

Supporting a Peaceful And Calm Educational Space

2022 Report



MHANYS
Mental Health Association
in New York State



Thank you Otsuka Pharmaceutical
Company for your support.





The information contained in this report was collected through a survey and key informant interviews conducted between April and August 2022. The results informed a set of recommendations to guide schools in creating and implementing wellness spaces. It is MHANYS position that these initiatives are an excellent strategy for promoting mental health literacy, reducing stigma and creating a positive school climate that supports wellness and safety.

We hope schools will be encouraged to consider designing a wellness space that aligns with the resources and needs of their school community. The MHANYS School Mental Health Resource and Training Center staff are available to provide technical assistance, resources for mental health education, professional development, and information for families. Visit us at mentalheathEDnys.org or contact us at schools@mhany.org.

MHANYS would like to thank all those who responded to the survey, and generously gave their time to participate in interviews.

Kathleen Bremer, School Social Worker, Canandaigua City School District, Ontario County, NY

Nicky Gabrielson, School Counselor, Keene Central School District, Essex County, NY

Jatha Johnson, School Counselor, Keene Central School District, Essex County, NY

Kristen Kresge, Mental Health & Physical Education Teachers, Valley Central School District, Orange County, NY


Patrece Poremba, Occupational Therapy Assistant, Rondout Valley Central School District, Ulster County, NY

Vanessa Santos, School Counselor, Brooklyn Lab School, Brooklyn, NY

Paul Scarpati, Occupational Therapist, Rondout Valley Central School District, Ulster County, NY

We are especially grateful to Otsuka Pharmaceutical Company for their financial contribution to this project and their on-going partnership in MHANYS' efforts to raise awareness and reduce stigma.





In July 2018, New York State became first in the nation to require schools to provide mental health instruction as part of the K-12 Health curriculum. Since then, the Mental Health Association in NYS, Inc. (MHANYS) has supported implementation with the work of the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center (Resource Center) providing instructional resources, staff development and information for families.

Working collaboratively with educators, the Resource Center learned about schools that were reimagining spaces to create a safe and calming sanctuary for students to practice stress management skills. They included repurposed offices and storage areas, often as part of the counseling center; designated corners in the classroom; and sensory hallways. We will refer to these collectively as “wellness spaces”.

A quick search of your Internet browser will identify a myriad of videos and blog posts from teachers and school mental health staff sharing their strategies for designing and implementing wellness spaces ([see example](#)). However, there is little empirical research or identified “best practices” for either the design or use of such spaces.

Intrigued by the concept and with support from Otsuka Pharmaceutical Company, MHANYS surveyed schools and conducted interviews to better understand the design and use of wellness spaces, including:

- the protocol for use, including referral practices and behavior expectations
- the types of coping tools and activities available
- how students are instructed to use the materials and/or space
- the design and development of the space, including funding sources
- expected student outcomes
- barriers to implementation and lessons learned
- data being collected

The results informed a set of recommendations to guide schools in creating and implementing wellness spaces. It is MHANYS position these initiatives are an excellent strategy for promoting mental health literacy, reducing stigma and creating a positive school climate that supports wellness and safety.

Recommendations for Developing an Effective and Inclusive Wellness Space

- Wellness Spaces should be accessible to all students and include a variety of activities to help students regulate uncomfortable emotions.
- Input from the entire school community, particularly students, should be reflected in the design and implementation of Wellness Spaces.
- Teachers and staff should experience the wellness space for themselves to understand the benefits and model positive coping strategies.
- Guidelines for how students use the space should be clear and supportive of mental health promotion practices and student safety.
- The use of a Wellness Space(s) should align with the school’s mental health and social emotional learning curriculum to support instruction and the practice of coping strategies.
- Data should be collected to evaluate student outcomes, identify the mental health needs of students, and inform school policy and practice.

