

A Compassionate School Approach to Children's Mental Health: Equity, Justice, and Overcoming Disparities

Date: May 12, 2020 | Virtual Training Webinar



New England (HHS Region 1)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Presenters:

Meghan Wenzel, M.S.

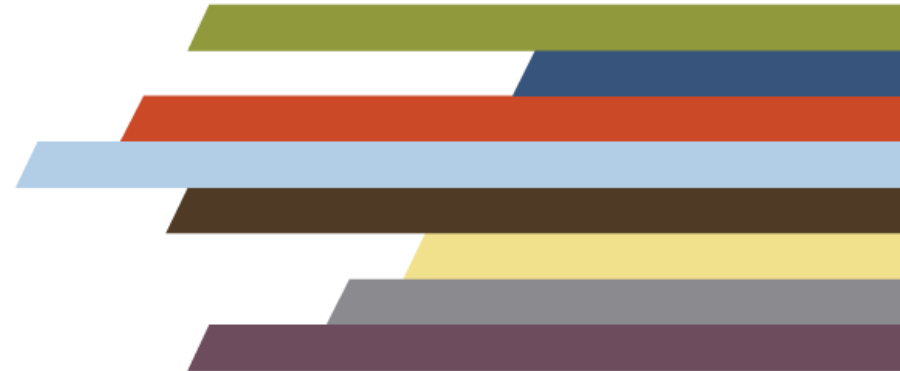
Researcher and Writer

Center for Educational Improvement

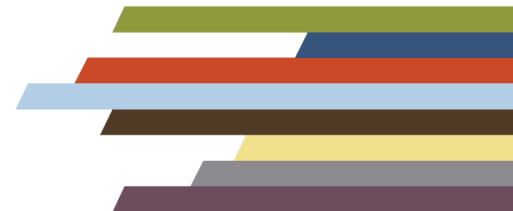
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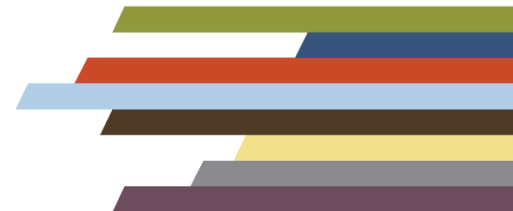


Schools have both an opportunity and an obligation to help strengthen student mental health and well-being. With our project in New England, we're working to do everything we can to help students.





