
December 2020

Mental Health Toolkit

**A RESOURCE FOR SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL
HEALTH PROFESSIONALS, SCHOOL
COUNSELORS, STAFF AND ADMINISTRATORS**



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Overview

The purpose of this toolkit is to assist school district leaders, administrators, staff, and school-based mental health professionals (i.e., school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, and school nurses) in *promoting the mental health and well-being* of school communities.

Mental health, and mental health promotion, center on the recognition, acknowledgment, and appreciation of individual and collective strengths, resilience, values, self-determination and ways of knowing and being. Unlike mental illness, which emphasizes labels, diagnoses, or “fixing” deficits, mental health promotion celebrates the unique qualities that each person, family, and community bring to the school community.

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) recognizes and honors the valuable work of Oregon’s school districts in serving students, staff and families. The recommendations and resources provided herein offer important considerations for the implementation, continuity, and sustainability of a strengths-based, multi-tiered system of support that can be used in in-person, hybrid, or distance learning environments. It includes tools for caring for students, and the adults (i.e., teachers, parents, school staff and leaders) that guide and nurture them.

This toolkit addresses six, primary content areas: (1) Leading from Strength to Promote Mental Health; (2) Addressing Traumatic Stress; (3) Elevating Student Voice; (4) Centering Racial Equity and Anti-racism; (5) Promoting Inclusive School Environments; and (6) Delivering Multi-tiered Systems of Support. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but designed to provide a general framework for mental health promotion, with a number of curated tools to assist in that effort. Although general health and mental health are intertwined, this resource is designed explicitly to support mental health and well-being.

Leading from Strength to Promote Mental Health

Mental health, which encompasses social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral *well-being*, is central to building a school culture and climate where all students, and all who serve them, thrive. The Oregon Department of Education’s Integrated Model of Mental Health centers health and well-being in the confluence of four interconnected pillars of practice: 1) trauma-informed care, 2) social emotional learning, 3) racial equity, and 4) asset-focused, evidence-based or field-tested prevention and intervention programs within multi-tiered systems of support.

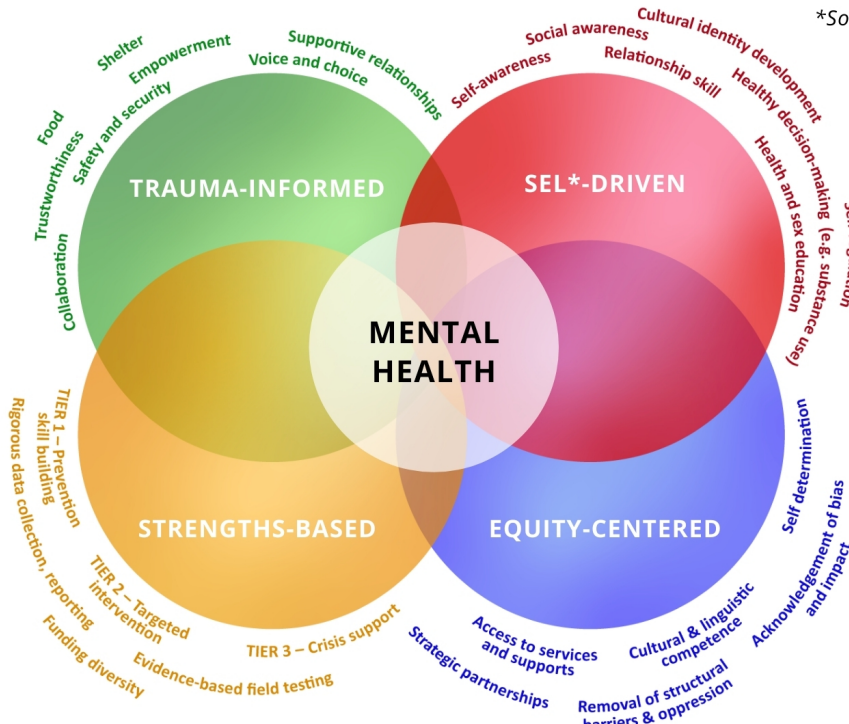
An Integrated Model of Mental Health



Integrated Model of Mental Health

Mental health emphasizes strengths, resilience, and enhancing social-emotional abilities

*Social-emotional learning



CONTINUUM OF CARE



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These pillars are part of a continuum of care that includes addressing physiological needs like food and shelter, ensuring physical, emotional and relational safety and security, providing opportunities for social connection, and cultivating purpose, self-efficacy, and self-actualization.