Survey Results: Overview of Wellness Spaces

In May of 2022, MHANYS' Resource Center conducted a survey of schools using our extensive email distribution list of educational stakeholders. Everyone was invited to complete the survey; it was not limited to schools that currently had a wellness space. MHANYS was equally interested in receiving input from schools that did not have wellness spaces. A total of 98 responses were received with three of them being from outside of New York State: New Jersey, Ohio and Minnesota. Although our intent was to survey NYS schools, we appreciate the time respondents took to complete the survey and have included all data in this report.

About half of all respondents identified as School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists or Behavior Specialists, and reported on wellness spaces used in secondary education (Figures 1 and 2). Seven out of 10 reported some type of wellness space that was either well-established, recently created, being implemented by a limited number of teachers or in the planning stages (Figure 3). Of those that did not have a wellness space, most indicated a moderate level of interest in developing this initiative if they had resources and guidance. Only 3 respondents indicated no interest at all.

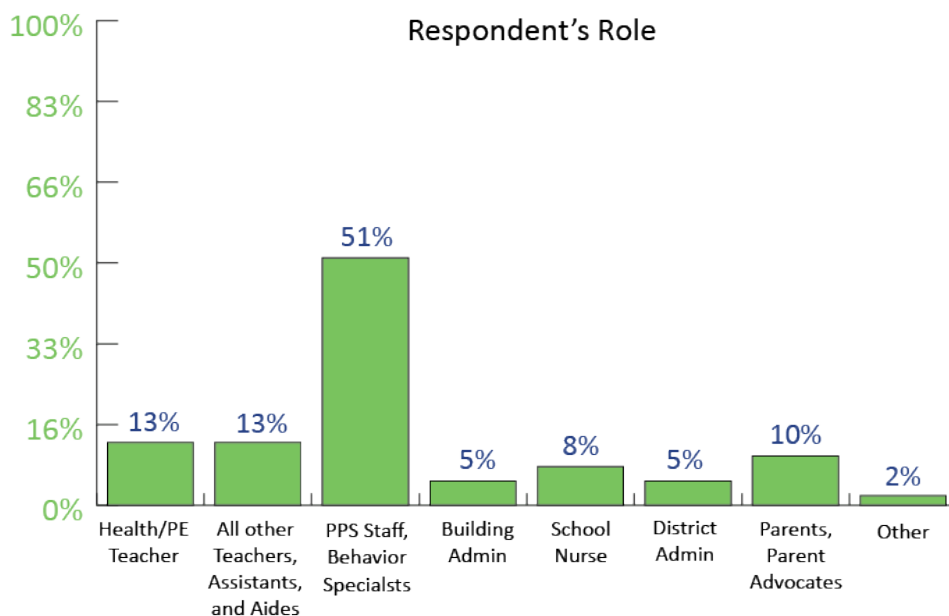


Figure 1

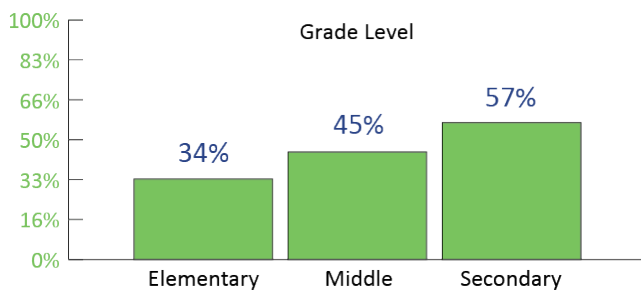


Figure 2

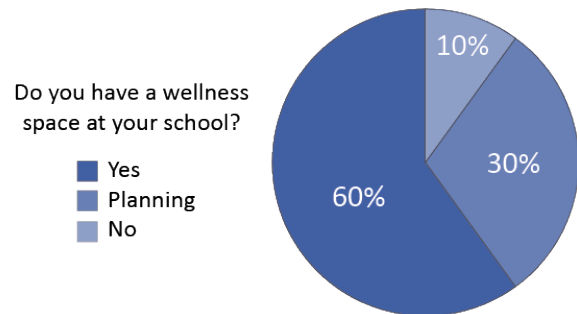


Figure 3

The wellness spaces described by respondents were each unique, with significant variability in the activities and material available, and how the spaces were staffed. Budgets ranged from \$100 to \$3000, with diverse funding sources, including community grants, department budgets, Covid relief funding and personal funds. In addition, wellness spaces were created as part of Capital Projects and others used repurposed materials and seating from previous grants (i.e. PBIS and 21st century classroom).