Mental Health Trends



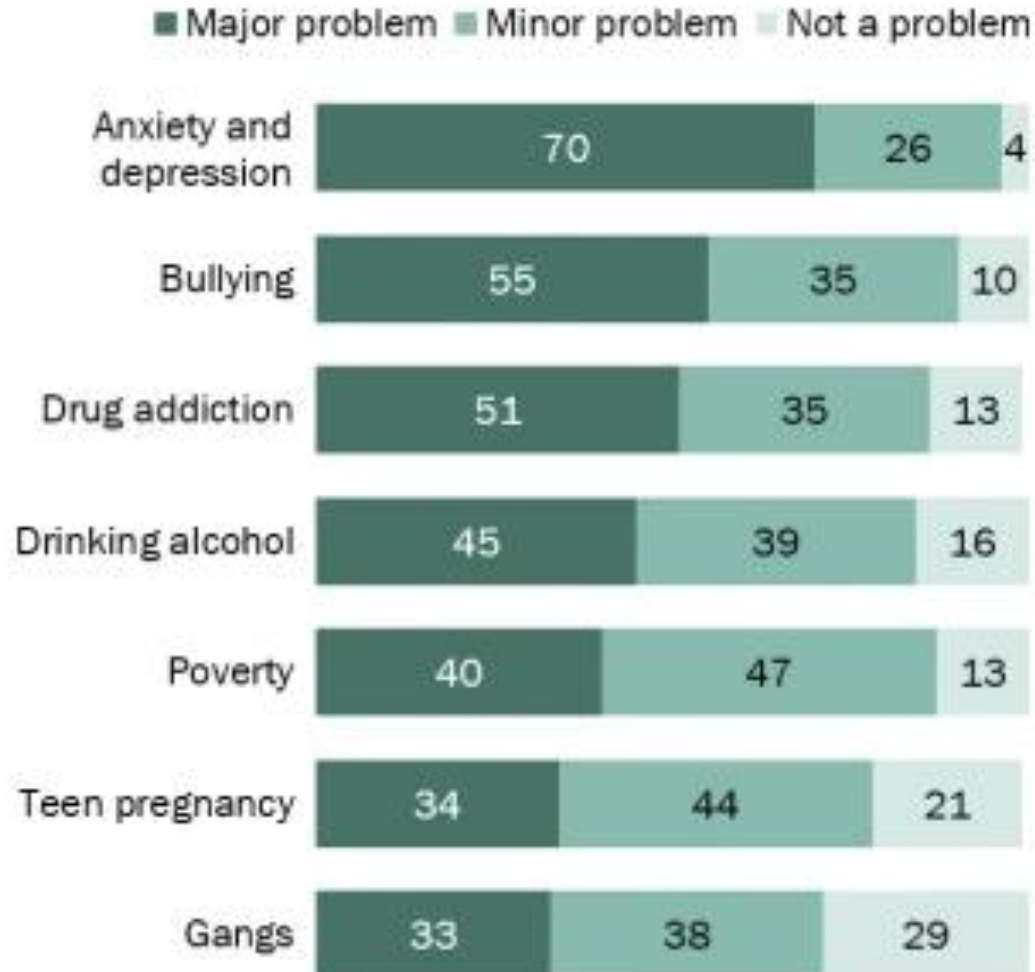


Anxiety, Depression, and Mental Illness are on the Rise

*“On one end of the spectrum there are students who deal with **intense expectations** and the **unrelenting competition** of college admissions. On the other end, there are students who face the social and psychological effects of **violence** and **poverty**. Add to that the challenges presented by **social media**, **bullying**, and other daily encounters, and the reasons for such breakdowns are obvious (Korminiak, 2017).”*

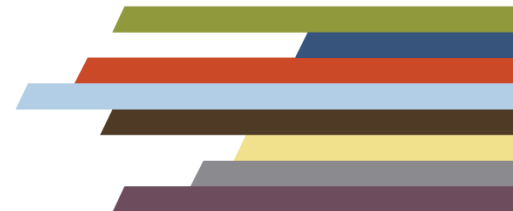
Anxiety and depression top list of problems teens see among their peers

% of teens saying each of the following is a ____ among people their age in the community where they live





Disparities in Mental Health



Mental Health Disparities

Rural, low income, and children of color have poorer access to mental health services compared to the general population



Racial/Ethnic Disparities *in Use* of Mental Health Services



African American and Hispanic/Latino(a) children have **1.5–3 times** greater odds of having an unmet mental health need than White children.

**Odds of having
an unmet mental
health need**

African American



White



Hispanic/Latino(a)



White



Note. Adapted from "Unmet Need for Mental Health Care Among U.S. Children: Variation by Ethnicity and Insurance Status," by S. H. Kataoka, L. Zhang, and K. Wells, 2002, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 159, p. 1552. Copyright 2002 by the American Psychiatric Association.

Systemic Inequities

Equality



The assumption is that everyone benefits from the same supports. This is equal treatment.

Equity



Everyone gets the supports they need (this is the concept of "affirmative action"), thus producing equity.

Justice



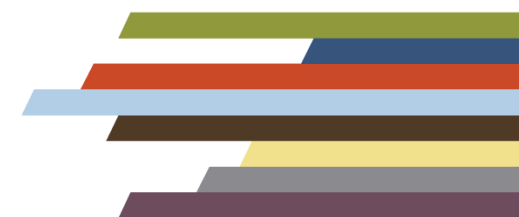
All 3 can see the game without supports or accommodations because the cause(s) of the inequity was addressed. The systemic barrier has been removed.

Psychiatric and behavioral problems often result in school punishment or incarceration, but rarely treatment

African-Americans, Latinos, and American Indians are more likely to be in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, which exacerbate these underlying conditions

Photo Credit: Purdue University

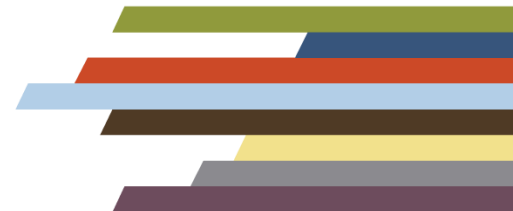
Alegria, Vallas, & Pumariega, 2010; Marrast, Himmelstein, & Woolhandler, 2016



