



Toward Student and Staff Well-Being

Building School-Community Partnerships for Mental Health Supports and Services

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Mental health and well-being significantly impact students' academic performance, social interactions, and school engagement. Partnering with communities can enhance the effectiveness and reach of mental health initiatives and supports within educational settings. By collaborating with community organizations and agencies, schools can augment resources and increase their capacity to effectively implement multi-tiered and comprehensive approaches. This fosters the establishment of safe and supportive learning environments for all students and enables delivery of timely and effective interventions for those experiencing trauma-related challenges (Eber et al., 2020; Maier et al., 2017). In addition, the community can provide opportunities for positive youth development, employment, and access to resources that can support students' academic and socioemotional development.

This action guide presents ways in which school-community partnerships can help implement key elements of mental health supports and services and offers action steps for schools, local educational agencies (LEAs)¹ and state educational agencies (SEAs) to foster effective collaboration between schools and communities. Its aim is to inform and support school, community, LEA, and SEA leaders as they consider, develop, or implement partnerships as a strategy for providing equitable, high-quality mental health supports and services, focusing specifically on partnerships critical for [implementing trauma-informed approaches and social and emotional learning \(SEL\)](#) as well as [supports for staff well-being](#).

The following sections outline two types of approaches to develop school-community partnerships:

- Whole school approaches, such as Community School (CS) and Community in Schools® (CIS®), that provide a range of services and supports
- Targeted “A la carte” partnerships that support the specific needs of the school/district

Both approaches have been implemented across schools and districts with positive outcomes (Maier et al., 2017). The choice of which approach to use depends on the current goals of the school or LEA, the status of the school or district's well-being initiatives, and the resources available from the school, district, and community.

Existing Whole-School Approaches for School-Community Partnership

There are several whole-school approaches to school-community partnerships that schools and districts can adapt based on the local context, current and future priorities, and resources. Here are two major types that have a proven success record.

¹ Educational agencies are organized in a variety of ways across states and jurisdictions. In this document, when we are referring to the educational agency in a particular area, we use local educational agency or LEA, and we use district when referring to a potentially broader set of local organizations.

Community School

A [Community School](#) (CS) is a public school that partners with community organizations and service providers to offer a range of services beyond traditional academic instruction. This model prioritizes identifying and connecting schools and districts with resources, training, and curricula that address adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and provides services and supports for students and families. CS is based on the combination of [four key pillars](#) (or features) that, together, create the conditions necessary for students to thrive:

1. Integrated student supports
2. Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities
3. Active family and community engagement
4. Collaborative leadership and practices

Community Schools Example

Oakland's Districtwide Community Schools (CS) Initiative

This initiative provided a wide range of services for children and promoted practices that enhanced child development by creating district-level supports enabling whole-child educational practices, including:

- Coordination of partnerships between schools and county-level agencies
- Trainings for specialized personnel, such as community school managers and student support teams
- Professional learning for school staff
- Resources for family engagement
- District-provided centralized resources and systems (e.g., central onboarding for partners, professional learning communities for CS Managers, data system)

Communities In Schools

[Communities In Schools®](#) (CIS®) is a national organization based in Arlington, Virginia, with nearly 200 local affiliates whose “shared mission is to bring needed student support services into schools, connect young people to caring adults, ensure that youth stay in school, develop skills and contribute to their communities” (National Center and Children’s Aid Society, 2011). The program provides universal services for all students within a school and case management services based on identification and ongoing needs assessments of students most at risk of disengaging from school. For this process, site coordinators and other local affiliate-level staff are deployed to serve and connect students and families to required resources via the model of Integrated Student Supports—a student-centered approach to promoting students’ academic success by developing or securing

and coordinating services and supports that target academic and non-academic barriers to achievement (Khan & Williams, 2016).

