

CHAPTER 1

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THE NEED FOR MENTALLY HEALTHY SCHOOLS

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.
—Dewey, 1916

At the beginning of 2020, schools in the United States were already close to a breaking point in dealing with a tidal wave of mental health issues affecting kids. Young people in greater and greater numbers were being diagnosed with mental disorders and facing increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and trauma. Organizations like the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) reported that one in six young people in the United States were experiencing a mental health disorder, but only about half of them were receiving any kind of treatment (National Alliance for Mental Illness [NAMI], 2019). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2022) warned that suicide was the second leading cause of death among teens and young adults.

Then the COVID-19 global pandemic hit.

The pandemic not only exposed the issues plaguing American schools, it doubled and amplified the problems. By 2022, 79% of psychologists reported seeing a dramatic increase in the number of patients with anxiety and depression symptoms, with the largest increase among patients ages 18 to 25 (American Psychological Association [APA], 2022). “The national mental health crisis continues,” said Arthur Evans, CEO of the American Psychological Association. The annual Mental Health America Survey found an increase in suicidal ideation and young people experiencing a major depressive episode over the previous year’s data (Mental Health Association [MHA], 2022). Clearly, the pandemic exacerbated an already overwhelming mental health crisis.

On the front lines of working with kids, teachers, administrators, and school staff have been clamoring for support and changes to help kids in need of mental and physical wellness. After decades of focusing on academic achievement and standardized test scores, more and more educators and Americans are seeing the need to rethink our approach to schooling and place mental health at the very center of how we educate kids and operate schools.

This book is a clarion call to do just that. We are offering a new, post-pandemic vision for schooling that impacts all stakeholders: students, educators, parents, and communities. It is based on science, decades of research, and proven examples from educators across the country. It's also something the two of us have been promoting for over a decade in hopes of remaking schools into safer, more relational places to live, learn, and work.

One of the things that keeps bringing the two of us together in our work is a shared vision for the purpose of schools. A school is a learning organization that brings people together across our shared, democratic culture so they can develop academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. On a practical level, it is a safe place that holds and protects kids in loco parentis so adults in the family can pursue their own goals like careers, higher education, and self-improvement. A school is also an important organization within a community, serving as a reflection of local values as well as a collaborator with members of that community.

If we begin to unpack that definition of schools, we see that our vision of schools is not about changing some of the core functions that have been in place for decades. In fact, some of these core functions helped students navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the recent social and political crises. We have learned the importance of having an adult mentor, connecting with peers, experiencing structure and routine, accessing health and wellness services, technology, supplies, and extracurricular activities. And like museums and libraries, schools play a crucial role in our society in providing knowledge, promoting culture, and making space for dialog, discussion, and debate. These functions need to continue, but they need to take mental health into consideration from the start. By doing so, we could improve schools beyond where they are today.

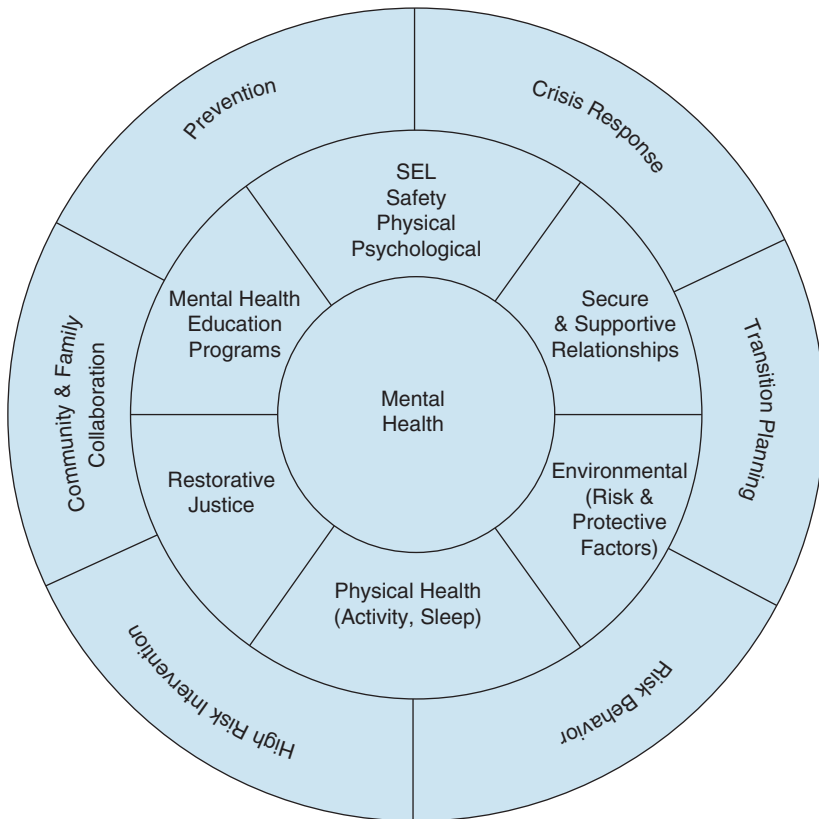
WHY IS MENTAL HEALTH IMPORTANT IN SCHOOLS?