The location of wellness spaces fell into 4 categories: a room in the counseling center, a room in a location other than the counseling center, a designated area of the classroom and sensory hallways. In addition, a School Social Worker from an online high school in Minnesota reported on a virtual wellness space. Designated rooms were the most common, accounting for 88% of responses

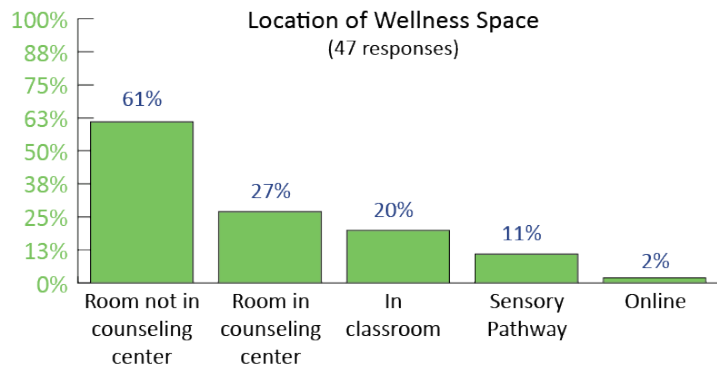


Figure 4

(Figure 4). Activities for managing stress included mindfulness strategies, such as labyrinth-tracing and breathing exercises, as well as physical and creative activities, such as yoga mats, rockers and building blocks. In addition, spaces were designed to be welcoming and comfortable with pillows, low lighting, music and flexible seating (Figure 5).

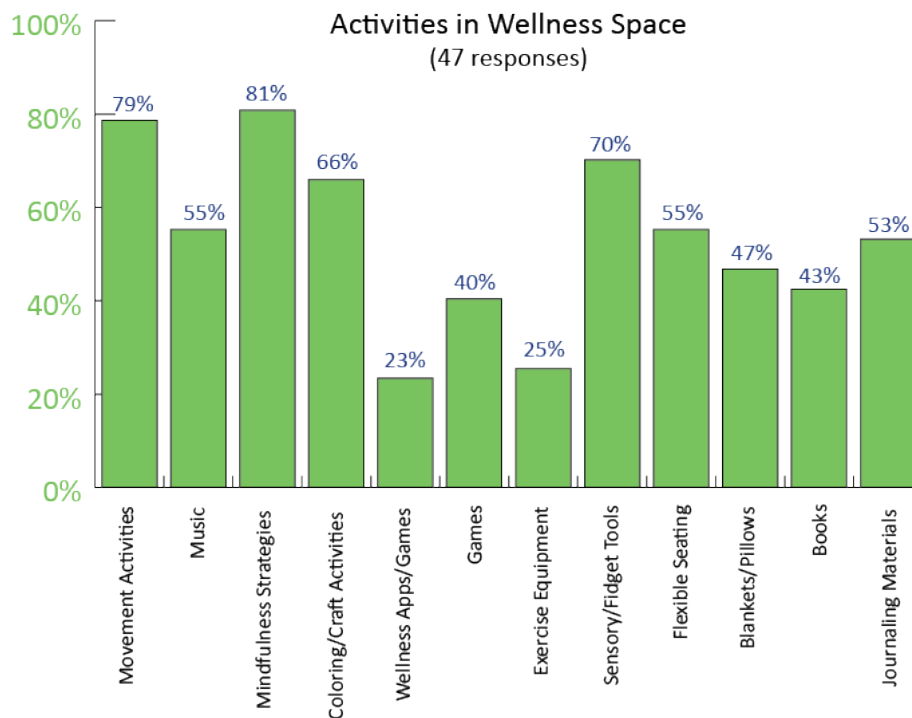


Figure 5

Supervision was generally consistent, even among wellness spaces that were still in the planning stages. Nearly all respondents either identified a designated staff person to monitor the wellness space or reported wellness spaces were easily visible by classroom teachers, counselors, or other school staff. Approximately 40% of respondents reported that more than one student was able to use the space at the same time, and another 40% allowed multiple students to use the space but only with permission. In general, students are required to check in with a staff member but could use the space independently, with little guidance unless they requested assistance. Importantly, this gives students a sense of agency and empowerment.

