



Helping Teachers Support Student Mental Health: Recommendations for Strengthening K-12 Teacher Preparation Curricula

What is the Mountain Plains MHTTC Center?

The Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC) is a partnership between the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's Behavioral Health Program and the University of North Dakota. The Mountain Plains MHTTC is funded by a grant through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to build regional mental health workforce competence by providing training, resources, and technical assistance with an emphasis on evidence-based practices. The Mountain Plains MHTTC serves SAMHSA Region 8 (Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming). The MHTTC was awarded additional funding to further support k-12 school administrators and school staff to enhance student mental wellness.

The focus of our school-based mental health work is to assist schools in implementing best-practice approaches to better address the mental health needs and wellness of all students, thereby optimizing the learning environment and promoting student achievement. The Mountain Plains MHTTC offers a variety of online resource guides, curricula, and self-paced trainings to assist teachers and other school professionals to understand and implement best practices in school mental health. These efforts are aimed at supporting rural schools and promoting trauma responsive practices in schools.

Youth Mental Health Issues Affect Academic Achievement

The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that roughly one in five school-aged children have a diagnosable mental health issue.¹ Given this prevalence, the questions are not *if* teachers will encounter students with mental health issues in their classrooms, but *when, how many* students are struggling, and *how* will this impact the classroom learning environment? Undiagnosed, untreated or inadequately treated mental health conditions affect students' ability to learn, grow, and achieve academic success. Such conditions can also adversely affect other students in the classroom, as well as the teacher, by creating distractions, disruptions and, in the most severe instances, fear, and safety issues.



Rural Mental Health is the focus of the Mountain Plains MHTTC Center

K-12 Educator Curricula is Important to Youth Mental Health and Wellness

While no one disputes that a teacher's first and most important role is to teach, growing evidence of the link between mental health and academic success necessitates that teachers be equipped with a basic understanding of, and techniques to promote, mental health in their classrooms.

The amount of time that teachers spend working with and observing their students means that they are uniquely positioned to identify mental health issues or problems that arise in the classroom. How a teacher addresses student mental health issues can impact every other student in the classroom.² With behavioral health services increasingly being delivered in school settings, teachers are on the front lines of identifying and referring children in need of additional assistance as well as creating classroom environments that promote wellness and learning.

Teachers from all levels of education are facing more student mental health issues and concerns. It is increasingly necessary for teachers to support students' mental and emotional health as well as their learning needs, yet teachers typically don't feel adequately prepared to address student mental health.³ While other resources to support mental wellness are more available in schools, teachers themselves are typically the first to identify the mental health needs of their students. There are many ways a teacher can support their students to be mentally healthy, including: recognizing warning signs, providing effective classroom management, and knowing about resources for support and referral.

"The knowledge and skills required of teachers to support student mental health and wellness are complex and develop over time and experience, but just one teacher-student interaction can be life-changing"

A.D. Bucholz
Workgroup Member

Consistent Inclusion of Mental Health-Related Curricula is Vital to Teacher Preparation

Few teachers are emerging from their preparation programs with sufficient information about student mental health and wellness, or with the skills and tools they need to identify and address student mental health issues in a timely and effective manner.² Teacher preparation programs and institutions have an opportunity to better equip emerging teachers to identify and handle mental health issues in the classroom, promote wellness, and facilitate early intervention. Currently, mental health curricula for teachers is not addressed in the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation Institutions, nor have the authors found other standard sets of skills or knowledge established regarding what emerging teachers need to know to promote and support student mental health. Where colleges and universities are addressing this need, they are doing so independently and without consensus guidance. Some have taken action to revamp programs and integrate this content into their existing coursework or to create new courses or modules on the topic. Others do not address this subject matter in any courses. Although much is being accomplished independently at various institutions, the Mountain Plains MHTTC identified an opportunity to support institutions of higher education to address student mental health and wellness "farther upstream" and to facilitate identification and dissemination of best practices in this area for teacher preparation programs.

Professionals Weigh-In on Mental Health Training in K-12 Teacher Education

The Mountain Plains MHTTC brought together regional authorities on teacher preparation in higher education to explore the issue and develop recommendations to continue to promote mental health training in teacher preparation. A workgroup was convened to examine the issue of mental health in teacher preparation curricula. Their goal was to develop realistic and useful recommendations that can be considered at colleges and universities across the region to better prepare teachers to meet student mental health and wellness needs in the classroom.

