



## Recommendations for Mental Health Instruction in Schools

The New York State Mental Health Education Law, which took effect July 1, 2018, requires public and private schools to provide mental health instruction for all students grades K-12. The School Mental Health Resource and Training Center at the Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. (MHANYS) recommends that classroom curricula and lesson plans, as well as district-wide initiatives that promote mental health education and awareness, should:

- **Assume a public health approach.** All students, as well as families/caregivers and school staff, will benefit from an understanding of key concepts in mental health and wellness, and the development of life-long skills and resources that transcend the young person's present role as a student. As schools develop a plan to educate youth, they should also consider:
  - district-wide mental health and wellness initiatives
  - professional development trainings for all school staff
  - opportunities to raise awareness with parents/caregivers
- **Adopt a social emotional learning (SEL) framework.** Schools are encouraged to view social-emotional learning as a "framework", not solely the implementation of an SEL program. NYSED has developed benchmarks and guidance to support the development of SEL core competencies. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) offers information on evidence-based programs for both elementary and middle/high school programs. Visit <https://casel.org/guide/> to view these two guides.
- **Focus on mental wellness, as well as mental health literacy.** Mental health education should include an understanding of mental health as a continuum and the relationship between mental health and physical health. A comprehensive approach to mental health education will help to reduce stigma and promote a culture and climate of wellness. Mental health literacy promotes an understanding of risk and protective factors, and signs and symptoms, as well as the development of coping strategies and help-seeking skills.
- **Be vetted in advance to assure appropriateness.** When researching an SEL or mental health education program, it is recommended that all content and the way it would be delivered in schools be examined closely to assure it is age-appropriate and offers safe messaging even if the program is deemed to be evidence-based.
- **Identify a mental health advisory team.** Mental Health Education should be collaborative and build on existing efforts. The following three steps are recommended:

- identify a diverse team to develop and implement mental health education. It doesn't have to be a team created for this purpose; it may be an existing team, such as the District Health Advisory Committee.
  - assess for what is being done in health education and across the disciplines.
  - Develop a system for evaluating mental health instruction, identifying gaps and new opportunities. Visit the School Mental Health Resource and Training website at <https://www.mentalhealthdnys.org/mh-education-readiness/> to review the NYS Mental Health Education Readiness Guide.
- **Engage students in small group discussions.** While some programs offer “assembly” style instruction, it is preferable to engage students in lessons on mental health literacy in small groups or in the classroom setting to support safety and learning. Include school support personnel whenever possible, such as School Social Workers and School Counselors. Teachers should always remain in the room with support personnel delivering instruction and plan to co-teach the lesson whenever possible.
  - **Collaborate with community providers and subject matter experts.** Mental health experts, advocates and community providers can help deliver mental health instruction. In addition, recipients of mental health services are a valuable resource for sharing stories of lived experience with mental health challenges and recovery. These community partners can also educate school personnel delivering mental health instruction to ensure they have adequate knowledge, education and training.

### **Curriculum Elements**

Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. (MHANYS) believes that the core elements in school mental health curricula should include:

1. The concept of wellness (e.g. 8 dimensions of wellness) including self-care and personal responsibility for one's own mental health and wellness.
2. The concept of mental health as an integral part of health.
3. The recognition of the signs and symptoms of developing mental health problems.
4. The implications of risk factors, protective factors and resiliency on wellness, mental health and recovery.
5. The relationship between mental health, substance use and other negative coping behaviors.
6. The concept of recovery from mental health disorders.
7. Instruction in the awareness and management of mental health crises such as the risk of suicide, self-harm and other mental health crises.
8. Instruction in identifying appropriate professionals, services and family/social supports for treating and maintaining recovery from mental health disorders.
9. The negative impact of stigma and cultural attitudes toward mental illnesses on treatment seeking behavior and as a contributing factor in discrimination against people with mental illnesses.