Survey Results: Barriers and Concerns

The top reason that respondents cited for not have a wellness space was the lack of an available location (Figure 6). Two schools reported rooms that are no longer in use due to competing priorities for the space: one was changed to a lactation room, and another is now used for in-school suspension following a change in administration. In addition, one Mindfulness Room is used to test students during assessments – arguably taking away the opportunity for stress management at a time when it is much needed. Two possible solutions to this challenge lie in the creation of wellness spaces in the classroom, also known as Calming Corners, and Sensory Hallways, as described in our interview with Marbletown Elementary School. Both provide a creative, accessible solution to a lack of space, as well as the second most frequently cited barrier – a lack of staff to support implementation. Sensory Hallways can be strategically placed in a location that ensures a moderate level of supervision keeping in mind that students typically use the space independently.

The third most frequently cited barrier was a lack of funding. About half of all respondents without a wellness space identified funding as a concern but budgets reported in the survey were as low as a few hundred dollars. With increased attention to student mental health and an unprecedented amount of Federal funds flowing into education, our hope is that schools will embrace new funding opportunities to support this initiative.

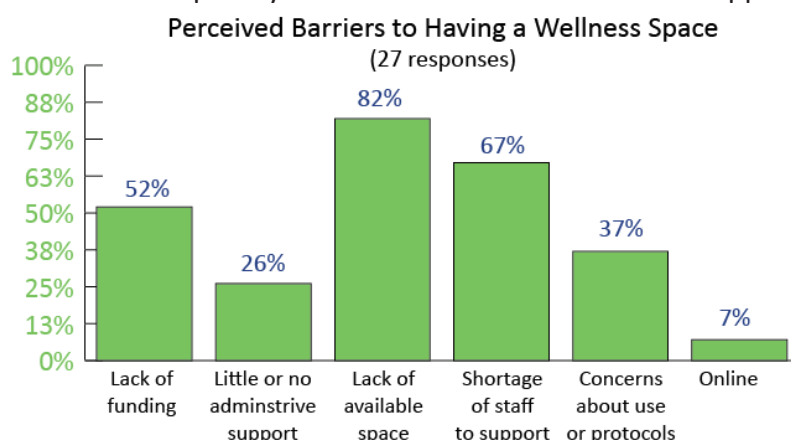


Figure 6

Developing an Effective and Inclusive Wellness Space

In addition to the survey data, MHANYS gathered information through key informant interviews in the Spring and Summer of 2022. Staff met with representatives from five schools that reported using wellness spaces, including two elementary schools, two high schools and a K-12 central school. The spaces they described included designated corners in classrooms, rooms near counseling offices, and sensory hallways. These interviews combined with the survey data informed six recommendations to support schools in designing, implementing, and evaluating wellness spaces that best meet their needs. We are grateful for those who participated and appreciate their enthusiasm and commitment to student mental health.

Recommendation #1

Wellness Spaces should be accessible to all students and include a variety of activities to help students regulate uncomfortable emotions.

While we acknowledge barriers, such as funding, space and staffing resources, all schools can create classrooms that are welcoming and peaceful with nature sounds playing on the computer, a few plants and soft lighting. With nominal funding, an area of each classroom can be designated as a “Calm Down Corner” with a few mindfulness tools, manipulatives, or visual cards with yoga poses. In addition, incorporating movement activities in the classroom or as part of a sensory hallway ensures that students who need a more active means of self-regulating will have tools available to them, as well. Focusing efforts on *where* students are learning means *all* students will have access to spaces that encourage the practice of coping strategies. In conducting our interviews, we learned about two initiatives that have been successful in increasing student access to wellness spaces: Calm Down Corners in the Primary-Elementary School of the Canandaigua City School District (Ontario County, NY) and Sensory Hallways in Rondout Valley Central School District’s Marbletown Elementary (Ulster County, NY).

