Mountain Plains (HHS Region 8)

MHTTC Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

School Mental Health:
Concerns, Needs, and Resources in Challenging Times
LISTENING SESSION, SEPTEMBER 29, 2020

In our nation's schools, both students and staff are bearing the weight of the current global health pandemic. To learn more about challenges and needs for K-12 education in our region, the Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center[a] (MHTTC), held a listening session with 13 school mental health professionals, administrators, and teachers from Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. These states represent U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' Region 8.

Funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Mountain Plains MHTTC develops online resources guides and toolkits as well as curricula and trainings to assist school professionals in understanding and implementing core concepts of best practices in school mental health. Learn more about all of its free school-based mental health resources, training events, and curricula on its School-Based Mental Health Page.[b]

Listening Sessions

Mountains Plains MHTTC staff connected with school-based partners across Region 8 and invited them to attend a listening session to share their current experiences, wins, and challenges following the onset of the global health pandemic, which upended their long-held practices and approaches. A total of 13 professionals participated (four participants sent in written responses because they were unable to participate in person). This document highlights the common needs, concerns, and strategies identified during the listening session and provides resources in response to those needs.

After signing consent forms, participants engaged in conversation with the group facilitator and each other, responding to questions related to:
1. Pressing needs and concerns for staff and students in maintaining wellness during the pandemic.
2. Needs of their communities.
3. Desired support from the Mountain Plains MHTTC in the near future.

Staff and Faculty Concerns

Teacher Well-Being and Burn Out
Split schedules, teaching to in-person and remote students simultaneously, needs for personal and family sick leave, concerns for getting sick or being sent home, childcare needs, managing students' anxiety about getting sick or having to quarantine, and neglecting self-care all arose as concerns in need of support and intervention.

Turnover
Districts are concerned about the increasing rate of turnover and retirement in response to the pandemic.

Staff Anxiety
There is concern about the difficulty in finding balance and getting "a rhythm" going to start classes. Staff are concerned about how to teach with the ever-evolving restrictions or requirements of the pandemic. There is also worry about ensuring confidentiality and safety on remote meeting platforms.

Staff and Faculty Needs

- Staff ability to identify their own triggers and weaknesses so they may understand when they need more support. Education for staff on self-care.

- Systems to support transitions from in-person to remote learning on a weekly or daily basis.

- Ways to help staff feel connected when they are isolated in their classrooms and on computers for meetings.

Staff and Faculty Strategies and Resources

Social and Emotional Learning Roadmap: Actions for a Successful Second Semester[c]
This roadmap is designed to support school leaders in planning transitions back to school, in whatever form that takes, by using social and emotional learning (SEL). There are several resources and tools embedded in this roadmap that address relationship building, healing, connecting, and supporting students, creating safe and equitable learning environments, and using data to improve support for students, staff, and families.

### COVID-19: Resilient Educator Toolkit[d]
This toolkit offers actionable strategies, tips, tools, and advice for teachers, families, and students. These teacher wellness and self-care resources can support and nurture teachers and increase resiliency.

Student-Related Concerns

- Students need support related to quarantine experiences.

- Students need support in processing and coping with what they may have experienced or seen at home, including trauma, deprivation, neglect, lack of food, being home alone, or lacking support in their own learning.

- Supports are needed to enrich student and staff relationships in virtual environments. Creating and maintaining relationships with students online can be difficult.

- There is also a lack of trust with people in the school because they are not there long enough to build trusting relationships.

- There is a lack of student opportunities to make connections with peers in virtual learning environments.

- There are barriers to students' access to behavioral health treatment and counseling. New cases are being turned away even with new telehealth opportunities because providers are at capacity.

- There is difficulty finding providers with openings, especially in rural areas.

  There is a reliance on school counselors who are not trained therapists.

