Fostering Mental Health and Wellness with Universal Social-Emotional and Behavioral Supports
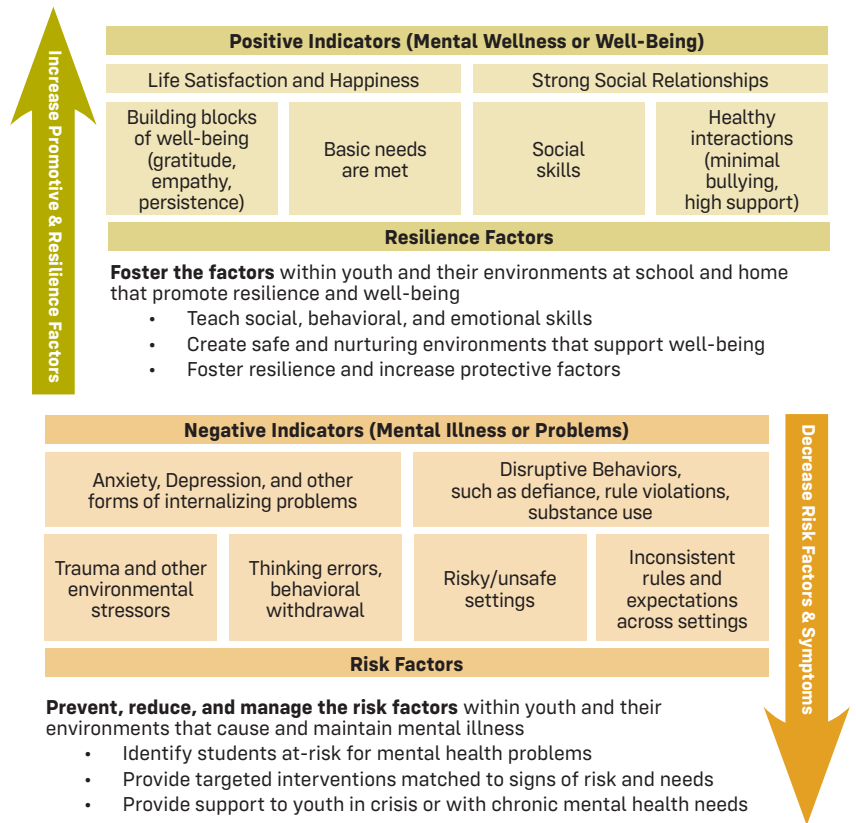
Even before the COVID-19 Pandemic, school-aged children across the nation were experiencing mental health issues and social isolation at alarming rates. The pandemic and resulting school closures have heightened these needs, particularly among students of color and other marginalized student groups who have been disproportionately impacted by pandemic-related stress, illness, and economic insecurity. Schools remain one of the most effective and efficient settings for providing mental health services.[i] This document will highlight universal practices that districts can employ to support social emotional wellness and complete mental health. Universal practices refer to supports delivered to all students across the continuum and may include social-emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, and positive behavioral supports and interventions, among others.

What do we mean by Complete Mental Health?

Traditionally, intervention and assessment of mental health has focused on the use of retroactive methods (e.g., discipline referrals) to identify problematic behaviors and other **negative indicators of mental health**. This can lead to loss of instruction,[ii] which is detrimental to student achievement and often has a disproportionate impact on students of color.

This approach also overlooks important **positive indicators of mental health** (e.g., resilience), undermining district efforts to serve all students and improve student outcomes.[iii]

Today school mental health professionals are focusing intervention efforts to support students' **complete mental health**[iv] by (1) Increasing Promotive & Resilience Factors and (2) Decreasing Risk Factors & Symptoms (See Figure on Right). For further information, districts should consult the **Dual Factor Model of Mental Health**.[v]

Increase Promotive & Resilience Factors

Positive Indicators (Mental Wellness or Well-Being)

Life Satisfaction and Happiness		Strong Social Relationships	
Building blocks of well-being (gratitude, empathy, persistence)	Basic needs are met	Social skills	Healthy interactions (minimal bullying, high support)

Resilience Factors

Foster the factors within youth and their environments at school and home that promote resilience and well-being
- Teach social, behavioral, and emotional skills
- Create safe and nurturing environments that support well-being
- Foster resilience and increase protective factors