Communities In Schools Example

CIS of San Antonio (CIS-SA)

San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) developed a strategic partnership with CIS-SA, leveraging community partnerships and relationships with district leaders to create a continuum of social, emotional, and trauma-informed supports for students and families. Components of this system include:

- Implementing the traditional CIS® Integrated Student Supports model on 81 campuses
- Employing licensed clinical mental health professionals to reduce access barriers by providing counseling services to CIS-SA case-managed students at their campus
- Contracting with the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District to fund licensed clinical mental health professionals who target school-aged parents and students who have experienced family or domestic violence
- Leveraging corporate funding to deploy staff who support the district's college, career, and military readiness goals
- Embedding a CIS-SA staff at the largest local homeless shelter to ensure students have the support they need to stay connected to their learning pathways
- Collaborating with local government and community partners to operate a drop-in and wraparound services center

Both CS and CIS® models are [place-based strategies](#) that aim to provide a holistic approach to education that recognizes that students' well-being and success in school are impacted by a range of factors beyond the classroom. They offer schools and districts serving low-income communities a means to overcome structural obstacles that make it more difficult to give children a high-quality education, such as poor access to physical and mental health services as well as to meaningful enrichment opportunities. Because CIS® is primarily designed for dropout prevention, academic impacts are not the sole focus (Maier et al., 2017).

Targeted Partnerships

In contrast to the whole-school approaches to school-community partnerships noted above, more targeted, “à la carte,” partnerships can be fostered with specific community organizations to implement a system of mental health supports and services.

Incorporating school-community partnerships into the Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) framework that schools, LEAs, and SEAs are already using is critical for providing a full spectrum of mental health supports and services to meet student needs (Marsh & Mathur, 2020).

MTSS allows for the

1. Prioritization of resources and integration of initiatives through universal supports for all students
2. Targeted and tailored resources for some students
3. Intensive individualized services for a few students

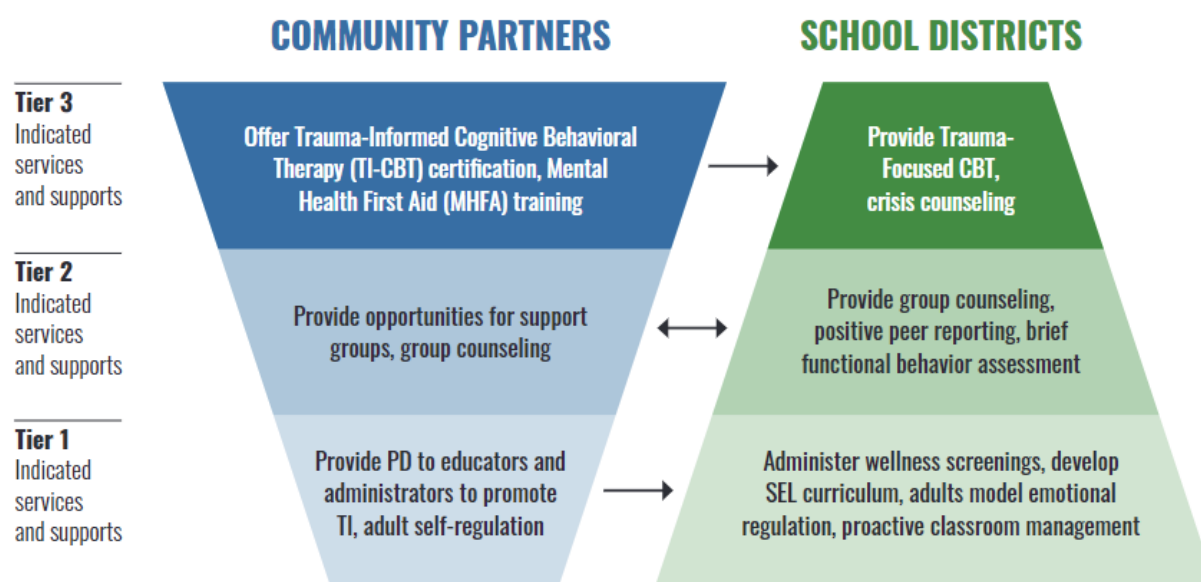
Effective collaboration between school-based mental health practitioners (SBMHPs) and community mental health partners across the three tiers broadens the availability of supports and enhances access to mental health care.