> *"In past years, students who had mental health concerns had people of trust within the building who they would reach out to for help and support. Now with students only in the building a few days a week [or not at all], they are not making connections with teachers and peers in the same ways and the isolation and pressures of home are bigger than ever."*
>
> *(Listening session participant)*
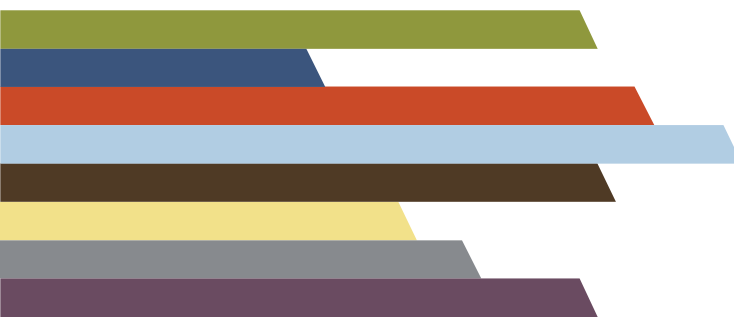
Student-Related Needs

- Evidence-based therapies for families, individuals, and couples, especially if isolated, as well as community resources for telehealth and other therapeutic services.

- Information about school and community resources that schools and administrators can use and provide to others, including families. Approaches to get resources to the families and the community so they can access treatment and mental health providers nearby or with telehealth openings.

- SEL curriculum that can pivot between in-person to online or change based on current needs. SEL curriculum skills should include resilience, organizing schoolwork, how to ask for help, and relationship skills.

- Clear communication about the systems and supports that are still available to students, how to access resources, and navigate building peer relationships if not in school.

- Preparation for the return to in-person school and addressing behaviors that have been developed during remote school or that will resurface when in-person school resumes. How to anticipate and prepare so that teachers are not "hit hard" when these students come back to in-person school.

- Training needs include addressing suicidal thoughts and feelings among students and behavior modification in the coming year to address unhealthy habits developed during remote learning.

Student-Related Strategies and Resources

In smaller schools, telehealth works well. In-person check-ins are brief to limit time out of class and alternate the classes that students are taken out of. More check-ins are on remote days, leaving the in-person days for higher needs students or crises. Participants also expressed appreciation for current and future Mountain Plains MHTTC school-based mental health training resources.[b]

Telehealth Toolkit for School Personnel[e]
This toolkit is a practical and concise guide to incorporating telehealth into regular routines as a provider working with students.

Supporting Students' Mental Health: Resources to Prepare Teachers[f]
This document describes the role of educators in supporting student mental health, explains the core components of mental health literacy, and provides an annotated list of existing resources and trainings that instruct educators on mental health literacy.

Second Step[g]
Second Step is a highly recommended SEL curriculum and approach. It is especially effective if all staff are part of the conversation and implementation. It also supports teachers' mental health.

MindUP[h]
MindUP is an SEL curriculum based in neuroscience that that gives students tools to manage stress and regulate their emotions and gives teachers skills to create an optimistic classroom.

Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning[i]
Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a trusted source for knowledge about high-quality, evidence-based SEL. CASEL supports educators and policy leaders and enhances the experiences and outcomes for all pre-K-12 students.
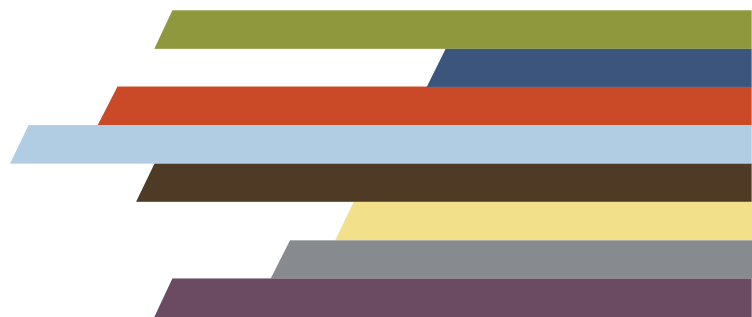
Administrator Concerns

Social and Emotional Screening Needs

There is a need to identify staff roles and responsibilities around social and emotional screening and a need to communicate the importance of school-based screening to caregivers. For example, there is a need to dispel the myth that asking about suicidal thoughts will generate them in a student.