Bullying as an Equity Issue

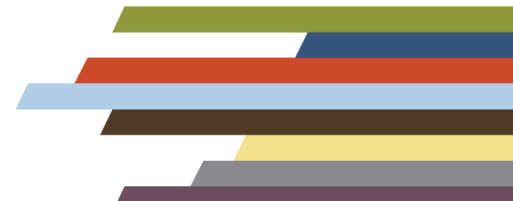
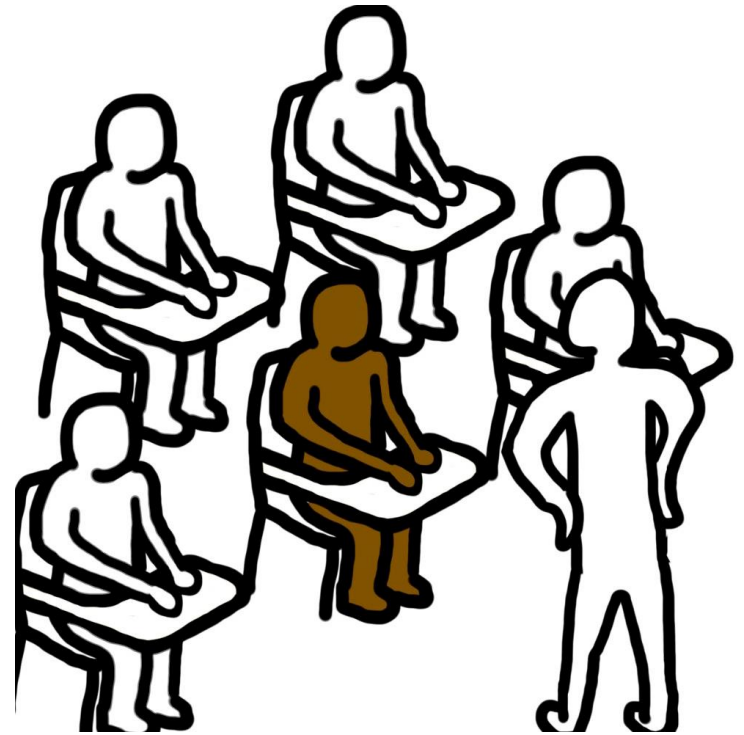


- Students more likely to be bullied include:
 - Boys
 - Younger students
 - LGBTQ students
 - Low income students



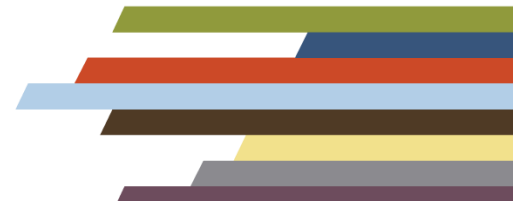
Harmful Effects of “Otherizing”

- Emphasize students’ strengths, not their differences
- “Otherizing” labels
 - Reduce student confidence
 - Foster negative self-images
 - Increase student stress
 - Have damaging and neurobiological impact on learning and achievement



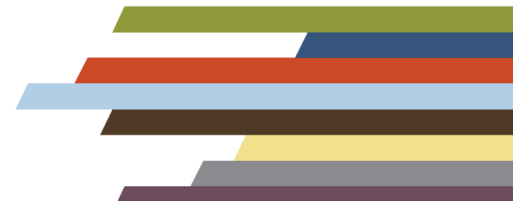
Barriers

- Stigma
- Distrust
- Non-representative mental health system
- Lack of adequate health insurance coverage
- Lack of qualified service providers
- Language barriers
- Racism, bias, and discrimination in treatment settings
- Clinicians' underlying assumptions
- Logistical issues



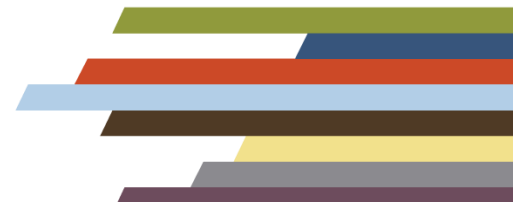
Historical Trauma

- Different conceptions of mental health problems
- Historical trauma and multigenerational unresolved grief
- High levels of poverty, limited access to services, and lack of awareness about mental health issues and services



Main Challenges

- American Indians: Substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide
- African Americans: Domestic violence, incarceration, PTSD, shame around seeking mental health, substance abuse
- Latinx: Language barriers
- Asian Americans: Shame around seeking mental health help
- Immigrants: PTSD, migratory trauma



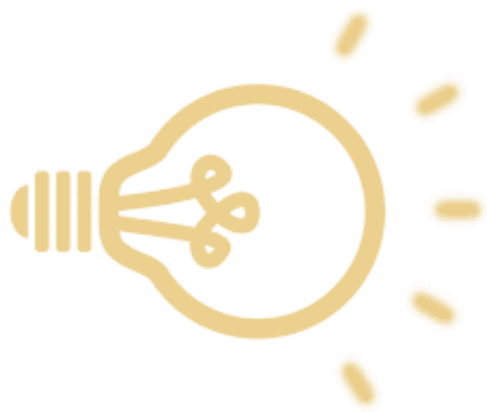


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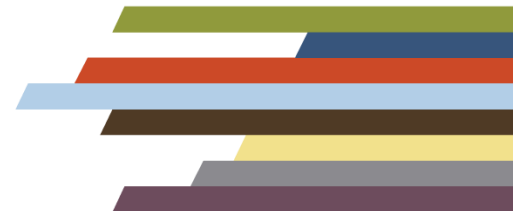
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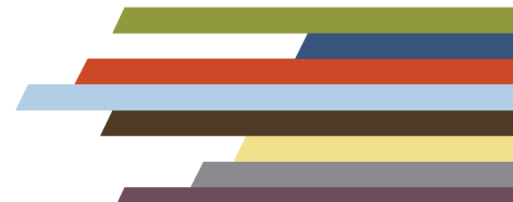