Figure 1 illustrates the complementary roles of schools and community partners within the MTSS framework.

- Tier 1 is implemented primarily by the schools with support from community partners for professional development
- Tier 2 is shared between school staff and specialized community partners
- Tier 3 is implemented primarily by community partners

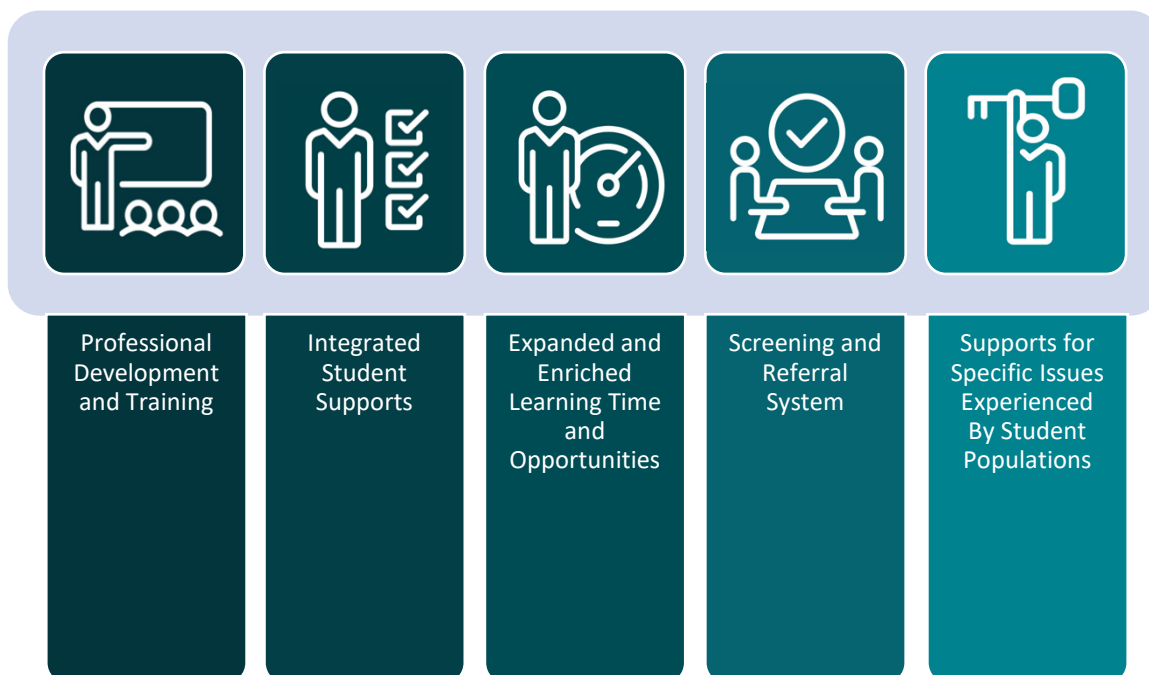
The roles and responsibilities within the partnership will differ based on unique resources and needs of school districts and the local community. Schools need to tailor the components and strategies described below to their needs as well as the type of community organizations with which they work (Eber et al., 2002).

Figure 1. Complementary supports in school-community partnerships within the MTSS framework



We draw on the critical components of the [trauma-informed approach within the MTSS framework](#) to outline five pillars of action planning steps—shown in figure 2.

Figure 2. The five pillars of action planning steps



Within each pillar, possible partnerships, actions, and incentives are provided. The action steps start with the universal supports (Pillar 1) and move to more targeted approaches (Pillar 3).

Depending on your needs and the potential partners available in the community, you may start by selecting action steps across the pillars or selecting a few within a pillar.