The Mindfulness Room at Valley Central High School was intentionally designed to create a peaceful, calm mood with soft lighting, wall tapestries, a relaxing ocean scene on the TV screen and motivational phrases on the wall. Activities were selected to meet the diverse needs of students, including yoga balls and mats, blocks, punching bag and boxing gloves, stationary bike, hula hoops, adult coloring books, magnetic dart board, glitter bottles, rain sticks and fidget toys. In addition, there is a variety of seating, such as rockers, spinner seats and stools. The most popular items with students appear to be the rocker and yoga balls.



Image from Valley Central High School's Mindfulness Room

In the Canandaigua City School District, some teachers in the Primary School (PreK-2) have created areas in their classroom where students can take a break when they are feeling angry, anxious, or stressed. Students can practice managing their emotions using fidget toys, coloring and craft activities, puzzles, books, and mindfulness strategies. The activities vary by classroom, as does the rules for using the space. For example, some teachers elect to use a timer, while others have no time limit. Students can self-refer, or teachers can recommend students visit the Calm Down Corner. This strategy has been well-received by teachers because it enables students to remain in the classroom and provides an opportunity to teach social-emotional skills. Many of the self-contained classrooms in the Elementary School also have Calm Down Corners with boxes of wellness tools individualized with strategies that work best for each student.

The idea of a Sensory Hallway in Marbletown Elementary School in the Rondout Valley Central School District was first introduced in the Fall of 2021 with the return to school following remote learning in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Staff recognized that students were getting little physical activity. Social distancing meant that students were sitting longer and not moving freely around the classroom or during usual transitions times, such as lunch, music, and art. This appeared to result in more disruptive behaviors, fidgeting, and low mood. Students needed an opportunity for movement and to explore their spaces. The creation of Sensory Hallways provided a space for movement breaks for the whole class, or for individual students. Two hallways were established - one in the K-1 hallway and one in the 2-3 hallway - with a budget of only about \$175

Recommendation #2

Input from the entire school community, particularly students, should be reflected in the design and implementation of Wellness Spaces.

Youth engagement in planning and decision-making provides students with a sense of agency and ownership, and often leads to innovative ideas for how the space can be used. Counselors from Keene Central School District shared an example of one student who was involved in the planning process and later brought a peer into the space - encouraging them to use it to manage a stressful situation and demonstrating some of the wellness tools.

Recommendation #3

Teachers and staff should experience the wellness space for themselves to understand the benefits and model positive coping strategies.

One challenge expressed by a few respondents was a lack of support from administrators and teachers who view the wellness spaces as a reward for disruptive behaviors or a way for students to “escape from work”. We interviewed two schools who were intentional about inviting teachers and staff to experience the wellness spaces firsthand as an opportunity to practice their own coping strategies, and to encourage staff to refer students who might need a break from the classroom to manage uncomfortable emotions and practice self-regulation.

School Counselors from Keene Central School District (Essex County, NY) established a Mindfulness Room in the counseling suite and created mobile carts to be used in classrooms. To encourage teachers and other school staff to refer students to the Mindfulness Room, they invited the adults in the school to preview the space and try some of the activities. Those who attended, received a “thank you” gift that included treats, mindfulness tools for the classroom, and “passes” for students. Recognizing that work-related stress is increasingly common among educators and school staff, one of the mobile carts was designated for adult use only. In a follow-up from our interview, the counselors reported the Mindfulness Room and the mobile carts are used frequently by students, teachers and staff.

In another interview with Brooklyn Lab School, a high school in New York City, the mental health staff host monthly “Coffee with the Counselors” in the Zen Den for teachers and other school staff. Much like Keene Central School’s Mindfulness Room, the Zen Den includes items such as fidget toys, yoga mats, blocks, games, sand, bean bags, and visual guides for mindful breathing. These informal conversations over coffee have created an opportunity for staff to provide input regarding student use of the room and share any concern that may arise.