Invitations to the Higher Education Teacher Preparation Workgroup were sent to representatives in the six-state Mountain Plains MHTTC region from over 30 accredited schools of education/ teacher preparation programs (programs are accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation). Deans, department heads, chairs and professors were invited. With over half of the educators expressing interest in participating, ultimately 12 individuals representing 11 different higher education institutions participated in the workgroup over five months. See below for a list of workgroup participants. Seven syllabi from most of the higher education institutions participating in this workgroup were collected for a snapshot of what is being taught in general and where mental health topics might be effectively integrated.

The objectives of the workgroup were to:

- Identify the skills that today's teachers must have to support the learning and mental wellness of all students.
- Explore ways to further embed behavioral health educational materials into existing higher education curriculum to enhance teachers' skills to support students with serious mental disturbance and mental illness.
- Develop recommendations to improve emerging teacher preparation to address and support student's mental health.

Workgroup participants were also informally surveyed to elicit additional information regarding the prevalence and specific content of mental health topics within teacher preparation programs. The results of this survey confirmed the research-what is taught to emerging teachers is variable across institutions and is for the most part, lacking. The majority of those surveyed felt that the quality or quantity of the mental health-related curricula currently being provided in their respective teacher education programs could and should be enhanced. According to survey respondents, when mental health is covered in teacher preparation, it is most commonly in the context of classroom management or social emotional learning. It is usually interwoven or mapped into other coursework, is rarely presented as a specific module within a course, and never stand-alone courses.



Changes Can Help Higher Ed Better Train K-12 Teachers to Support Mental Health and Wellness

In addition to the general themes of curricula improvement noted above, the workgroup developed a set of specific issues and corresponding recommendations that colleges and universities can use to improve preparation of new teachers to support mental health and wellness in their classrooms. The issues include:

1. **General Findings:** Respondents indicated most frequently that their programs could be strengthened in the area of mental health and wellness by adding/enhancing several curriculum and program components.

Recommendation: Increase, enhance, and improve mental health and wellness related curricula in K-12 prep programs, to include:

- A. Understanding the role of teachers, and limits of that role, in supporting student mental health and wellness;
 - B. Greater depth of coverage of mental health information and supports;
 - C. Information on referral procedures, including issues of school district responsibility and liability, when students may be in need of treatment;
 - D. Teacher self-care and wellness;
 - E. Basic information about system navigation; including the roles of various school and community mental health professionals in supporting students and teachers with student mental health issues. Teachers in rural areas especially need to know about local, state, national, and online resources to access.
 - F. Content to help teachers move beyond being trauma-informed to being trauma-responsive; to use an understanding of the principles of trauma to adjust their interactions with students and thereby maximize student learning.
2. **Common program outcomes should guide curricula development.** language in the field, related skills needed, and methods of delivery of information are critical to effectively prepare teachers to understand and address mental health in the classroom.

Recommendation: Using desired program outcomes, establish a core set of competencies related to emerging teacher's mental health knowledge and skills.

- A. Establish agreed-upon definitions and shared language of mental health issues, wellness, school-based mental health, and stigma. Consider using definitions from established national authorities, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness⁵ or the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association.
- B. Create a set of recommended topics and learning competencies that can be shared across institutions. At minimum, these should include the following topics:
 - i. Basic mental health awareness, including developmental considerations in mental illness and stigma reduction.
 - ii. Overview of trauma, how to identify trauma and approaches for working successfully with traumatized children.
 - iii. Guidelines for referral and resources in classrooms.
 - iv. Social and Emotional Learning.

- v. Healthy interpersonal boundaries.
- vi. Classroom management and disruptive behaviors.
- vii. Student and teacher wellness.
- viii. Basics of suicide prevention.

- C. Review existing curricula for any areas that address mental health and enhance the content there.
- D. Thoughtfully establish the hierarchy of mental health curricula offered, including the timing and modality of mental health topics taught.
- E. Integrate mental illness stigma identification and reduction into all relevant coursework; include these closely related topics: equity, equality, cultural humility, and culturally responsive teaching.

3. Programs need guidance in the absence of standards for mental health in teacher preparation curricula. Colleges and universities are already pressured to fit a copious amount of content into limited timeframes and coursework. There is little time or place for additional content and no overarching guidance of what would be most useful or important to add.^a

Recommendation: Adopt curricula changes that ensure emerging teachers are prepared to recognize and respond appropriately to the mental health needs of their students.