Student and Family Reticence to Return to School

Some students are doing better remotely (including some students with high anxiety) and do not want to come back to school in person, and some students may be "falling through the cracks" in remote settings.

Supporting Staff

There is need to identify when staff need additional help managing their stress. Schools need to help staff admit they need support, and ensure availability of care for teachers and staff.

Inconsistent Access to Behavioral Health Care

Individuals may be inconsistently accessing behavioral health care services because of stigma, confusion in how to access care via telehealth, and fear of being exposed to COVID-19 in a clinic setting. There is also a need for mental health supports for family caregivers who are taking on more responsibilities with limited resources.

Staff Retention

Increased faculty turnover and early retirement have left many districts without sufficient faculty to maintain staffing needs.

> *"If our staff is not able to take care of themselves, they will miss supporting students as well."*
>
> *(Listening session participant)*

Administrator Needs

- Support and encouragement to use lessons learned during remote school periods to provide the best education to students.

- Employee assistance resources and staff training on self-care.

- Information about support for families and students, such as counseling, support groups, and system navigation assistance (virtually or in-person) both through the schools and in the community.

- Training, information, and support that is accessible across schools and districts.

Administrator Strategies and Resources

Mental Health, Social Emotional, and Behavioral Screening and Evaluation Compendium[j]
The purpose of this compendium is to provide a comprehensive source of information for practitioners engaged in mental health work. It offers freely accessible, no-cost mental health, social-emotional, and behavioral screening tools for children and adolescents.

Promise in the Time of Quarantine[k]
This brief contains case studies that explore how 12 schools or systems responded to the impact of COVID-19. The individual case studies highlight promising practices on distance learning from each school across eight categories.
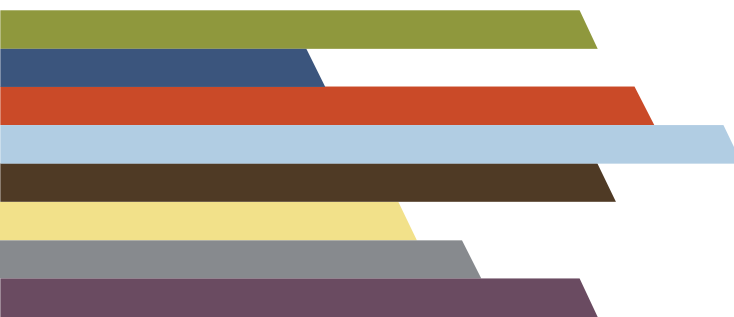
Summary

The COVID-19 public health emergency has provided an opportunity to review what is currently working in school mental health and how systems have been less successful at supporting students and staff. It has illuminated the lack of resources, providers, and services for students in rural and remote areas while at the same time increasing the opportunities for services via tele-mental health and distance learning. It has revealed the unwavering commitment of school staff to their students while also displaying the toll and stress this commitment takes on staff. There is a need to better support teachers' mental and physical health.

The Mountain Plains MHTTC remains committed to responding to the concerns and needs shared by listening session participants. This commitment includes continuing to develop and share resources that support students' social and emotional learning, connecting schools with community resources, identifying opportunities for staff learning and wellness, and working to improve the overall mental health of all staff and students in the Mountain Plains region.

Resource Links

a. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/home

b. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/school-based-mental-health-program

c. casel.org/reopening-with-sel/

d. resilienteducator.com/collections/covid19/

e. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mid-america-mhttc/telehealth-toolbox-school-personnel

f. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mhttc-network-coordinating-office/supporting-student-mental-health

g. www.secondstep.org

h. mindup.org

i. casel.org

j. education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Other-Resources/School-Safety/Building-Better-Learn- ing-Environments/PBIS-Resources/Tier-II-Tier-III-and-Behavioral-Health/Mental-Health-Social-and-Emo- tional-Screening-and-Evaluation-Compendium-with-bookmarks.pdf.aspx

k. bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/PromiseInQuarantineBellwetherFinal.pdf

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