Pillar 1: Professional Development and Training

Awareness of ACEs and the importance of safe and supportive learning environments is essential for *all* staff, but especially for SBMHPs. Schools can partner with local organizations who can provide Tier 1, universal support by conducting [professional development and training for their educator workforce](#). Increasing educators' awareness of common causes of trauma and mental health challenges can help to create safe and supportive learning environments within the classroom and the school. Below are possible partnerships, actions, and incentives that school, community, and state leaders can take to promote the provision of professional development and training for educators.

Partnerships—Consider local entities that can align with your goals of conducting professional development and training

- Universities
- University-based clinics
- Community-based organizations (consider organizations specializing in homelessness or providing services for the LGBTQ+ community)
- Mental health clinics
- Technical assistance agencies

Actions—Consider the benefits of annual, regular, and one-time trainings

- Increase awareness about ACEs, trauma-informed practices, and SEL (see an example from [North Dakota](#))
- Train SBMHPs in trauma-informed Tier-3 interventions, such as the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS), to support students and fellow staff
- Conduct cultural sensitivity training as well as trauma-informed family and community engagement

Incentives

- Find opportunities that are relevant to the student and staff population
- Develop self-care skills and adult socioemotional competencies that can benefit educators' occupational well-being (see an example from [San José University](#) and [Pima County Schools in Arizona](#))
- Provide professional development and training that earns continuing education units, credentials, or certificates



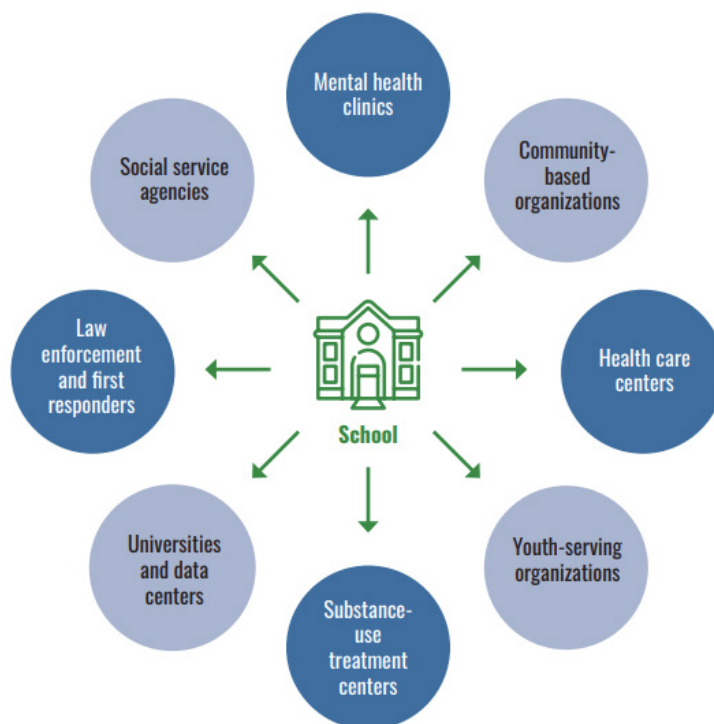
Pillar 2: Integrated Student Supports

Schools can provide integrated student supports or “wraparound services”² “by partnering with social and health services to help meet their needs, such as crisis care. In addition to helping bridge opportunity gaps for students at underserved schools, integrated student supports may be beneficial for any school wanting to overcome academic and nonacademic barriers to student success. See Figure 3 below for an illustration of the many external community entities that schools can partner with to provide wraparound services to their students. Schools, LEAs, and SEAs can

² Wraparound services is a term commonly used to mean a child- or youth-centered approach to providing services in a comprehensive and holistic way by a coordinated team made of professionals and other service providers (see [National Center for Homeless Education, 2023](#))

form the following partnerships, take the following actions, and provide the following incentives to provide integrated student supports.