The integrated model emphasizes the inherent strengths, agency, voice, courage and determination of each individual. It compels each member of the school environment to ask what makes people, families and communities thrive in the face of difficult challenges, and what we must do to recognize, honor and uplift that resilience.

Although it is important to recognize and acknowledge that most people will encounter significant challenges during their lifetimes, the model and its values discourage common practices such as labeling people based on their experience, categorizing them into groups, or adopting a mindset of “fixing what is broken.” Instead, it affirms that *mental health is dynamic and fluid, and that individuals are capable of healing and transformation, sometimes with*

little or no assistance. When support and care are requested, necessary services and supports must be readily available and offered free of stigma or consequence. Relationship building, and clear, compassionate communication are at the heart of that effort.

Strength-based Strategies and Resources

The following resources are useful for creating strengths-based school cultures, classrooms, and practices.

- [Creating strength-based classrooms and schools: A practice guide](#): This brief and accessible guide offers strategies, principles and practices for building strength-based school communities.
- [Strength-based approach: A guide to writing transition learning and development statements](#): This resource from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Melbourne, provides a broad array of information and practices regarding strengths-based teaching and learning.
- [Reach out Oregon](#) provides parent-to-parent peer support and provides a community for listening, learning and supporting adults in caring for children and teens.

Addressing Traumatic Stress

It is important to recognize that traumatic events like pandemics, natural disasters, accidents or deaths, and intense, chronic stressors such as poverty, illness, family dysfunction, racism, discrimination, abuse and societal discord impact students, staff and families differently based on factors including race, age, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and/or role. Although most students and adults have experienced, or are currently facing considerable challenges and adversity, not everyone will be traumatized. Schools do, however, need to be able to address the signs and symptoms of trauma as they arise.

Symptoms of acute and prolonged stress can, and do vary in severity and duration. They may include sadness, anger, exhaustion, difficulty concentrating, sleeplessness, anxiety, hypervigilance, aggression, and avoidance of people and situations, to name a few. Each of

these responses often represent a person's best attempt to adapt to, and cope with traumatic stress, given their age, developmental stage, and particular complement of skills and abilities.

In working with students and adults, it is essential to recognize that:

- Individuals are not defined by their trauma, behavior, emotions, thoughts, or capacity to communicate; their experience is distinct from their identity.
- Each person must be given the freedom to define their experience for themselves.
- Each person brings ways of knowing and being, personal, family and community support, and connections to place and space that may be central to their healing.
- Responses to traumatic stress are dynamic and may vary considerably from moment to moment, or day to day.
- Safe, trusting relationships, and a recognition and affirmation of each person's experience(s) are foundational for healing.
- The culture, policies and practices of the institutions that were designed to protect students, such as schools, may be the [very sources of their distress or re-traumatization](#).
- The stigma around seeking mental health services and supports may prevent some from seeking help, and may require creative, innovative alternatives, or cultural approaches to standard care.

Under all circumstances, strengths-based, trauma-informed, racial equity-centered, multi-tiered systems of support are central to promoting mental health. This means being explicitly responsive to each student's linguistic and cultural heritage, and honoring their values, funds of knowledge, and inherent strengths and challenges.

