

# The Importance of School Employed Behavioral Health Professionals in Supporting Students, Staff, Families and Communities During COVID 19

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our educational, social, and economic systems in March 2020 with significant impact to our communities. The Educational Staff Associates Behavioral Health Coalition (ESA BHC), which is composed of school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses, agree that we must first consider the safety of our students, staff, families and communities. At times, our professions have been inhibited in the ability to effectively collaborate as a result of the siloed nature of the educational system. Now more than ever, the ESA BHC is advocating for more robust and integrated systems to support students' social-emotional health and well-being. Considering the intersectionality of the dual public health crises of racism and pandemic disease, the ESA BHC has come together to present recommendations to transform how we meet the needs of our students, staff, families and communities during this time of crisis and uncertainty.

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is recommended to be in place in all Washington school districts to provide students a continuum of academic and social-emotional/behavioral services ranging from teaching broad-based skills in the classroom to small group and individualized support. The dual public health crises have increased the demand to address the social-emotional health and well-being of children and to insure their physical safety. As such, a continuum of services will be needed, potentially including online support with virtual delivery of interventions and teletherapy.

The OSPI Social-Emotional Learning workgroup's Four Guiding Principles have provided the lens for this work: Equity, Cultural Responsiveness, Universal Design, and Trauma Informed Approaches.

## Supports for Students

A coordinated, comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach would best meet the complex needs of students. The impact of this shifting, unpredictable landscape may be more significant for students with pre-existing adverse childhood experiences or chronic persistent trauma. In addition, inequities are greatly exacerbated within the intersectionality of the dual public health crises.

After a period of time for staff to get to know students and for students to access Tier 1 social emotional instruction, screening of all students is highly recommended. Any students who are identified as having high risk needs, such as suicidal ideation, should have access to immediate assessment for these needs. This is to assess the impact

that the current situation has had on the lives of our students and address their needs appropriately within the MTSS framework. All students should receive strong social and emotional health services across the MTSS continuum.

Innovation, flexibility, and adaptability will be required to reach children furthest from educational justice and address barriers to emotional wellness and learning. Schools should provide research-based and/or evidence-based interventions which are antiracist, culturally centered, and linguistically appropriate. Students must be supported to re-establish a sense of community that maintains physically safe distance while fostering peer connections and adult relationships for emotional health.

An effective, comprehensive approach includes the whole child, whole school, whole community and incorporates family voices so our students can heal, thrive and succeed.

## Supports for Families and Communities

The 2020-2021 school year will be an opportunity to build and enhance partnerships with guardians and the community. The COVID-19 Pandemic has created more barriers for families, and it has illuminated further the existing barriers and gaps in our partnerships. It is more important than ever to ask parents what they want and need. This is our opportunity to prioritize listening and learning with families.

In response to the events of the COVID-19 Pandemic, we urge school teams to use a Trauma-Informed Approach such as that outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The school team should develop a plan to identify parent needs, with a progress monitoring system the team can use to ensure ongoing updates and relevant course corrections occur in a timely manner.

Schools should communicate directly in the language spoken at home with parents about resources, strategies, and online opportunities for training and/or support groups. Resources may include school services, basic needs such as food and shelter, technology and mental health. Parents may need assistance with facilitating students' participation in online learning, peer relationships and emotional support for their children during these trying times. They may also need strategies for managing behavior at home. Effective communication will include emails, phone calls, texts, home visits, and other methods needed, in a safe, transparent, and trustworthy manner. We need to empower parents and to ensure they have a voice in their student's education.

Family partnerships have always been a needed component of any successful school. This fall offers us the opportunity to dive in and transform the quality of our partnerships. Schools should focus on building relationships above all.

# Supports for Staff

Educators include all personnel who support learning, from classroom teachers to bus drivers to specialists. As educators prepare for the 2020-2021 school year, we encourage schools to prioritize a Trauma-Informed Approach to support educators delivering instruction and services in-person, online or a hybrid model. Educators have experienced stressors and disruptions to their role, their health and the health of their loved ones, racial trauma, and grief and loss of loved ones. Educators are also deeply concerned about the welfare of their students.

Ensuring the health and safety of our students is a priority for educators, which requires adherence to guidelines from state and local health departments. Secondary to this, they require access to the tools, professional development, and resources needed to carry out their educational duties. A key component to reducing the stress on staff is to ensure safe, effective communication channels, technical support, and limiting the number of platforms they are expected to use. Educators need time for collaboration within and between school buildings. Schools should encourage self-care and provide information about avenues of support for educators experiencing stress.

Educators first and foremost care about their students. With support from families and their school, they will ensure the best education possible for Washington's students.

## Conclusion

During this dual public health crisis, school psychologists, counselors, nurses, and social workers are critical team members in the schools. As we envision reopening schools in Washington State, we are urging OSPI, WEA, and local unions, as well as districts to include representatives from each of our professions. A continuum of evidence-based practices are necessary academically, socially, emotionally, behaviorally, physically, and mentally for students to consistently engage in their education. We have training, expertise, and strong relationships with our students, staff, families and communities. We provide direct and indirect evidence-based practices and interventions, and mobilize available supports in our buildings as well as resources in our local and state communities. Multidisciplinary collaboration, within an MTSS framework, enhances our ability to meet students' complex needs.

Washington's schools employ behavioral health experts in these roles, and must elevate their voices, expertise, and perspectives as we innovate and re-imagine public education. We are dedicated to partnering with stakeholders to provide a robust continuum of services to our Washington state students and families as we navigate this unprecedented and challenging time.

# Resources

- [Education Staff Associates Behavioral Health Coalition \(ESA BHC\)](#)
  - [ESA Tiered Roles in an MTSS framework](#)
  - [ESA Top Three Distinguishing Factors](#)
- [School Nurse Organization of Washington \(SNOW\)](#)
- [National Association of School Nurses \(NASN\)](#)
  - [COVID 19 Resources](#)
  - [Race and Equity Position Paper](#)
- [Washington Association of School Social Workers \(WASSW\)](#)
- [School Social Worker Association of America \(SSWAA\)](#)
  - [COVID 19 Resources](#)
  - [Racial Equity and Social Justice](#)
- [Washington State Association of School Psychologists \(WSASP\)](#)
  - [COVID 19 Guidance and Resources](#)
- [National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\)](#)
  - [COVID 19 Resources](#)
  - [Social Justice](#)
- [Washington School Counselors Association \(WSCA\)](#)
- [American School Counselor Association \(ASCA\)](#)
  - [COVID 19 Resources](#)
  - [Race and Equity Resources](#)
- <https://www.k12.wa.us/>
  - [COVID 19 Guidance and Resources](#)
  - [Center for Improvement in Student Learning \(CISL\)](#)
    - [Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(MTSS\)](#)
    - [Washington Integrated Student Supports Protocol \(WISSP\)](#)
  - [Social Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Indicators Workgroup](#)
- [Department of Health COVID 19 Page](#)
  - [Statewide High-Level Analysis of Forecasted Behavioral Health Impacts from COVID-19](#)
- **Other Resources**
  - [A Framework for Safe and Supportive Schools](#)
  - [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#)
    - [COVID 19 Resources](#)
  - [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#)
    - [Trauma Informed Approach](#)
  - [SEL and Self-Care Resources for Educators, Schools, and Parents Related to Distance Learning and Covid 19](#)
  - [SEL and Mental Health Resources for Covid 19](#)
  - [Mental Health America Back to School Guide](#)