Disparities in Action

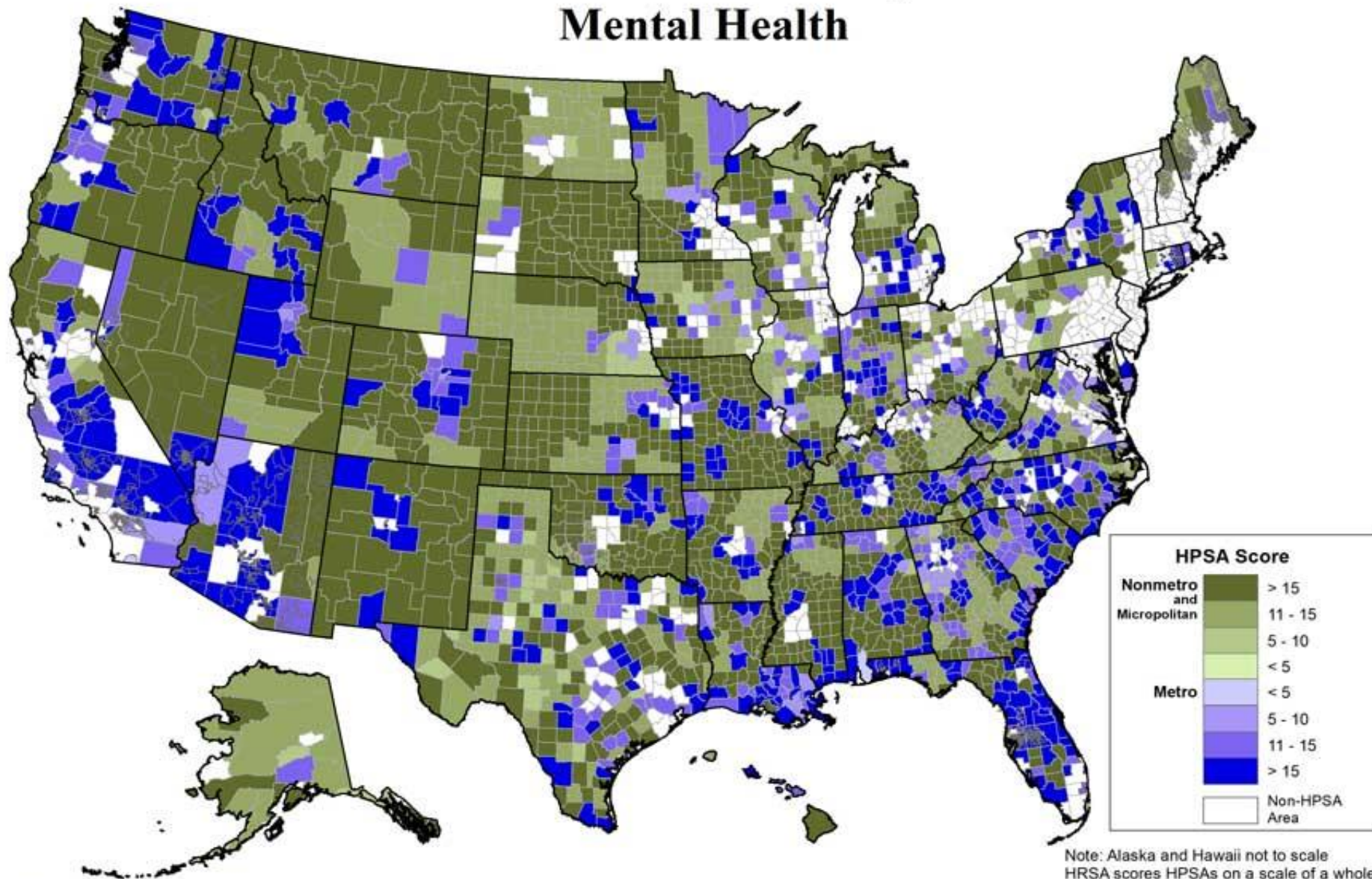


Decreased Access in Rural Areas

- More than 60% of rural Americans have mental health professional shortages
- More than 90% of all psychologists and psychiatrists work exclusively in metropolitan areas
- More than 65% of rural Americans get their mental health care from a primary healthcare provider
- Handle With Care initiative in MI



Health Professional Shortage Areas Mental Health



Note: Alaska and Hawaii not to scale
HPSAs on a scale of a whole number (0-25 for mental health), with higher scores indicating greater need


Source(s): data.HRSA.gov, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, January 2020

What's Going On?