Recommendation #4

Guidelines for how students use the space should be clear and supportive of mental health promotion practices and student safety.

Approximately one-third of survey respondents who did not have a wellness space identified concerns about protocols or guidance for student use as a perceived barrier. Most of those interviewed did identify this as being important to the success of implementation, particularly to guard against use of the space to avoid a particular class or activity. School staff who were interviewed and those responding to the survey shared a variety of strategies to support appropriate use of wellness spaces. A High School in Nassau County that responded to our survey requires students to watch a brief video describing their recently established Wellness Room, including the rules and available coping tools. Prior to visiting the room, students must sign an acknowledgement of behavior expectations and are given a sticker that allows access.

During National School Counseling Week, students at Keene Central School District were introduced to the Mindfulness Room and provided with information about how to access the space. Students are expected to check in with a counselor before using the room and can stay for up to 15 minutes. If a student feels they need more time, the counselor will provide 1:1 support. Since its inception, older students primarily self-refer, whereas younger students are more likely to be recommended to use the space by teachers, counselors, and other staff.

Student preference for types of stress management strategies will vary - some will benefit from calm and relaxing strategies, and others need more active engagement. To encourage students to try different strategies, Mrs. Kresge, Mental Health Teacher at Valley Central High School, uses invitational language, such as “I found this strategy helpful and I want to share it with you” or “I would love for you to try this with me. If you don’t enjoy it, that’s ok...we can find a better strategy for you.”

At Brooklyn Lab School, students can use the space at any time. They are instructed to sign in with their reason for visiting and are limited to 10 minutes. If students feel they need more time, a counselor or social worker will meet with them individually. Due to the proximity to counseling offices, a School Counselor, Social Worker, or intern is always available. These guidelines have provided reassurance for teachers that students are not using the space to get out of class. The Zen Den is also open at lunchtime for students who don’t like the crowds and the noise, and is sometimes used for Restorative Circles, Arts and Crafts and other group activities.



Images from Brooklyn Lab School's Zen Den

Recommendation #5

The use of a Wellness Space(s) should align with the school's mental health and social emotional learning curriculum to support instruction and the practice of coping strategies.

Most of the schools we interviewed described wellness spaces as part of a larger initiative to support student mental health. Keene Central School District and Brooklyn Lab School teach mindfulness and other coping strategies to students as part of their mental health literacy and SEL curriculums. Marbletown Elementary and Valley Central High School use their spaces to provide instruction – both to students and staff – in a way that is changing the culture of the school and normalizing conversations about mental health.

Several school staff at Keene Central School District had participated in Mindful Schools courses. Beginning in the lower grades, students are taught mindfulness strategies as part of classroom circles, and older students learn about mindfulness in Health class. When students visit the Mindfulness Room, they are already familiar with the strategy and can practice in an environment where they are supported and safe. Similarly, the School Counselor from Brooklyn Lab stressed the success of their Zen Den was in part due to its alignment with their use of DBT STEPS A, a social-emotional learning curriculum that teaches mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. It also includes the concept of a “wise mind” which refers to the confluence of reason and emotion creating a peaceful and calm presence. When using the Zen Den, students are encouraged to achieve a “wise mind” state before returning to class.

At Marbletown Elementary School, Occupational Therapy staff were very involved in modeling how to use sensory hallways they created. They demonstrated activities for students, stressing appropriate behaviors, and educated teachers about the brain-body connection and how body awareness impacts learning, attention, directionality, and handwriting. The OT staff shared classroom strategies, such as using music stands at desks to allow students to stand rather than sit. Ultimately this created a shift in how teacher approached learning – with more flexibility and opportunities for movement. It also created more conversations about how to normalize some of these strategies in the classroom, making them more accessible to all students rather than bringing attention to students with disruptive behaviors.

