



Share and Borrow Session on School Mental Health: Responses to the Public Health Emergency

Sarah Nielsen, LaVonne Fox, and Thomasine Heitkamp

Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center

Educators are often the first line of support in addressing mental health needs for students. They recognize the impact mental health has on learning and achievement. In response, the Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC), funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has developed training, technical assistance, and resources to support school-based mental health in HHS Region 8. Region 8 includes the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Montana, Colorado, and Wyoming. The MHTTC team continues to develop online resource guides and toolkits as well as curricula and self-paced trainings to assist school professionals in understanding and implementing core concepts of best practices in school mental health.



Communities of Practice and Assessing Student Mental Health Needs during a Public Health Emergency

Beginning in 2018, the Mountain Plains MHTTC developed school-based communities of practice (CoP). In September 2020, Dr. Sarah Nielsen, Dr. LaVonne Fox, and Professor Thomasine Heitkamp facilitated discussion among seventeen educational leaders who had participated in a CoP. The purpose of the meeting was to gather and discuss the challenges, accommodations, and adaptations that occurred due to the PHE of a global pandemic (COVID-19).

This document provides a summary of the information gathered during a virtual meeting with these educational leaders. This document also includes MHTTC and other federal resources to assist in addressing some of the needs identified.

Sharing Sessions

Following a brief session introduction, attendees participated in small breakout groups to engage in focused discussion around specific topic areas. One group focused generally on the views of teachers, another on mental health providers, and another on educational administrators. Below is a brief review of information gathered during these sessions. Sessions were recorded, participants provided consent, and participants were also given the opportunity to opt-out of the recording.

Topic 1: Addressing embedded strategies in their classrooms: How are we supporting positive student mental health in the classroom? What is working? What is not?

Themes from Discussion

1. Some teachers like the hybrid format because it allows time to build relationships and you can work more one-on-one with students.
2. Teachers also note that students have become very adept in using technology.
3. Accommodations made by school personnel has increased parent and teacher communications.
4. Health protocols in place have removed activity-based learning, rotations, and small group tables-and that impacts negatively on social-emotional learning.
5. Students experience less physical activity and it is difficult to sit in place; this also decreases opportunity for play-based learning.
6. Schools have emphasized focusing on a growth mindset by highlighting words of the week that facilitate growth, such as looking at the word "grit."
7. The culture in the larger community does not support the use of masks and other preventative measures. As a result, students bring this perception/attitude into the school and classroom.
8. A need exists for administrative leaders to set priorities and provide support to teachers.
9. Schools need to provide short activities for instructional purpose and other strategies to help with self-care among teachers.

Topic 2: How have you adapted to COVID-19 in your school mental health systems? For example, is more time spent on social and emotional learning in the classroom? How are you using telehealth to meet with students? What is working? What is not?

Themes from Discussion

1. Currently those participating are not using telehealth as a delivery method to provide support for students' mental health needs because they were concerned about confidentiality and school policies surrounding telehealth that may not be supportive.
2. Schools have adapted from providing 15 minutes of mindfulness activities in a designed environment to sending a 15-minute mindfulness video to complete in each classroom. Schools find follow-through with completing mindfulness activities varies based upon the teacher and demands of the classroom. A positive is that students online and in classrooms get access to this.
3. Counselors have set up virtual offices using Google slides. Google slides allows counselors to post readily available mental health strategies for children and families along with information about community resources. Google forms have been used to develop a "request to see the counselor" and students K-12 have a link to complete the form whether they are at home or in school. This has worked well for older elementary students. Teachers provide support for younger students to use the form. The form asks the student a variety of questions including how they are feeling, level of urgency, etc.
4. Counselors continue to go to the classroom and meet with students in their offices using safety protocols.
5. Nursing services identify somatic complaints that may potentially be related to mental health concerns and refers to the school counselor.

6. A concern was noted for the divisiveness of COVID-19 and how to best respond, the influence that may be having on children who hear and witness disagreements about COVID-19, and the steps schools and communities are taking to manage the virus.
7. A concern was noted about worry that students who may be at-risk for anxiety or depression related to COVID-19 are not being identified. The group noted that students are positive and responding well to being back to a routine.

Topic 3: How are we continuing to coordinate and address mental health from an administrative perspective? What is working? What is not?

Themes from Discussion

1. Everyone is pleased to be back at school and seeing students, even if it is a hybrid model for some.
2. Collaboration with families has increased because of online learning last spring and planning for this fall.
3. Schools experienced had a decrease in enrollment with students transitioning to private school/home schooling with a speculation that this is related to a mask requirement at the school and parents are opposed to wearing masks.
4. The entire process of hybrid learning/fully online learning has been extremely taxing on teachers, with veteran teachers having to learn new skills and feeling like “first year teachers again.” Before COVID-19 it was said to meet students where they are at, but we also now find that we have to meet teachers where they are at, as well.
5. Relationship building between students and staff has been difficult because they are in and out of the building so quickly, but we know that it is critical to academic and emotional success.
6. Relationships with community organizations to support students and school social workers have become critical. Communities are engaged in helping students and families to address food insecurity, lack of housing, and addressing other basic needs. Families are more receptive to help.
7. Schools are working to make sure IEP evaluations are completed earlier in the school year along with 504 Plans. Worries exist that schools will close again due to spike in COVID-19 numbers in many of the states in Region 8, thus no longer allowing them to offer education onsite.
8. Tension exists about school sports and the lack of requirement of masks, when students are mandated to wear masks in the classroom.
9. Ensuring that all staff in the schools are following protocols. This includes bus drivers that transport children residing in very rural areas for many hours each day.
10. The challenge of working with parents to explain school policies, about which parents might express concerns relative to the safety of their child.