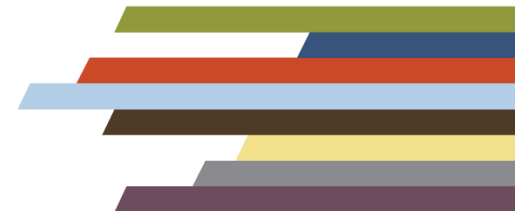
Socioeconomic status
ACEs
Family history of trauma
Untreated mental health conditions
Increased academic pressure
Overexposure to electronic devices
Inadequate amount of daytime recreation

Increased anxiety, depression, and trauma

Increased prevalence of mental illness and suicide



Causes, Manifestations, and Consequences



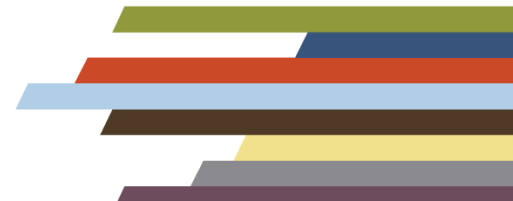
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs include:

- Abuse
- Neglect
- Parental mental illness
- Parental substance use
- Divorce
- Domestic violence
- Parental incarceration

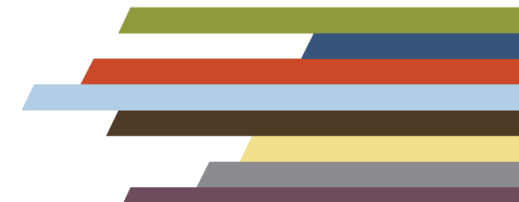


Roughly 60% of Americans have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience.



Causes of Behavioral and Emotional Challenges

- History of trauma in the family
- Untreated mental health conditions
- Modern-day changes in parenting
- Overexposure to electronic devices and social media
- Inadequate amount of daytime recreation
- Increased academic pressure
- Natural disasters, war, and the current political climate
- School shootings



The Neuroscience of Trauma

Trauma affects functioning for multiple domains:

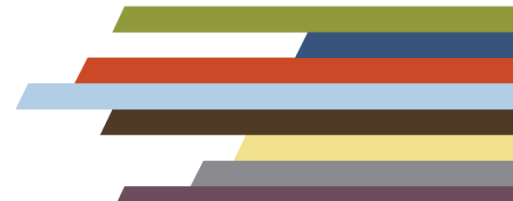
- Cognitive
- Academic
- Socio-emotional-behavioral

Prolonged exposure to trauma and adversity undermines normal development of brain circuits and executive function, which negatively impacts learning



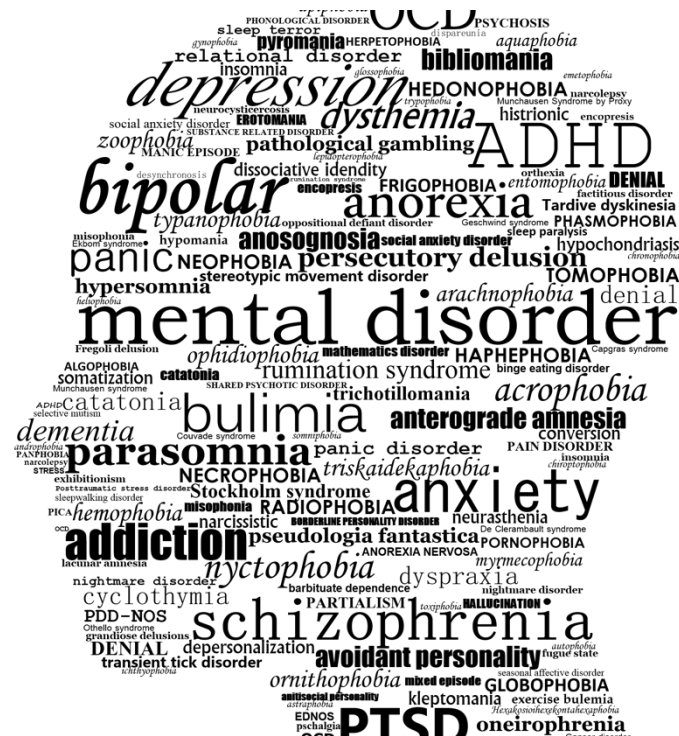
Manifestations of Trauma in the Classroom

- Learning or hyperactive ADHD disorders
- Fear
- Anger
- Sadness
- Depression, alienation, and isolation
- Disassociation, hallucinations, and psychosis
- Withdrawal



Consequences of Mental Illness

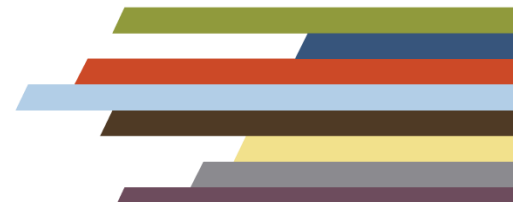
- Dropping out of school
- Weakened immune system
- Increased risk of obesity, cardiovascular issues (i.e., heart attack, stroke), cancer, and premature death
- Teen suicide



Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Genetic predisposition to high emotional reactivity and/or low tolerance to stress	Positive, growth mindset
Easy access to lethal methods, including guns	Supportive environments
Bullying (online and in person)	Safe, stable, caring relationships
Child maltreatment	Adequate nutrition
Low self-esteem	Sense of purpose (faith, culture, identity)
A family history of suicide, alcohol, or drug abuse	Problem solving skills, self-regulation, agency
Incarceration	Communities and social systems that support health and development, and nurture human capital

COVID Is Exacerbating Inequality

- Low income families are more likely to:
 - Lose their jobs and health insurance
 - Work in “essential jobs” with higher risk of infection
 - Have pre-existing conditions
- These factors make youth more vulnerable to mental illness and less likely to receive care





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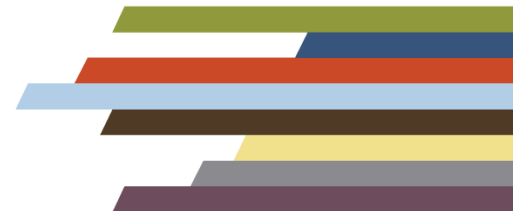
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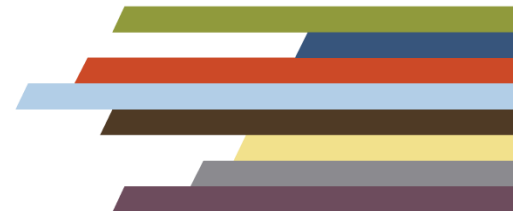
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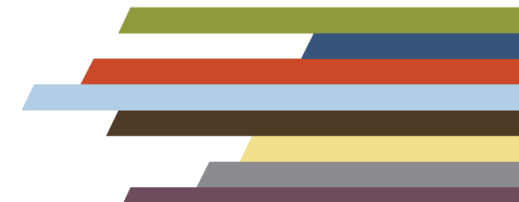


Addressing Disparities



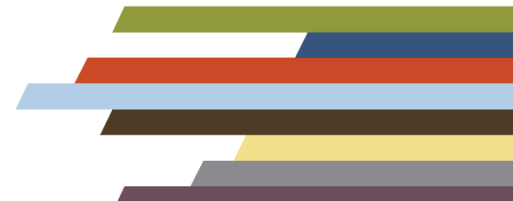
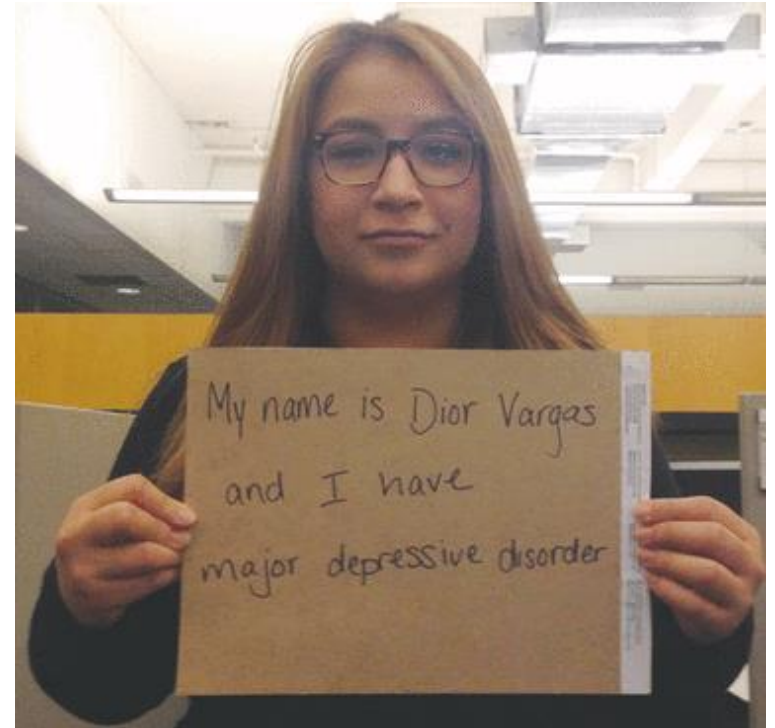
Invest in Culturally Sensitive Services

- Invest in mental health services in schools
- Develop culturally appropriate and targeted education and outreach
- Tailor services to improve utilization



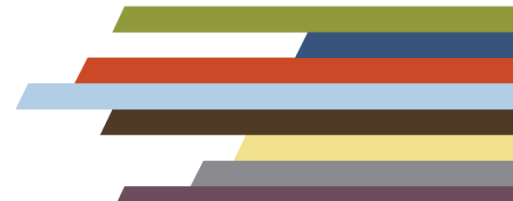
Reduce Stigma

“I always felt like I was the only one, and like I didn’t have anyone to turn to and talk to. I felt like I was alone. When people talk about mental illness, when it’s discussed or shown through the media, they never really show people of color.”