Figure 3. External community agencies that schools can partner with to provide integrated supports



Partnerships—Consider conducting a needs assessment to determine which collaborations would be the most valuable

- Teachers and SBMHP
- Caregivers
- Hospitals and community health centers
- Universities or other data centers
- Organizations that provide
 - Health support (e.g., medical, dental, and mental health)
 - Housing assistance (e.g., county homelessness services, McKinney-Vento liaison)
 - Social support (e.g., conflict-resolution, restorative practices, and anti-bullying programs)
 - Culturally responsive youth engagement and services

Actions

- Co-create mental health crisis teams to provide targeted and intensive mental health supports to students who require significant levels of support who understand robust approaches to mental health crisis management.
- Leverage community organizations to train SBMHP or other designated school-level points of contact on the needs of specific student populations, such as students experiencing homelessness on the requirements of the *McKinney-Vento Act* or students from foster care on the requirements of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, for student identification, eligibility determinations, program enrollment, and the provision of support services.
- Create district-level coordinators who can build capacity for the school-community coordinators or managers in providing integrated student supports through partnerships.
- Invest in collecting and managing data at the district level. Note: School-level data collection may be difficult, given the resources, [privacy laws](#), and the multiple partners often involved in a community-schools strategy.

Incentives

- Encourage youth participation in community programs by including community services as a requirement for graduation (see [graduation requirements](#) examples from [Maryland](#))



Pillar 3: Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities

Partnering with organizations to increase out-of-school time allows students to [engage](#) and experience educational opportunities and SEL both in and out of the classroom. They also offer additional opportunities for students to [develop positive relationships](#) with trusted adults involved in supportive programs. The out-of-school time climate is typically less formal and offers a great opportunity to introduce trauma-informed practices to a targeted population while supporting students' social and emotional well-being by building positive relationships with peers and trusted adults.

Partnerships—Consider summer and afterschool collaborations

- Boys and Girls Clubs
- YMCAs
- [21st Century Community Learning Centers](#)

Actions

- [Partner with organizations](#) to provide before and after-school, weekend, summer, and holiday programming that expands children's learning opportunities while coordinating with the students' school-day curricula to create a coherent educational experience.

- Provide access to out-of-school providers that can provide social-emotional and interpersonal/peer supports for students beyond the school day.
- Develop business partnerships that can provide a needed resource (e.g., [mentoring](#), partnerships in annual health fairs, etc.).

Incentive

- Organize constructive opportunities that can qualify for resume-boosting internships or even paid work

Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities in Action

Schools in Tucson and Chandler, Arizona partner with a local non-profit, [Higher Ground](#), to implement Restart SMART, a CS model, that offers student, family, and community supports through partnerships with multiple organizations to provide and leverage resources, services, and programming. They have a Restart SMART Site Director, Student Support Specialist, and Family Support Specialist at schools whose populations face high-poverty rates and related opportunity gaps. Because Higher Ground is already embedded in Tucson, it has deep community connections in the neighborhoods where they are located. For their afterschool program in multiple school sites, they incorporate life skills (e.g., responsibility, resilience/grit, teamwork) curriculum by way of fun and engaging activities as well as provide critical mental health services in a safe, loving environment. Additionally, interns from University of Arizona and Pima Community College Life Changers work with the students and the program partners with organizations, such as the Sheriff's Department, Fire Department, Tucson Youth Development, and United Way.



Pillar 4: Screening and Referral Systems

Community service providers can offer supplementary or intensive services that go beyond school capacity. Schools and districts can partner with community-based organizations to expand screening, using evidence-based instruments; enhance referral processes for trauma-focused treatment; and increase the capacity of schools and districts to provide mental health and behavioral crisis supports for students (CASEL, 2020). Below are partnerships, actions, and incentives that school and LEA leaders can take to foster these types of services.