Summary

While the PHE due to COVID-19 provided a myriad of challenges for schools, educators, mental health providers, administrators, students, and parents are displaying remarkable resilience. Participants enjoy working with their students in the classroom on a face-to-face basis, even if only part-time. Many noted how quiet the school is and they miss the excitement of children in the hallways. Concerns exist about decreasing enrollments, retention of teachers, fears of spread of COVID-19 and quarantining, divided community views about how to respond to the PHE that impact students, fears for the safety of students with pre-existing conditions, and challenges of explaining to parents school policies that do not adhere to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention standards, particularly in relationship to school sports.

Follow-up School Mental Health Resources

Based on the content of each discussion group, we wanted to highlight available resources that educational leaders may find useful. We will also continue to develop trainings and resources that are responsive to school needs. Please be sure to subscribe to the [Mountain Plains MHTTC E-Mailing List¹](#) for updates on trainings.

Schools and Child Care: Plan Prepare and Respond²

Provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, this website offers tools and resources for schools as they respond to the current PHE. The website provides resources for deciding to go back to school, checklists for going back to school, and how to protect staff and students.

Managing Behaviors in the Classroom During Challenging Times³

As an unprecedented new school year began, this 60-minute webinar addressed basic classroom management strategies with a focus on preventing undesirable behaviors and increasing awareness of challenging behaviors related to trauma, grief, and stress. Attendees learned easy-to-implement interventions to promote resiliency.

Mountain Plains MHTTC Mental Health Resources for K-12 Educators During COVID-19⁴

In response to the recent pandemic (COVID-19), several national organizations and associations have shared and promoted resources to assist K-12 educators. Parents, family members, school staff, and other trusted adults play a critical role in helping children make sense of what they hear and making sure that it is honest, accurate, and minimizes anxiety and fear. This product compiles all recent toolkits, guides, tip sheets, and infographics that have been developed by reputable sources to assist educators during this time.

Mountain Plains MHTTC Mental Health Resources for Parents and Caregivers During COVID-19⁵

In response to the recent pandemic (COVID-19), several national organizations and associations have shared and promoted resources to assist parents and caregivers with how to prepare the family for an outbreak, techniques to reduce the risk of contracting the virus, coping strategies for dealing with stress, and helping children cope. This product compiles all recent toolkits, guides, tip sheets, and infographics that have been developed by reputable sources to assist parents and caregivers during this time.

Mountain Plains MHTTC Telehealth Resource Page⁶

This page offers a variety of resources on telehealth including slide decks, recorded trainings, funding, and recommendations. This supports the schools in use of telehealth including content on children and youth.

Promise in the Time of Quarantine: Exploring Schools' Responses to COVID-19⁷

This product highlights 12 district and charter schools from across the country and how they have responded to the mental health needs to students during COVID-19. COVID-19 has altered education as we know it, and no one school has found the perfect approach to distance learning. Every school struggles with the dual priorities of sustaining student learning and ensuring students are safe, fed, and well, all outside of the school building. However, some schools more quickly adopted promising practices in response to common challenges, offering lessons for other schools seeking to improve their distance learning models.

Resource URLs

1. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/subscribe-our-mailing-list
2. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/index.html>
3. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/product/managing-behaviors-classroom-during-challenging-times
4. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/product/mental-health-resources-k-12-educators-during-covid-19
5. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/product/mental-health-resources-parents-and-caregivers-during-covid
6. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/telehealth-resources
7. bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/PromiseInQuarantineBellwetherFinal.pdf

DISCLAIMER

Published in 2020 by the Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (Mountain Plains MHTTC) at the University of North Dakota, Northern Plains Center for Behavioral Research 400 Oxford St, Grand Forks, ND 58202.

This publication was prepared for the Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC) under a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). All material appearing in this publication, except that taken directly from copyrighted sources, is in the public domain and may be reproduced or copied without permission from SAMHSA or the authors. Citation of the source is appreciated. Do not reproduce or distribute this publication for a fee without specific, written authorization from the Mountain Plains MHTTC. For more information on obtaining copies of this presentation please call 701-777-6367.

At the time of this publication, Elinore F. McCance-Katz served as SAMHSA Assistant Secretary. The opinions expressed herein are the views of Lavonne Fox, Sarah Nielsen, and Thomasine Heitkamp and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), or SAMHSA. No official support or endorsement of DHHS, SAMHSA, for the opinions described in this publication is intended or should be inferred.

The work of the Mountain Plains MHTTC is supported by grant H79SM081792 from the Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