Employ a Diverse Workforce

- Hire and maintain a diverse mental health workforce
- Treatment is based on the relationship between the patient and the clinician
- Train mental health practitioners to provide culturally appropriate assessment and services

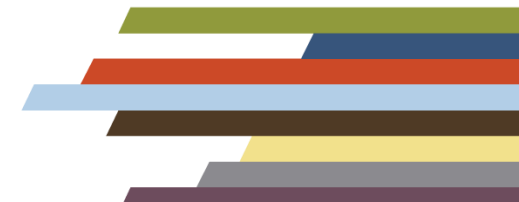


Support and Empower Teachers

Students identified teachers as a primary source of help with mental health problems, followed by peers and mental health counselors.

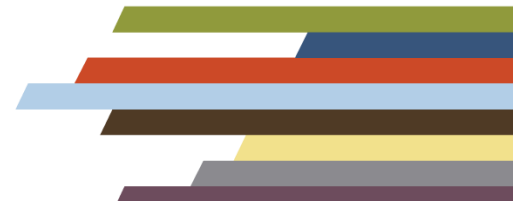


“There are a few teachers who I’ve formed pretty strong bonds with... sometimes they are better than counselors ... they’ll talk to you about life in general...”



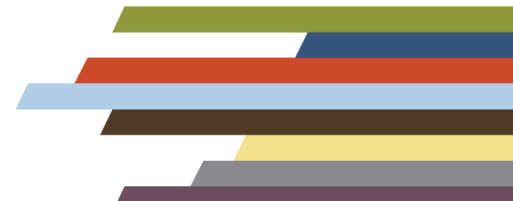
Become More Trauma-Skilled

- Build school-wide capacity to understand trauma, create strategies, policies and procedures that support students.
- *“Knowing how trauma influences behavior and learning, meeting the resiliency needs of traumatized students, and skillfully applying skilled actions are more likely to produce the desired student outcomes than simply knowing about trauma.”*



Focus on Students' Strengths

- Identify and nurture students' strengths and interests.
- Examine school policies like tracking and labeling.
- Teach all students the highest quality curricula that pushes their creative and critical thinking.
- Teach students about how the brain works and cultivate a growth mindset.





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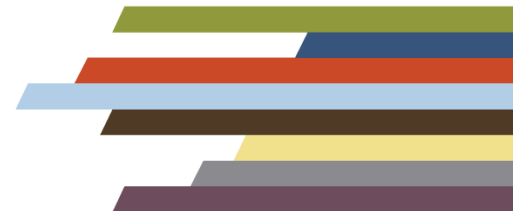
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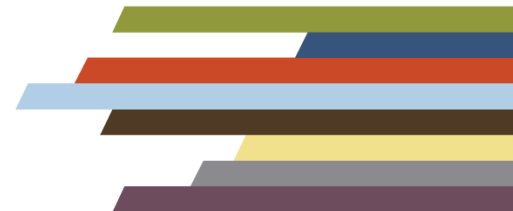
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Teach Social and Emotional Skills

- Share: “Today I feel...”
- Write: “When was a time you used self-control? What was the outcome?”
- Discuss: “How did Theresa feel when her mom left? How did she manage her emotions? Do you think it was a healthy way to manage them?”
- Strategize: “If you are feeling nervous about the test today, remember to use positive self-talk. Tell yourself that you’ve got this!”



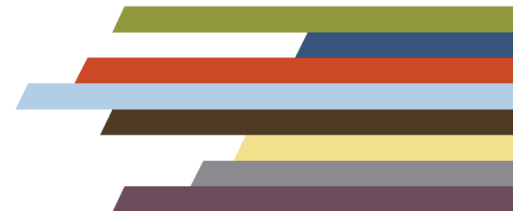
Mindfulness In Action



“The world was hectic before this all came along, and this has put a lot of people over the top, so now you are stuck in one place feeling all these emotions and there is no tool being delivered to you to deal with all of that”

[Mindful Moments videos](#)

[A District-Wide Approach to Coordinating Mindfulness Implementation](#)

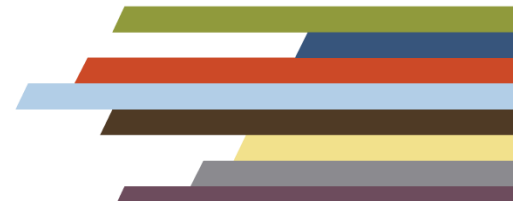


Yoga and Breathing In Action

Schools in Houston implemented a program that taught stress relief through yoga, breathing exercises, and learning to focus.