Partnerships

- Clinics
- Universities
- Hospitals

Actions

- Develop a system for making referrals to provide needed services and supports to students.
- Disseminate information to schools to ensure that all staff know how to connect students to school and community mental health services.
- Partner with local employers or social services that have experience working with the targeted populations for Tier 2 and 3 supports, which can enhance services and outcomes for educators and students.
- Create a school-based [crisis management team](#) comprised of professionals, caregivers, and community partners who understand robust approaches to mental health crisis management.
- Ensure school and community mental health partners create or update current practices and policies related to mental health crisis management, specifically mandatory reporting and re-entry after a suicide threat.
- Work with community partners to update and communicate reporting mechanisms that ensure students and families can quickly access help in a mental health crisis.
- Train staff and students on when and how to use these tools and follow up to ensure that users receive swift access to help.

Incentives

- Encourage staff participation and leadership (e.g., crisis management teams) by providing continuing education units.

Screening and Referral Systems in Action

The [Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine \(TCHAT\)](#) program, funded by the Texas legislature, provides telepsychology and telepsychiatry services to children and adolescents in Texas schools. TCHAT works with school staff members to identify and assess behavioral health needs of students, prioritizing the needs and care of at-risk children and adolescents who lack access to mental healthcare services in their communities.



Pillar 5: Supports for Specific Issues Experienced by Student Populations

Schools facing specific issues (e.g., the opioid crisis) or interested in focusing on specific student populations (e.g., [students in foster care](#) or [students experiencing homelessness](#)) can build cross-system partnerships to get supports and services through community partners. Below are partnerships, actions, and incentives that school and LEA leaders can take to foster these types of supports.

Partnerships—Consider partners who are already working to address the same challenges or serve the same students

- Local colleges
- Clinics
- Community mental health organizations
- Law enforcement

Actions

- Conduct [a needs assessment](#) with staff, families, students, and community members to understand the extent of the issue, the resources available, the type of partners needed, and the shared goals for student well-being. Then tailor the combination of programs and services to the needs, strengths, and priorities of the school and community.
- Partner with [substance use disorder](#) (SUD) treatment facilities, which may offer programs designed not only to support individuals with SUDs, but also their families.
- Join [community-based coalitions](#) (e.g., substance misuse prevention coalitions, suicide prevention coalitions, and/or broader youth empowerment coalitions) and bring together stakeholders to tackle common challenges.
- Participate in collaborative community events, public awareness campaigns, and mental health education programs to help create safe spaces for open discussions about mental well-being, encouraging students to seek help without fear of judgment.
- State boards of education can partner with State Epidemiological Outcomes Workgroup (SEOW) to help LEAs and schools access data to better understand the prevalence, incidence, and impact of the opioid crisis on students' functioning and well-being.

Incentives

- By gaining partnerships and joining coalitions, schools can combine forces to combat the consequences of trauma among students without having to spend the resources themselves.

Supports for Specific Issues Experienced by Student Populations in Action

[Kentucky's School Safety and Resiliency Act](#) mandates that schools and districts collaborate with law enforcement to create procedures for notification. They are implementing the [Handle with Care Model](#) for police to notify designated school staff when a student may have been exposed to a traumatic incident involving law enforcement, so they may recognize signs of distress and intervene early to support a student.

Next Steps

Schools and districts must focus on having a strategically organized, locally relevant, and well-coordinated set of partnerships and services that, together, can foster meaningful, systemic change that strengthens the well-being and success of students and families. This work aligns with the idea

that student success is an intentional collaborative effort involving educators, families, and the broader community.

The action steps outlined are a good starting point for schools, LEAs, and SEAs to develop new partnerships or strengthen existing partnerships with community organizations. To use the recommendations in this resource, carefully evaluate the approaches, selecting those that most closely align with the unique needs and available resources of your schools and communities.

School-community partnerships can contribute to positive, systemic change while improving the well-being of students, families, schools, and communities. These partnerships are especially critical to connect students who are at risk of mental health problems to early intervention services and provide treatment for students with identified mental health and socioemotional needs. The utilization of the MTSS framework enables the efficient allocation of resources and the seamless integration of various efforts both internal and external to the school, so that all students receive the level of support they require to thrive in school.

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