- A. Look to professionals in other fields (social work, school psychology, school counseling, occupational therapists and speech and language pathologists) who also work in schools to see how they have addressed program outcomes related to school mental health. School social work, school psychology, and counseling students and professionals are already working in schools with teachers. These professionals can share resources and best practices.
- B. Guidelines, in the absence of standards, can be tied to extra certifications or endorsements on a teacher's license. Create certifications/endorsements in school mental health.
- C. Establish standards or guidelines that correspond with students' different stages of progression through the training program, revisiting topics in greater depth as teachers in preparation gain experience. Teach about mental health when the skills and knowledge can be applied. If students are not actually working and learning in classrooms at the time they learn these specific skills, they may have less impact or retention.
- D. Train field supervisors in mental health content as well so that they can provide immediate feedback if they observe a situation in which a candidate needs support in their field placement.

4. Enhance teacher resiliency for the challenges they will face in today's classrooms. Many new teachers could be better prepared to handle the mental health-related issues that will confront them in the classroom. Teachers themselves are impacted by traumatized children and may experience secondary and, in some cases, primary trauma at their jobs. Teachers are leaving the profession in high numbers because of a lack of preparation, knowledge, and support to deal effectively with classroom challenges and maintain their own wellness while doing so.⁴

Recommendation: Support teachers' mental health and improve career retention through the pre-service teaching of coping skills, self-care, and mental wellness.

- A. Curate resources that can be provided to student teachers through a variety of modalities such as handouts, online public video platforms, or other methods.

- B. Develop a simple emergency toolkit or resource booklet for teachers to have on hand in the classroom when difficult mental health or behavioral situations arise.
- C. Establish a clearinghouse of resources on teacher self-care that are accessible.
- D. Ensure teacher understanding of local resources for increased ability to work with and make referrals to mental health providers.
- E. Tailor education and resources to the various stages and progression of teacher preparation, introducing the topics of self-care and resiliency early, and providing greater depth as teachers enter classrooms.
- F. Bring K-12 higher education educators / professors and administrators up to date on mental health topics. Some of these professionals may have neither taught nor received this training and an awareness of these issues will allow them to better support teachers in today's classrooms.

"In an era where our nation's schools, and therefore students, are haunted by opioid crises, toxic stress, suicide epidemics, and threats of mass shootings, educators have never been more responsible for student welfare and well-being. It is crucial that our teachers enter their classrooms prepared with more than a modicum of mental health education in order to best support the varied needs of students. The importance of this needed aspect of teacher education cannot be understated."

Dr. Lauren Davis
Assistant Professor of Curriculum & Instruction
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Take the Next Steps

Mental health issues in the classroom can significantly impact students, the learning environment, and teacher mental health and retention.⁴ While most teachers do have some level of support on this front from school counselors, administrators, and other professionals and para-professionals, these issues will increasingly diminish K-12 learning environments if teachers lack the skills and resilience to more effectively manage them in the classroom.

The workgroup participants have outlined steps that higher education institutions can take as they continue to endeavor to prepare emerging teachers for the issues and challenges they will likely face in their classrooms. Some of these steps, such as ensuring that new teachers receive plentiful information about wellness and secondary trauma, are simple and can easily be accomplished. Others, like revamping institutional curricula, are complex and will take the collaboration of higher education administrators, educators, K-12 school personnel, and local and national mental health experts to make those changes.

The recommendations here were created with the input of higher education educators and administrators who know the demands both on teacher preparation programs and on teachers in the field. They reflect the state of mental health-related training in K-12 teacher preparation, and identify several ways in which future curricula could be strengthened. The Teacher Preparation Higher Education Workgroup provides these recommendations as a resource to help continue the critical work that must be done in the area of K-12 teacher preparation curricula to best equip teachers to meet the complex needs of their students. This work includes standardizing the mental health-related

language in K-12 teacher preparation, using desired outcomes to create mental health and wellness related core competencies, establishing standards to guide the development of mental-health related K-12 teacher preparation curricula, and supporting teachers to ensure their own mental health and resiliency.

The Mountain Plains MHTTC is proud to partner with the Teacher Preparation Higher Education Workgroup to develop these recommendations and to offer no-cost, online and in-person trainings to meet the teaching workforce goals set out here by the workgroup. Using technology and knowledge transfer, the Mountain Plains MHTTC strives to improve emerging teachers' understanding of mental health and build their skills to support students with these issues.

Access our resources at <https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/school-based-programs> or contact Stefanie Winfield, MSW at swinfied@wiche.edu.

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