Resources for Understanding, and Healing Following Traumatic Stress

- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#): The network offers many educational materials regarding the various types of trauma, trauma-informed care for families, students and schools, the differing ways trauma intersects with culture, history, race, gender, location and language, the importance of adult/family/provider partnerships, secondary traumatic stress, and more.
- [Learn about childhood trauma and positive health](#): The Child & Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative provides information regarding how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can impact a child's developing brain, and be related to challenging behaviors, chronic illness, and negative health outcomes later in life.
- [How to respond to trauma in your classroom](#): Teaching Tolerance provides strategies for responding to and supporting youths who are, or have experienced, trauma.
- [Seven strategies for helping students who have experienced trauma](#): Tips from Edutopia on how to support and empower students who have experienced traumatic events.

- [Activities that help students cope with traumatic stress](#): Sesame Street in Communities offers tools to help children process through difficult experiences.
- [Resources for creating a trauma-sensitive environment in schools](#): Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative Massachusetts Advocates for Children explores the causes of trauma, how trauma manifests in schools, and how to create a trauma-sensitive school culture.
- [How to develop school-wide, trauma-informed practices](#): Edutopia resource outlines school-wide practices for addressing traumatic stress and supporting student coping and learning.

Elevating Student Voice

A sense of powerlessness, hopelessness and invisibility are among the greatest contributors to stress and poor mental health. In many cases, healing is possible when students and adults are provided with meaningful opportunities to be seen, heard and appreciated. This is particularly true for students whose voices and choices may have historically received less attention or acknowledgement. *The importance of respecting student voice and choice, engaging students meaningfully in committees and decision-making bodies, as well as honoring and acting on their input cannot be underestimated.*

Within the academic and mental health service delivery setting there are many opportunities to center student voice to provide an avenue for healing and repair; however, safety is a prerequisite to all of these activities. This is why relationship and trust building must come first. It is critical that students and adults are afforded safe spaces where they are free to express their thoughts, emotions, stories, and opinions without fear, criticism, judgment, or condemnation.

The need to create safe spaces is essential for all meetings involving members of the school community; students, school staff, parents, leaders, families, community members, external partners, and others. When it comes to students however, it is important to recognize that youths may feel as though their voices are not equally recognized or weighted in adult conversations, as the power structures within educational systems have historically been designed and led by adults.

Safe spaces require the development of collaboratively built group norms, values, understandings and agreements regarding how members will communicate with each other. Students should be part of the process of creating these understandings within school contexts. These agreements should apply to all situations where students and adults interact (e.g. classrooms, counseling sessions, student study groups, IEP meetings, parent conferences, and school board meetings) so that each member of the school community is committed to

ensuring student safety. It is recommended that these agreements and understandings be read at the beginning of each meeting, and that school community members agree to immediately name, address, and resolve any behaviors that diverge from these norms. Lastly, it is essential that those who facilitate discussions involving students create opportunities for all youth voices to be heard, and make particular effort to create space for individuals who may be less vocal, or more reluctant to share their experience.

Aside from dialogue, it is important to create nonevaluative opportunities for students to express their thoughts and feelings. These may include creative projects such as writing, visual art, story-telling (oral/written), music, movement, theater, outdoor exploration, and other body-based creative activities. Allowing students to choose the ways in which their voices can be most authentically and meaningfully expressed, and creating safe, non-evaluative venues for that expression are central to promoting strength and resilience, and to healing stress and trauma.

Resources for Centering Promoting Student Voice and Empowerment

- [Elevating student voice in education](#): This resource from the Center for American Progress provides research, theory and tools for promoting student voice, choice and empowerment in education.
- [SOUNDOUT student toolkit](#): Provides an assortment of resources for educators, leaders and parents including tip sheets, information, research, reports, training and technical assistance designed to promote student voice.
- [How to ask students about their mental health](#): Resources for speaking with children and adolescents about their feelings.
- [Tips for helping students struggling with difficult emotions or behaviors](#): Tips for teachers and others for helping students work through challenging feelings.

Centering Equity, Racial Equity and Anti-racism

Racism and othering hurt everyone. This is particularly true for students, staff and leaders of color who often do not feel seen, heard, valued, understood, welcome, or safe in their school communities.