Much has been written about mental health through a variety of perspectives: medical models, deficit models, prevention models, holistic approaches, systems perspectives, and transactional models. Each comes with core values and an underlying framework of guiding principles and claims. Given these models and the demands facing schools, pivotal questions must be asked that can help us come up with new systems and strategies for helping kids. What matters most in education today? What can be done for all of our students not only to learn but to thrive? How do we make school healthy places for all to learn?

What Schools Due to Address Mental Health Matters

Mental health should be embedded in a school’s mission, policies, practices, and programs. Surrounding that focus should be social and emotional and physical safety, risk and protective factors, supportive relationships, restorative justice, and mental health education programs. Schools should also focus on prevention activities, transition planning, crisis response, and community and family collaborations (see Figure 1.1). By placing mental health at the center of our thinking and our work, school leaders approach all those other aspects of schooling from a different perspective.

FIGURE 1.1 MENTAL HEALTH AT THE CENTER OF THE SCHOOL



SOURCE: Illustration by Jane Tomlinson.

Each school should have a comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan that is grounded in its culture and climate and just about everything that it does. Such a plan would comprehensively use a multitiered system of support (MTSS), have a holistic approach to people and learning, focus on community partnerships, and create a “continuum of care” where social and emotional support and protective factors align to build capacity, increase assets, reduce risk, and cultivate resilience.

Although many schools are developing policies and initiatives, the time calls for clarity of purpose and vision in considering mental health issues in schools. We need to think beyond deficit and medical models of mental illness to ones that are transactional and take into account multiple domains of functioning and well-being (Sameroff, 2009). Much of our understanding of mental health is based upon medical models like the *DSM-5*, which is a classification system to identify problems, assigning a label to internal pathological conditions. This medical model focuses upon internal factors with less attention to sociocultural and economic factors. Each school has its own organizational culture and structure. Therefore, each school must have its own approach to mental health that is contextual and local. Just as we should take a holistic approach to working with individual students, we need to take a holistic approach to working with schools.

When people think of mental health they often think of illness (a deficit model) and clinical therapeutic interventions (a medical model). But to think more broadly, mental health in schools promotes healthy development; considers multiple domains of cognitive, social, and emotional functioning; takes into account the prevention of psychosocial problems like bullying, substance use abuse, and school violence; and cultivates protective factors while minimizing risk. We need to develop a “Continuum of Care” that considers prevention and early intervention, builds capacities, and allows systems to foster mental health of its school community, including students, staff, families, and parents.

To move beyond a deficit or medical model is to take into consideration a more transformational framework that is holistic and centers the whole child in a partnership between parents and community and school. It takes into account contexts, history, power, and possibility, framing a vision of what schools can be like when focusing on the mental health of all members of its community. It embeds social and emotional learning, cultural humility, systems thinking, and equity. This can start by looking critically and deeply at who we are and where we come from, something known as *positionality*. By identifying our positionality, we can begin to identify and examine the assumptions, biases, and values that may guide our thinking, and critically examine our principles, practices, and policies about mental health.

As educators, researchers, and policymakers, we want to make clear our own positionalities and identities. We feel this is critical at the outset of a book like this one where we offer advice about how others should improve schools. Our opinions have been shaped by our experiences as both learners and educators. They are therefore shaped by our context and positions in the world. Explaining who we are also models the kind of honest self-reflection and self-awareness we hope you will bring to your examination of yourself and your school as you rethink everything through a mental health lens.

TOM'S POSITIONALITY

It's critical for me to name and be aware of my positionality or social location in this work, which is shaped by a variety of events, experiences, and social

groups. It's the angle from which I view schools and mental health issues in schools. Engaging in this critical reflection and identifying areas in which I have privilege is an opportunity to not only present the awareness that I have of myself and the focus of my work but also critically consider what can be done to establish a climate and culture in schools that addresses the mental health needs of all students.

I am a clinical social worker and a school social worker. I've been in social work practice for 48 years. I've been in a school, in the capacity of student, social worker, counselor, teacher, learner, administrator, for 65 consecutive years. Schools and school year routines and structures are familiar in my lived experience and are an essential part of my identity. My experience in school was challenging. My family faced significant economic and mental health struggles. I was an average student but school felt like a safe haven, a place of belonging. It was in high school that I benefited from a rigorous education and supportive learning environment, a community that was based on service and relationships.

My professional degrees are a master's degree in social work practice and a PhD in clinical social work. I've been a student in a Catholic parochial school through the eighth grade, a Catholic seminary for high school and my first year of college, a Catholic university for my undergraduate degree and MSW, and an independent accredited clinical social work program for my PhD. I've worked in therapeutic day schools and public schools, one of which was a high-achieving high school in which I was the social work department chair for 26 years. I've worked in charter schools and independent schools. The experience of being in schools and with a focus upon mental health has been a through-line.

