

ACCESS TO SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS AND ROLES OF SCHOOL-EMPLOYED MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

The following resource contains excerpted information authored and endorsed by numerous school and school mental health organizations, including the American School Counselor Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the School Social Work Association of America. The intent of this resource is to provide information on the background and skillsets of school-employed mental health professionals and initiate dialogue around how to effectively utilize their services to support students, families, and school communities. It is not intended to be utilized to determine the specific roles, functions, or the "tier of service" provided by these professionals.

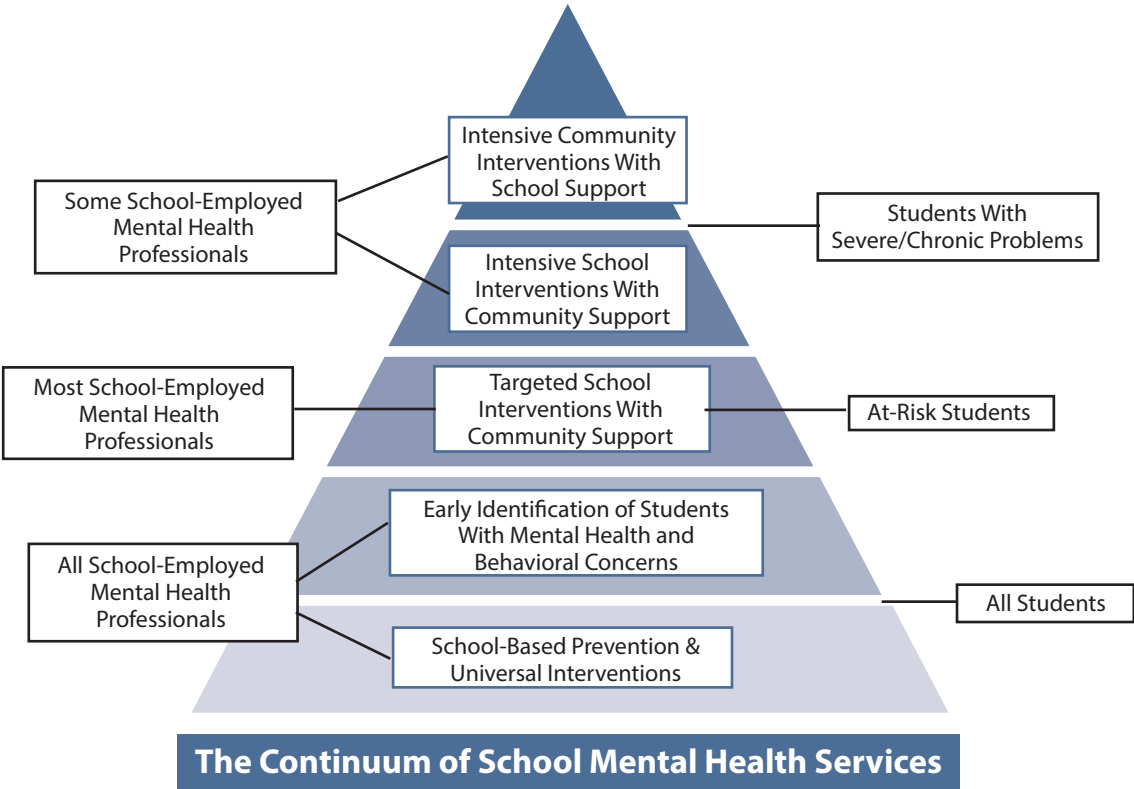
Access to School-Based Mental Health Supports

Mental health is developed early in life and educators play a significant role in ensuring that students' experiences throughout their school careers contribute to their positive mental health. Access to school-based mental health services and supports directly improves students' physical and psychological safety, academic performance, and social-emotional learning. This requires adequate staffing levels in terms of school-employed mental health professionals (school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and in some cases, school nurses) to ensure that services are high quality, effective, and appropriate to the school context.

Access to school mental health services cannot be sporadic or disconnected from the learning process. Just as children are not simply small adults, schools are not simply community clinics with blackboards. School-employed mental health professionals are specially trained in the interconnectivity among school law, school system functioning, learning, mental health, and family systems. This training ensures that mental health services

are properly and effectively infused into the learning environment, supporting both instructional leaders and teachers’ abilities to provide a safe school setting and the optimum conditions for teaching and learning. No other professionals have this unique training background.

Having these professionals as integrated members of the school staff empowers principals to more efficiently and effectively deploy resources, ensure coordination of services, evaluate their effectiveness, and adjust supports to meet the dynamic needs of their student populations. Improving access also allows for enhanced collaboration with community providers to meet the more intense or clinical needs of students. (See figure 3.)



Adapted from “Communication Planning and Message Development: Promoting School-Based Mental Health Services” in *Communiqué*, Vol. 35, No. 1. National Association of School Psychologists, 2006.