Many of Oregon's children and families experience racism, oppression, microaggressions, discrimination, marginalization, and a lack of recognition of their individual and community cultural strengths and values. These events can significantly contribute to the emotional and social stress and distress that they face.

The mental health and education fields rely on diagnostic categories to identify and describe students who need additional services or supports, or who excel academically. By and large, this approach was developed and institutionalized through a white cultural lens that does not account for racial, cultural, linguistic or gender diversity. As a result, many youths are mislabeled, under-labeled or over-labeled in the current system.

For example, children experiencing stress commonly display behaviors ranging from temper tantrums, excessive energy, aggression, difficulty concentrating, to behavioral withdrawal and sadness. To serve students fully, equitably, and responsively, these responses to life events need to be examined within the larger contextual framework of children's lives and experiences, rather than through a deficit or pathology-oriented mindset.

To create safe and equitable environments, services and support for all students, it is imperative that school community members examine their implicit and explicit biases, attitudes, beliefs or stereotypes regarding race, culture, sex, gender identity, ability, and social status, and their intersection, and consider how one's thoughts impact their responses to others. Recognition of how adults' mental schemas impact students' lives and contribute to negative, long-term consequences like the school to detention pipeline, or the development of damaging racial, social or sexual identities, is essential to effectively address and redress the individual and systemic practices that cause harm.

Resources for Promoting Anti-racism and Promoting Racial Equity

[Addressing race and trauma in the classroom: A resource for educators:](#) The National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides a guide for educators to examine how to address the intersection of race and trauma and its effects on students. Includes a list of supplemental resources.

[Cultural and Linguistic Competency Training:](#) Designed for licensed mental health professionals interested in expanding their cultural competency.

Promoting Inclusive School Environments

Many common educational policies and practices reinforce the inequities that students face in the education system. To create schools where students, staff and families can thrive it is necessary to critically assess which policies and procedures reinforce inequitable access to opportunities, or impede health, well-being, and achievement. This requires deliberately identifying and naming the attitudes, practices and biases that create inequitable learning experiences, ensuring that all students' stories, cultures, history and voices are represented in learning environments, and committing to treat community members equitably and inclusively.

Resources for Promoting Inclusive, Safe and Welcoming Schools

[University of Kansas Center for Teaching Excellence](#): This site offers a wealth of resources for educators and schools to support creating inclusive school climates, and best practices for inclusive teaching, leading difficult conversations, and creating an inclusive climate.

[Inclusive Schools Network](#): This interactive site offers podcasts, school self-assessments, print materials, activities and planning tools for schools, educators and families.

[Ollibean website](#): This resource provides a community hub of information for parents, families, and advocates. Based on the principles of inclusion, this site is designed to provide information, resources and research related to disability issues for families, educators and schools.

Multi-tiered Systems of Support

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) refer to a three-tiered, responsive system of services and supports (assessment, education, prevention and intervention). Offerings range from universal activities that occur in the classroom, to intensive one-on-one services to address a particular concern. Supports occur along a continuum of care, which includes physiological and physical needs, safety and security, relationships and connection, and purpose and self-determination. All three levels of service are typically offered through partnership between schools and districts, school mental health professionals, community mental health providers, community based organizations that serve schools, Tribal Consultation, and local hospitals and/or universities. It is essential that all students have equitable access to these resources, programs and services.

The three tiers of support include:

- **Tier 1:** Universal mental health promotion and prevention activities that are offered to all students.
- **Tier 2:** Selected prevention and intervention services provided to students with an identified concern or challenge that requires minimum to moderate intervention.
- **Tier 3:** Targeted or indicated direct, individual service for students with a significant identified mental health concern, or who require crisis services within or outside of the school.

Use of this framework helps schools and districts to organize and allocate resources to provide high quality evidence-based or field-tested assessment, prevention, education and intervention resources. These systems help ensure that every student receives the appropriate level of support to be successful. The framework can also be used for needs assessment and resource mapping, data collection, analysis, continuous improvement, building community partnerships, and/or creating a diversified funding stream.