“We soon expanded the program to 14,000 students on 26 campuses and saw the same results as in previous research: fewer behavioral issues, students and teachers regaining focus, and a palpable shift toward a culture of care and compassion at each campus.”



Restorative Justice

Empowers youth and promotes justice and equity by focusing on:

- Respect
- Dignity
- Accountability
- Mutual concern

“When you get these kids talking, you learn about the traumas they have faced. Maybe their brother was killed, or their father was sent to prison. If you can get to the root of the cause of the offense, you’re truly stopping the cycle”



Restorative Justice in Action



A restorative justice process asks:

- What happened?
- Who was harmed?
- Who is responsible for repairing the harm?

A traditional discipline process asks:

- What rules were broken?
- Who broke them?
- How should we punish the offending student?

Montgomery County Public Schools

Summary

- Toxic stress and/or chaotic family situations or environments can lead to anxiety, depression, and trauma. If unaddressed, these can lead to mental illness and even suicide.
- Schools have a variety of ways to better support students and families:
 - Develop a compassionate and culturally sensitive mental health program
 - Reduce stigma around mental health
 - Employ a diverse workforce
 - Support and empower teachers
 - Focus on students' strengths
 - Integrate social and emotional learning into the curriculum
 - Integrate mindfulness, breathing, meditation, and/or yoga into your curriculum
 - Implement restorative justice practices





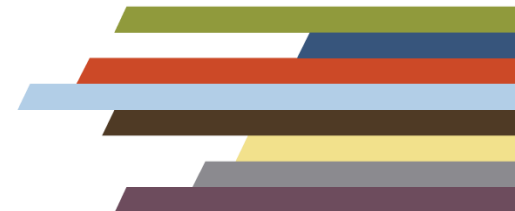
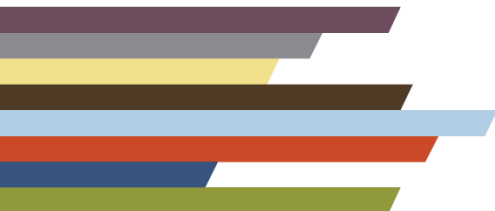
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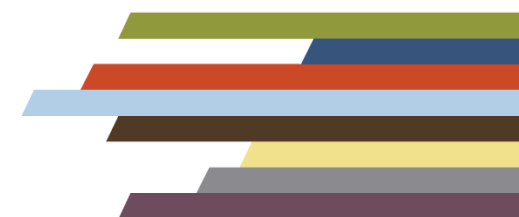


Childhood-Trauma Learning Collaborative (C-TLC)

Is your school trauma-informed? Are you/your colleagues looking for mental health resources to better support your students?

Join the Center for Educational Improvement (CEI) for a series of online events hosted by the [New England Mental Health Technology Transfer Center \(New England MHTTC\)](#).

Our complementary webinar series is designed to strengthen mental health supports that address the needs of children who have experienced/are at risk of experiencing significant trauma.





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Childhood-Trauma Learning Collaborative (C-TLC)



Sessions begin May 19

4:00 p.m.
Webinar

[What will schools be like next year? Visioning for the Future of Education: A 3-part webinar series](#)

Discussion Leader: Chris Mason, Ph.D., Executive Director
Center for Educational Improvement

May 26

4:00 p.m.
Webinar

[Courageous Conversations: A partnering tool to achieve equity in schools](#)

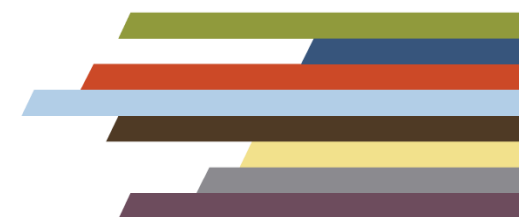
Maria Restrepo-Toro, BNS, M.S., Manager
New England MHTTC

June 16

4:00 p.m.
Webinar

[Trauma-Informed Yoga in Schools](#)

Dana Asby, M.A., M.Ed., Director, Innovation and Research Support
Center for Educational Improvement





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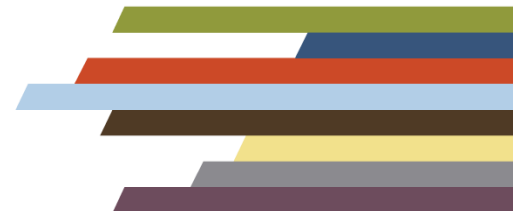


Thank you for attending!

Questions? Contact Us:

Center for Educational Improvement

info@edimprovement.org



C-TLC Community Building



2019 Childhood-Trauma Learning Collaborative Fellows

Image captured as a part of the C-TLC Kick Off Meeting, April 29, 2019
The College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA

References

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