Figure 3

School counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers all offer unique individual skills that complement one another in such a way that the sum is greater than the parts. When given the opportunity to work collectively, they are ready and capable of providing an even wider range of services, such as:

- Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting school-level data to improve availability and effectiveness of mental services;
- Designing and implementing interventions to meet the behavioral and mental health needs of students;
- Promoting early intervention services;
- Providing individual and group counseling;
- Providing staff development related to positive discipline, behavior, and mental health;
- Providing risk and threat assessments;
- Supporting teachers through consultation and collaboration;
- Coordinating with community service providers and integrating intensive interventions into the schooling process.

An Excerpt from the Field: Topeka Public Schools

In Topeka Public Schools, we consider ourselves very fortunate to benefit from the scope and depth of knowledge and skills represented by a multidisciplinary approach to providing mental health services. School Counselors, School Social Workers and School Psychologists work together on building teams to assess and support the needs of individual students while addressing systemic challenges to that process. In recognition of the vital role of inter-agency collaboration, Topeka Public Schools has an active district-level Mental Health team that includes community partners as well as teachers, Counselors, Social Workers, School Psychologists, a BOE member, administrators and support staff representing buildings throughout our district. Our collective belief is that, together, we truly are more than the sum of each of our parts.

Addressing Shortages

Fully providing effective, integrated, and comprehensive services requires schools to

maintain appropriate staffing levels for their school-employed mental health professionals. Every district and school must be supported to improve staffing ratios. Unfortunately, significant budget cuts, combined with widespread personnel shortages, have resulted in reduced access to school-employed mental health professionals in many schools and districts. In these districts, school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses often have inappropriately high student-to-professional ratios that far exceed the recommendations provided by their respective professional organizations. Poor ratios restrict the ability of these professionals to devote time to important initiatives, including school-wide preventive services (e.g., bullying, violence, and dropout prevention), safety promotion, and sustained school improvement. Many districts go without prevention and early intervention services that effectively link mental health, school climate, school safety, and academic instruction. Partnerships with community providers or school-based health centers can provide important resources for individual students. However, community providers sometimes lack familiarity with specific processes in teaching and learning and with systemic aspects of schooling. Successful school–community partnerships integrate community supports into existing school initiatives utilizing a collaborative approach between school and community providers that enhances effectiveness and sustainability. Many schools have limited access to community supports making overreliance on community partners as primary providers of mental health services potentially problematic.

District-wide policies must support principals and school safety teams to provide services in school-based settings and strengthen the ability of schools to respond to student and family needs directly. While working to improve ratios, districts can begin to move toward more effective and sustainable services by:

- Assigning a school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker to coordinate school-based services with those provided by community providers.
- Ensuring that the school data being collected and resulting strategies are addressing the most urgent areas of need with regard to safety and climate.
- Providing training that targets the specific needs of individual schools, their staffs, and their students.
- Reviewing current use of mental health staff and identifying critical shifts in their responsibilities to bolster prevention efforts.

Roles of School-Employed Mental Health Professional

Many professionals within a school help to support students' positive mental health. This includes school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, school nurses, and other specialized instructional support personnel. For the purposes of these recommendations, however, we are focusing on the mental health professionals who should serve in critical leadership roles in terms of school safety, positive school climate, and providing school-based mental health services: school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers. Their training and expertise help link mental health, behavior, environmental factors (e.g., family, classroom, school, community), instruction, and learning. Each of these professionals helps to create school environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to learning. Each may deliver similar services such as counseling, social-emotional skill instruction, and consultation with families and teachers; however, each profession has its own unique focus based upon its specializations, which result in different, albeit interrelated, services. The specific services and expertise of individual practitioners may vary, but the following describes the core competencies and specialized instructional services of each profession.

School counselors.

Have a minimum of a master's degree in school counseling. School counselors are generally the first school-employed mental health professional to interact with students as they commonly are involved in the provision of universal learning supports to the whole school population. School counselors have specialized knowledge of curriculum and instruction and help screen students for the basic skills needed for successful transition from cradle to college and career. School counselors focus on helping students' address their academic, personal/social, and career development goals and needs by designing, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student success. School counselors work to promote safe learning environments for all members of the school community and regularly monitor and respond to behavior issues that impact school climate, such as bullying, student interpersonal struggles, and student-teacher conflicts. Effective school counseling programs are a collaborative effort between the school counselor, teachers, families, and other educators to create an environment promoting student achievement, active engagement, equitable access to educational opportunities, and a rigorous curriculum for all students.

School psychologists.