The MTSS framework is as fluid and dynamic as the individuals within the system. It is intended to account for the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, sex, economic status, social determinants of health, and other factors that influence a student's circumstances in the present moment. It utilizes quantitative and qualitative data to determine which resources are necessary for students to retain or regain their physical and emotional health and well-being.

The framework is **not intended** to be used as a diagnostic or classification system. Explicitly, these tiered levels of support are **not to be used as a means to identify or categorize a student** (e.g., "This is a tier 2 student."). The mislabeling of students based on the need for service can, and often does, create stigma and harm, and a fixed identity, and **should be discouraged at all times**.

Tier 1 - Responsive

Stressful or traumatic life events will cause mild discomfort for some. Tier 1, universal, responsive services are appropriate where mild disruption of daily functioning is present. Tier 1 strategies are often used to foster social-emotional learning, support healthy behaviors (nutrition, fitness, hygiene, sleep, sexual, digital citizenry), build prosocial relationships and social skills, instill hopefulness, kindness, and compassion, bolster cognitive competencies such as problem solving and wise decision-making, heal or restore damaged relationships, and, create safe and inclusive learning environments. Supports may include weekly check-ins with students, families or staff members, offers of support and resources as appropriate, regular communication with teachers to check-in on students' progress, and referrals to mental health providers if symptoms worsen, or cause increased distress.

Tier 2 A and B – Targeted Support

For those experiencing considerable stress and distress, Tier 2 supports may be necessary. These resources may be divided into low-level (A) and high-level (B) support.

For those with moderate levels of emotional, cognitive, or social difficulties (2A) the following activities are suggested:

- Develop a resource plan with student identifying strengths, positive prosocial activities, social supports, and a clear strategy of when to ask for help.
- Consider providing group skill building supports for students with similar concerns.
- Schedule regular check-ins with student in their preferred mode of contact at least once per week.
- Maintain regular communication between teachers/staff and service providers to track student progress. Identify an immediate strategy if student difficulties increase or intensify.

The following is suggested when students or staff experience more significant mood, cognitive, or social challenges (2B):

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- Create a health, safety and resource plan. The plan should identify strengths, positive prosocial activities, a clear strategy of when to ask for help, and a list of 24/7 resources and supports (including crisis supports).
- Evaluate if an external referral is needed. If so, connect with community provider to determine availability and facilitate a warm hand-off.
- Offer short-term counseling if feasible and needed (students only).
- Make plan to involve caregivers (students only).
- Communicate with teachers regarding academic expectations and follow-up student progress data and qualitative reports.
- Maintain regular communication between teachers/staff and service providers to track student progress. Notify service providers immediately if student's problems increase or if a student is in crisis.

Tier 3 - Crisis Support

In circumstances where students or staff are at imminent risk for harm or danger, it is essential to take immediate action. Please also see "How to Prevent Suicide," and "What to Do If You Suspect Abuse" in the Mental Health area on the [ODE website](#).

Tier 3 Resources

- If you are not able to conduct a formal suicide risk assessment, do one of the following:
 - Call the National Suicide Hotline for a risk assessment and immediate support (800-273-8255); OR
 - Contact Lines for Life to provide a remote suicide risk assessment and safety planning service for schools (503-575-3760).
- If a student is actively suicidal or at risk for imminent harm and not willing to connect with resources call 911.
- Consult the "How to Prevent Suicide" [guidance document](#) in the Mental Health section of the [ODE website](#) and/or follow your school or district crisis protocols and policies.
- Communicate regularly with parents, guardians and individuals that the student has identified a trusted adult(s).
- Offer caregivers resources such as [Reach Out Oregon](#).
- Check in frequently with student, family and teacher (as appropriate).
- Consider 360 degree assessment strategies that identify strengths, challenges, gaps and opportunities. Develop and implement individualized support plans as needed.

Please contact ODE's Director of Mental Health, [B. Grace Bullock](#), PhD with any questions.