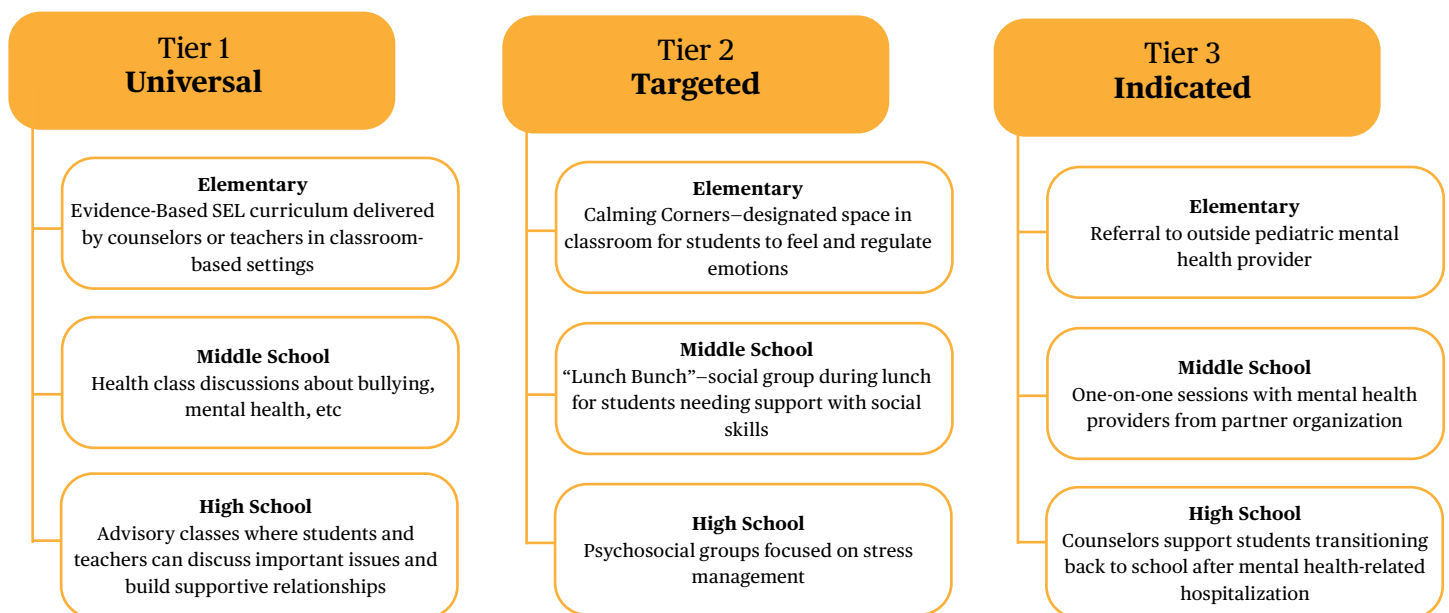

Multi-Tiered System of Support for SEL and Mental Health[13]

Tier 1: Social and emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-sensitive school programs and practices implemented in the classroom and through schoolwide practices and policies.

Tier 2: Targeted interventions for students identified as having low to moderate social, emotional, or mental health challenges–often through small-group interventions.

Tier 3: Individualized mental health interventions for students with high mental health needs, including diagnosed mental health disorders.

Needs for Tier 2 and 3 supports are typically identified through student assessments, mental health screenings, and/or other school records such as attendance and disciplinary data. Once identified and placed in one or more Tier 2 and/or 3 interventions, students are monitored to determine whether interventions are effectively addressing students' needs and whether more or different interventions are needed. These types of interventions are typically offered at the school by school staff. In some cases, particurlarly Tier 3, mental health interventions may involve referring students to outside mental health clinicians.

Examples of MTSS Programs for SEL and Mental Health Across the Three Tiers

Tier 1 Universal	Tier 2 Targeted	Tier 3 Indicated
Elementary Evidence-Based SEL curriculum delivered by counselors or teachers in classroom-based settings	**Elementary** Calming Corners–designated space in classroom for students to feel and regulate emotions	**Elementary** Referral to outside pediatric mental health provider
Middle School Health class discussions about bullying, mental health, etc	**Middle School** "Lunch Bunch"–social group during lunch for students needing support with social skills	**Middle School** One-on-one sessions with mental health providers from partner organization
High School Advisory classes where students and teachers can discuss important issues and build supportive relationships	**High School** Psychosocial groups focused on stress management	**High School** Counselors support students transitioning back to school after mental health-related hospitalization

An effective MTSS system for SEL and mental health is more than these three tiers, however. To best support all students through the continuum of services in a coordinated and effective manner, schools and districts may want to focus on factors that are hypothesized to be associated with effective MTSS.

Factors That Are Hypothesized to be Associated With an Effective MTSS in SEL and Mental Health Framework

Leadership	School and district leaders provide vision and demonstrate commitment to creating and sustaining an MTSS framework for SEL and mental health.
Data Utilization	School and district staff use data to inform decisions related to SEL and mental health, including SEL assessments, mental health screeners, implementation monitoring data, and program evaluation data.
Implementation	All programs and practices across all three tiers are implemented effectively using tools to monitor fidelity, as well as using continous quality improvements to strengthen implementation as needed.
Staff Competency	All staff are trained, coached, and supported to effectively perform their role within an MTSS structure.
Equity Lens	Schools and districts use data to identify and address inequities related to SEL and mental health, including training educators on implicit bias in data, ensuring programs and practices are culturally responsive, and ensuring school climate is supportive of all students across various group identities.

Why Is MTSS for SEL and Mental Health Important to Promote Student Well-being?

Research shows that the use of MTSS for SEL and mental health:

- Is associated with significantly improved social-emotional competencies and coping skills, as well as improved symptoms and functioning for students with mental health disorders.[14]

- Has the potential to address various forms of discrimination faced by racial and ethnic minoritized students, which in turn negatively impacts their mental health.[15]

- Has demonstrated evidence for promoting school safety. Such approaches include training students on bystander interventions to prevent bullying; training school staff on how to identify and refer students exhibiting signs of distress; and developing crisis response protocols that are culturally sensitive, school-informed, and focused on de-escalation.[16]

- Has been associated with an increase in the effectiveness of interventions in preventing and/or addressing depression among students in a school setting.[17]

In addition, the use of MTSS for behavior had positive effects on disruptive behavior among students who struggle the most with behavioral challenges.[18]

Additional Resources:

- Council of Chief State School Officers Toolkit: Integrating social and emotional learning within a multi-tiered system of supports To Advance Equity: SEL MTSS Toolkit For State and District Leaders

- REL Appalachia Report: What Tools Have States Developed or Adapted to Assess Schools' Implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports/Response to Intervention Framework?

- National Center for School Mental Health: Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems, National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH)

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