Have a minimum of a specialist-level degree (60 graduate semester hour minimum) in school psychology, which combines the disciplines of psychology and education. They typically have extensive knowledge of learning, motivation, behavior, childhood disabilities, assessment, evaluation, and school law. School psychologists specialize in analyzing complex student and school problems and selecting and implementing appropriate evidence-based interventions to improve outcomes at home and school. School psychologists consult with teachers and parents to provide coordinated services and supports for students struggling with learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral problems, and those experiencing anxiety, depression, emotional trauma, grief, and loss. They are regular members of school crisis teams and collaborate with school administrators and other educators to prevent and respond to crises. They have specialized training in conducting risk and threat assessments designed to identify students at-risk for harming themselves or others. School psychologists' training in evaluation, data collection, and interpretation can help ensure that decisions made about students, the school system, and related programs and learning supports are based on appropriate evidence.

School social workers.

Have master's degrees in social work. They have special expertise in understanding family and community systems and linking students and their families with the community services that are essential for promoting student success. School social workers' training includes specialized preparation in cultural diversity, systems theory, social justice, risk assessment and intervention, consultation and collaboration, and clinical intervention strategies to address the mental health needs of students. They work to remedy barriers to learning created as a result of poverty, inadequate health care, and neighborhood violence. School social workers often focus on providing supports to vulnerable populations of students that have a high risk for truancy and dropping out of school, such as homeless and foster children, migrant populations, students transitioning between school and treatment programs or the juvenile justice system, or students experiencing domestic violence. They work closely with teachers, administrators, parents, and other educators to provide coordinated interventions and consultation designed to keep students in school and help their families access the supports needed to promote student success.

Excerpts above are from *A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools*: <http://www.nasp->

[online.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/a-framework-for-safe-and-successful-schools](http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/a-framework-for-safe-and-successful-schools). Copyright 2013 by the National Association of School Psychologists. All rights reserved. Posting is with Permission. For more information visit www.nasponline.org.

Please refer to the websites below for complete and updated information regarding school-employed mental health professionals.

School Mental Health Professional Associations, Models and Standards of Practice

Professional	Associations	Models and Standards of Practice
School Counselor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ American School Counselor Association: https://www.schoolcounselor.org/ ▪ Kansas School Counselor Association: http://www.kssca.com/ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National Model: https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/ASCANationalModelTemplates/ANMExecSumm.pdf ▪ Kansas School Counseling Standards: http://www.ksde.org/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Career-Standards-and-Assessment-Services/Content-Area-M-Z/School-Counseling
School Psychologist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National Association of School Psychologists: https://www.nasponline.org/ ▪ Kansas Association of School Psychologists: http://www.kasp.org/ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National Association of School Psychologists Practice Model: Improving Outcomes for Students and Schools: https://www.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/nasp-practice-model
School Social Worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School Social Work Association of America: http://www.sswaa.org/ ▪ American Council for School Social Work: http://acssw.org/ ▪ National Association of Social Workers: http://www.naswdc.org/practice/school/default.asp ▪ Kansas School Social Workers Association: http://www.ksswa.org 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National School Social Work Practice Model: http://www.sswaa.org/?page=459 ▪ National Association of Social Workers Standards for School Social Work Services: http://www.naswdc.org/practice/standards/NASWSchoolSocialWorkStandards.pdf

Looking for additional information on the role of school nurses? See the links below:

- **National Association of School Nurses:** <https://www.nasn.org/home>
- **Kansas School Nurse Organization:** <http://www.ksno.org>
- **School Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice, 2nd Edition:** <https://www.nasn.org/mainsitedev/nasn-resources/professional-topics/scope-standards>

School-Employed Mental Health Professionals in Kansas

While there are variations across the background and skillsets of school-employed mental health professionals, in order to work in a school setting best practice requires that they have 1) completed coursework specific to practicing in a school setting, 2) completed a supervised, school-based practicum, and 3) hold a master’s degree.

- In Kansas, school psychologists are required to obtain an Education Specialist Degree in addition to a master’s degree.
- Some school social workers may have had additional training to obtain clinical licensure (LSCSW), in addition to their masters-level licensure (LMSW).

Professional	Ratio recommended by national associations	Licensure
School Counselors	1 for every 250 students ¹	Kansas State Department of Education
School Psychologists	1 for every 500-700 students ²	Kansas State Department of Education
School Social Workers	1 for every 250 students ³	Kansas Behavioral Sciences Regulatory Board

References

¹ American School Counselor Association. (n.d.). *ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs*. Retrieved from American School Counselor Association website: <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/ASCA%20National%20Model%20Templates/ANMExecSumm.pdf>

- ² National Association of School Psychologists. (2010). *Model for comprehensive and integrated school psychological services*. Retrieved from the National Association of School Psychologists website: <https://www.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/nasp-practice-model>
- ³ School Social Work Association of America. (n.d.). *National school social work practice model*. Retrieved from the School Social Work Association of America website: <http://www.sswaa.org/?page=459>