

Promoting Student Mental Health at School: Research Featured in *School Psychology Review* Volume 50

School psychologists are essential to the provision of mental health care for kids in school. These services are foundational to supporting their healthy development and academic success. (Sanchez et al., 2018). Research reveals that by seventh grade, 40% of students will have experienced a mental health issue such as anxiety or depression, and that, each year, nearly 20% of school-age youth meet the criteria for a mental health disorder (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). The majority of these children and youth do not receive the care they need (Whitney & Peterson, 2019), and of those who do, the overwhelming majority do so in schools (Rones & Hoagwood, 2000). Moreover, rates of mental health issues are rising in this country. Rates of depression have risen over the past 20 years, with suicide rates at an all-time high (Curtin & Heron, 2019). In order to address the increasing mental health needs of youth, broad, systemic change is needed, and schools play a critical role. To help inform the discussion, *School Psychology Review's* 50th volume is a special issue focusing on the use of public health approaches to address the prevalence and burden of youth mental health problems (Herman et al., 2021). This issue contains valuable research to guide improvements in comprehensive school mental health systems and provides clear evidence of the importance of school mental health services to school and student outcomes. Below is a brief overview of findings from several articles featured in this special issue.

- ***Systemic prevention services like PBIS save money over both the short and long term.*** Whereas it is widely known that there are positive effects of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) on student outcomes, and that it is an effective prevention tool for mental health issues, it is less clear what such interventions cost. In this recent study of the cost savings of a PBIS program, Bradshaw and colleagues (2021) found that there was a savings of \$4,500 per student in elementary school and \$860 per student in secondary school. This is primarily due to improvements in test scores and reductions in aggressive behaviors; however, long-term benefits like improved mental health also contributed to cost savings. That is, PBIS is not only an effective program but also one that saves schools money in both the short- and long-term (Bradshaw et al., 2021).

School psychologists are experts in PBIS and other multitiered systems of support that improve students' mental and behavioral well-being and learning.

- ***Quality of implementation matters.*** Additionally, when school mental health prevention and intervention models are implemented with fidelity, they can have positive impacts for children. A study examining student outcomes that were associated with the fidelity to a comprehensive mental health prevention and intervention program found that social, emotional, and behavioral concerns were associated with fidelity to such programs (Reinke et al., 2021).

School psychologists have expertise in data-based decision-making, research-based interventions, and program evaluation.

- ***Collaborating with school-based mental health providers is key to providing effective interventions.*** Two separate studies found that mental health interventions can be effectively developed in collaboration with schools, and, when such collaboration is sought, it can lead to interventions implemented with fidelity. That is, school-based personnel can deliver effective interventions with fidelity (Cho, Strawhun, et al., 2021; Holmes et al., 2021).

School psychologists are critical members of the school-employed mental health team that implements and evaluates both individual and systems-level services and programs.

- ***Effective mental health care has important academic outcomes.*** Thompson, Herman, and colleagues (2021) found that children with greater access to case management and mental health services from a community center had better school attendance, lower risk for social and emotional problems, fewer disciplinary actions, and better academic outcomes overall. When such mental health services are embedded within schools, it can improve school climates and lower discipline rates over time (DiGirolamo et al., 2021). As such, school–community partnerships that allow effective collaboration for the treatment of children with mental health disorders can have profound positive effects for schools.

School psychologists work with administrators and educators to help link interventions that support social–emotional well-being, positive discipline, and learning, as well as create safe, supportive learning environments.

- ***School mental health services improve outcomes even for students with more intensive needs.*** The effect of mental health supports on academic outcomes even extends to those in alternative school placements. Researchers found that at-risk students who were enrolled at a K–12 disciplinary alternative school had fewer disciplinary actions, improved social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, and improved academic performance following mental health intervention (Henry et al., 2021).

School psychologists provide direct, intensive Tier 3 services to students with the most severe needs and help coordinate related school-based community services for these students.

- ***Social media can be an effective tool for encouraging mental health help-seeking.*** One possible reason that children with mental health disorders do not receive the treatment they need is the stigma around mental health help-seeking. Social media may be an effective way of reducing stigma and promoting help-seeking among youth. Indeed, researchers developed an effective social media campaign to do just that; however, the authors also caution the social media campaigns must attend to the cultural characteristics of all youth to be most effective (Thompson, Hollis, et al., 2021).

School psychologists can help disseminate information to reduce mental health stigma via social media. They can also help educate students on the appropriate use of social media to connect with others or seek help.

- ***Collaboration between schools and community providers can help expand access to services and improve outcomes.*** When barriers are removed to treatment, youth can more readily receive needed treatment. A program that brought psychiatric care into schools found that youth symptoms decreased, treatment was adhered to, and both parents and school personnel had high levels of satisfaction after 2 years of the program (Cho, Marriott, et al., 2021).

School psychologists coordinate community-based services provided in schools to help ensure seamless delivery and relevance to the learning environment.

- ***Proactive advocacy can increase support for and implementation of school mental health services.*** One way to gain such school-based mental health programs is through effective advocacy for them. Using South Carolina as an example, researchers found that mobilization and organization, collaboration, prioritization of at-risk populations, accountability, and prevention, among other themes, as common among initiatives that have allowed South Carolina to increase their school-based mental health programs (Franke et al., 2021).

School psychologists are advocates on behalf of children’s mental and behavioral health at the individual, building, and systems levels. They are adept at identifying and presenting data on needs and recommended interventions and outcomes.

CONCLUSION

As seen from the research reviewed here and presented in the 50th volume of *SPR*, school psychologists are integral to ensuring that all children have access to evidence-based mental health treatment. Although that goal requires systemic changes, school psychologists are prepared to lead the way. For example, school psychologists can use evidence-based, cost-effective interventions, such as PBIS, to help improve students’ mental health and academic functioning; school psychologists collaborate with other educators, administrators, researchers, and others to create safe and supportive learning environments; and school psychologists advocate for children’s mental health by using data to determine needed interventions. Rising rates of mental health problems and increased barriers to mental health care are serious problems; school psychologists can help be a solution.

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