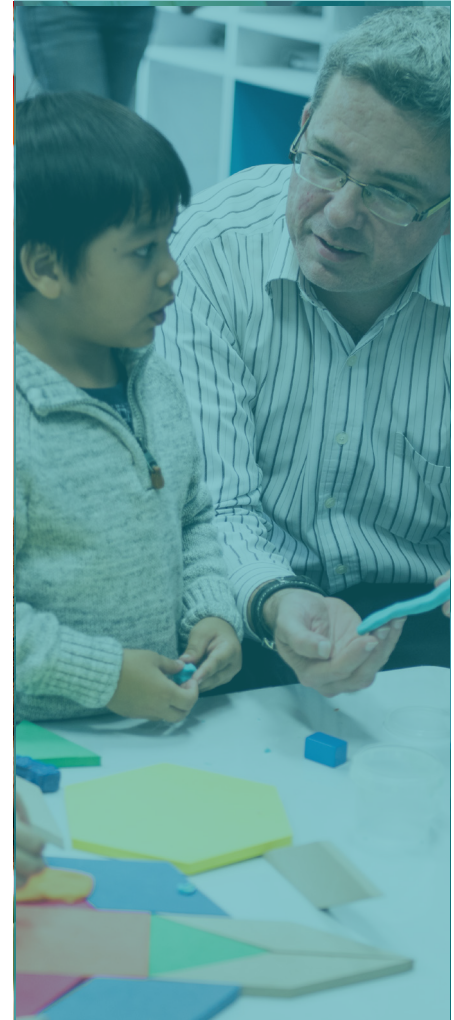
At Valley Central High School in Orange County, students spend time in the Mindfulness Room as part of a three week unit on Mental Health in Physical Education class. Students in grades 9 and 10 receive two units of Mental Health each year (7-8 sessions per unit) and students in grades 11 and 12 receive one unit of Mental Health each year. Topics include depression, anxiety, suicide, social media use, healthy relationships, and self-management strategies, such as mindfulness. In addition to the Mindfulness Room, classes are sometimes held outdoors (i.e. mindful walks through trails on school property) and a [virtual mindfulness room](#) was established to reinforce learning and provide access to mindful activities outside of the scheduled PE unit on mental health. The Health teacher expands upon mental health curriculum by teaching students the brain-body connection during Health class and continuing the practice of coping strategies for stress management. In addition, the school coordinated a Mental Health Day for all students and staff to teach new strategies and begin to normalize the conversation about mental health. Finally, professional development is being planned so teachers can integrate mindfulness and other stress management practices into the classroom schedule.

Recommendation #6

Data should be collected to evaluate student outcomes, identify the mental health needs of students, and inform school policy and practice.

Very little data was being collected by the schools surveyed, and those that did collect information often were limited to general sign-in information (i.e. student name, grade, time of check in and check out). A few more collected information for student behavior plans, to identify the strategies used by the students, and to understand what brought students to want to use the space (i.e. asking students to identify their emotions). Most acknowledged the importance of collecting data but were unsure of what information should be collected or cited privacy concerns. To maintain confidentiality, data can be collected via an electronic survey accessed through a QR code on the student's phone or a tablet set up near the wellness space. We suggest schools collect the following data:

1. student name, grade level and time of check-in
2. did they self-refer or did someone recommend they visit the space
3. how are they feeling (choose from a list of emotions)
4. why do they want to use the space, what occurred prior to them using the space
5. what, if any class, are they missing
6. time of check-out
7. what strategy or activity did they use
8. how are they feeling (choose from the same list of emotions)



The information above will help identify trends in use of the wellness space, information about the school environment (times and locations of stress, interpersonal conflict, etc.), students in need of support or intervention, and most frequently used strategies or activities. Canandaigua City School District expressed interest in targeting data collection to better support students with emotional and behavioral needs. They intend to collect baseline data to better evaluate changes over time with the use of Calm Down Corners. They are considering language to incorporate the use of Calm Down Corners into Individualized Education Programs.

We hope the above recommendations will encourage you to consider designing a wellness space in your school or district. The MHANYS School Mental Health Resource and Training Center staff are available to technical assistance, resources for mental health education, professional development, and information for families. Visit us at mentalhealthEDnys.org or contact us at schools@mhany.org.



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