

# Strategies for Integrating Mental Health into Schools via a Multitiered System of Support



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## KEYWORDS

- Mental health-education integration • Multitiered systems of support
- Positive behavior interventions and supports • Response to intervention

## KEY POINTS

- Historically, school mental health services have not effectively spanned a full continuum of care, from mental health promotion to treatment, and several implementation and service challenges have evolved.
- To fully realize the potential of mental health supports in academic settings, it is essential to consider how to effectively integrate the mental health and education systems and their respective resources, staffing, and structures.
- It is essential that the community mental health workforce is prepared to engage with and work in schools, and educators and other school professionals are similarly prepared to address student mental health and to integrate community professionals into their systems of care for students.
- It is critical to integrate mental health and education teams into unified teams that consider the “whole child,” addressing academic as well as social-emotional-behavioral considerations.
- Education and mental health systems should consider using implementation science to more effectively integrate a full continuum of evidence-based mental health practices into schools.

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**Abbreviations**

|       |                                                         |
|-------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| ADHD  | Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder                |
| CBITS | Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma In Schools |
| EBP   | Evidence-based practice                                 |
| IEPs  | Individualized education programs                       |
| MOU   | Memoranda of Understanding                              |
| PBIS  | Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports          |
| Rti   | Response to intervention                                |

In the wake of No Child Left Behind and subsequent high-stakes testing, Common Core Standards, and teacher evaluation, schools are increasingly focused on instructional content and its effective delivery as a way to promote achievement and success for all students. Although focus on academics is important to advance student success, so too is attention to the social, emotional, and behavioral factors that are critical to student functioning. All students can benefit academically and socially when their classroom and school environments are positive, preventive, and responsive.<sup>1–3</sup> Furthermore, there are likely to be several students in each classroom that have impairments that impede their own and other students’ learning, necessitating more targeted intervention or supports. Integrating mental health interventions into a multitiered system of educational, social, emotional, and behavioral supports has the potential to contribute to positive learning environments for all students, especially those who display significant risk for mental health difficulties.

Despite a growing evidence base for school mental health interventions, strategic integration of mental health supports into the education infrastructure has proved challenging. Efforts to implement are often incomplete, short in sustainability, limited in outcome durability, and narrow in spread.<sup>4,5</sup> Explanations for these shortfalls include limited funding, competing initiatives, inadequate training and professional development, insufficient school-community partnerships, low priority, lack of leadership.<sup>6–8</sup> To fully realize the potential of mental health supports in academic settings, it is essential to consider how to effectively integrate the mental health and education systems and their respective resources, staffing, and structures. The purpose within this article is to review best practices and strategies for school and community partners to systematically integrate mental health interventions within a school’s multitiered system of student support. It is also suggested that schools may represent one of the best opportunities to facilitate an integrated implementation of mental health practices and systems. In addition, by improving the capacity of educators (ie, general and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, principals), and school and community mental health professionals (ie, psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, occupational therapists, nurses, social workers) to work together to leverage their respective knowledge, skills, and resources to implement evidence-based mental health practices, improvements in student academic achievement and social and behavioral competence may be realized.<sup>4,9,10</sup>

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES**

Historically, school mental health services have not effectively spanned a full continuum of care, from mental health promotion to treatment, and several implementation and service challenges have evolved. First, school mental health service provision has largely been characterized by tertiary clinical care models, serving students

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