Negative Indicators (Mental Illness or Problems)

Decrease Risk Factors & Symptoms

Anxiety, Depression, and other forms of internalizing problems		Disruptive Behaviors, such as defiance, rule violations, substance use	
Trauma and other environmental stressors	Thinking errors, behavioral withdrawal	Risky/unsafe settings	Inconsistent rules and expectations across settings

Risk Factors

Prevent, reduce, and manage the risk factors within youth and their environments that cause and maintain mental illness
- Identify students at-risk for mental health problems
- Provide targeted interventions matched to signs of risk and needs
- Provide support to youth in crisis or with chronic mental health needs

One District's Universal Approach to Social Emotional Learning

The School District of Palm Beach County developed a Tier 1 approach to social-emotional learning (SEL) to support the mental health of all students and staff. These steps included: (1) developing common language around SEL skills and competencies for universal instruction district-wide, (2) stakeholder collaboration to identify skills related to CASEL's 5 Core Competencies for weekly SEL themes, and (3) the creation of an SEL Guide for Elementary and Secondary Schools to support the shift towards a school-wide SEL approach. The guide is a resource to ensure students develop SEL competencies across classrooms, school, out-of-school time (afterschool), home, and community. The district SEL Team provided resources to schools to explicitly teach each week's theme, including lessons from evidence-based curriculum programs, district-created lessons, and resources from *Learning from Justice and Facing History for Ourselves*. The second area of focus was on fostering a sense of belonging and community regardless of setting, physical or virtual. SEL Morning Meeting lessons were created to establish and maintain relationships. These lessons also reinforced the SEL theme of the week and provided opportunities for students to reflect and apply the social and emotional skill for that week. For secondary schools, daily SEL-themed Welcoming Rituals/Check-ins were developed for teachers to use with students during one period each day.

Mental Health and Academic Performance

School success is not just academic success. To support all students, educators must ensure academic, behavioral, and social-emotional growth and development. In many cases, schools that support students' mental health promotion have seen an *assortment of positive impacts* in students' physical, social-emotional, and academic outcomes,[vi] thus providing reason for *broadening the notion* of school success.

Often overlooked in supporting mental health is a focus on teacher well-being. Teaching is a stressful, high turnover profession (*even before the COVID-19 Pandemic*) that often gets overlooked as a target of mental health promotion. *Supporting teachers' well-being* can also lead to improved instructional quality, student well-being, and student achievement.[vii]

District and school leaders can be the *catalyst for promoting* both student and teacher well-being through universal, supplemental, or individual strategies. Leaders should therefore consider a *two-pronged approach* (e.g., promoting both student and teacher well-being) when determining how to best support their student and staff populations.

Tips for Building Trauma-Informed Instructional Environments
- Increase transparency (e.g., classroom daily planner)
- Establish predictability (e.g., daily routines)
- Nurture student autonomy by providing "voice and choice"

Tips for Fostering Student Resilience
- Model positive behaviors
- Express gratitude (e.g., focus on praise, not criticism)
- Incorporate mindfulness activities into the curriculum

Action Steps for Districts

Based on your district's readiness for supporting student and staff mental health, there are *three potential next steps*.

1. *Critically evaluate current universal practices at the district level.* For example, consider completing a needs assessment to determine assets and needs.

2. *Identify strategies to promote student resilience.* See below for evidence-based Tier I and II practices.

3. *Focus on high-leverage, low-resource practices to build momentum.* Implement strategies such as those outlined above to (1) promote a trauma-informed instructional environment[vii] and (2) foster student resilience.[ixx]

Where to start?

- **Review/distribute resources such as:**
  - Teacher Stress
  - Social, Emotional, Behavioral Screening
  - Supporting Students during COVID-19
- Wanting to *start a conversation* across all staff? Follow this example of a needs assessment to gather data to focus on areas of improvement.
- Looking for *extra support*? Contact the School Mental Health Collaborative for technical assistance.

Strategies

Examples of *Tier I (Universal) Strategies* could include:
- Choosing a Social-Emotional Learning Curriculum
- More focused interventions such as Second Step or Positive Psychology (costs associated)

Examples of *Tier II (Supplemental) Strategies* could include:
- Motivational Interviewing
- Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)

Click here for references.