I am white, cisgendered, male, able-bodied, Christian. In most areas of my identity and social location, I hold significant privilege. I acknowledge the interconnection between the multiple identities that I hold and recognize that as we consider mental health in schools there's a focus upon our individual experiences but also a critical need to consider societal and cultural factors, and to identify the role they play that may be political, economic, and structural. It also provides an opportunity to know that through cultural humility, we recognize the limitations of what we know but remain open to hearing, understanding, and honoring how we perceive the world and the experience of others. Engaging in this exercise helps us to identify privilege, particularly white privilege, and how it shapes our understanding of school climate culture and the needs of all students. I am also a husband, a father, and grandfather, whose hope is that schools are a place where all children can thrive.

TIM'S POSITIONALITY

Like Tom, schools have been my "home" for decades. Growing up in the second half of the 20th century, I thrived in schools, whether traditional K–12 schools, Catholic schools, or in an experimental, "open" classroom school. As a middle-class, white, cisgendered, able-bodied male, I encountered very few obstacles to my success in schools from kindergarten through graduate

school. That success is one of the reasons why I chose to enter teaching as a profession. Schools were a place I felt safe, supported, and successful.

My experiences as a teacher, administrator, and teacher–educator are part of the reason for my deep interest in promoting mental health in schools. Over the past 30 years, I have learned from each of the thousands of students I have taught that context and identity are critical elements of anyone’s lived experience and their perceptions. Early in my career, I thought I taught “kids” or “classes.” Now I realize that I teach individuals. There is no generic lesson plan that works for everyone. And the most important thing I can do as a teacher is to build a relationship with a student so I can provide them with the best experience and support. In doing that, I have had the privilege of helping young people navigate stress, anxiety, trauma, depression, and suicidal ideation, as well as understanding their own race, class, gender, ability, and place in the world. I have also helped teachers, staff, and colleagues navigate their own individual battles with mental health and illness. I’ve worked with many parents and families on better supporting their children. From them, I have found my voice to lead others to reenvision schools as places where support, safety, and relationships are as important as academic learning.

My other reason for dedicating my life to mental health are my friends and family. I take this work personally because it has been personal. As is true with anyone, I have had my own battles with mental illness, including physical ailments brought on by stress and anxiety. As a very self-reflective individual, I have been hyperaware of my own emotions and the impact they can have on others. More importantly, I have watched the people I love most dearly grapple with mental illness in both small and big ways. It has given me an “insider” view of their struggles and their triumphs as well as the health-care professionals and educators who have been critical to the well-being of my loved ones and me. I want our schools to be locations of belonging, caring, and learning. I believe they can be.

OUR WORK TOGETHER

We have known each other as colleagues for over 30 years. We taught and served in leadership roles at the same high school for much of that time, Tom as a social worker and Social Work Department chair and Tim as an English teacher, department coordinator, and principal. It was during Tim’s tenure as principal that we worked in tandem on responding to the many mental health issues facing the students, staff, and community in a large high school. In Tim’s first year as principal, we managed the response to the death of two staff members, a murder–suicide involving the family of a current student, and the suicide deaths of a parent and a recent graduate. That year cemented our relationship as colleagues working to improve the health and well-being of those around us in this school. During those years, it was common practice for us to check in with each other weekly to make sure we were each doing OK and to call each other at any time with news of another tragedy or loss in our community.

As it happened, we both left the school at the same time and decided to continue working together on issues related to mental health, social and emotional learning, and school climate. For 10 years, we have crisscrossed the Midwest, working with teachers, administrators, and families on recognizing the signs of suicide; the relationship between the mind, body, and brain; and how to engage in healthy practices and SEL skill-building that can help before, during, and after a crisis. We believe that a healthy school before a crisis can be a healthy school after a crisis, but only if that school and its members engage in a whole-child, whole-person, whole-school approach to mental health and wellness.

CREATING A MENTAL HEALTH ACTION PLAN

We both believe that schools need to envision themselves through a mental health lens. In doing so, a school would make different decisions about how to operate on an hourly, weekly, and annual basis. Social and emotional learning would be equal to academic learning. The student's experience from the moment they wake in the morning, through their entire school day, till the time they go to sleep would be seen through this lens of mental health and learning. The classroom would be set up and run differently if mental health was given equal attention as academic success. And with only a few changes, the school itself would begin to feel and act in a way that supported individual needs, relationships, and collective empathy.

This text is our attempt to give teachers, staff, administrators, board members, parents, and community members a blueprint for developing their own Mental Health Action Plan (MHAP) and start enacting it. A complete template of the MHAP is located in the Appendix. Along the way, we will refer to sections of it that you should complete based on your school context. We will also be including "Pause and Reflect" questions within each chapter for you to use on your own or with a school leadership team to think about the issues being presented and how they connect to your overall plan.

YOUR CONTEXT AND POSITIONALITY

A good starting point for developing any MHAP is to explore your own personal identity and context, just as we have done in this chapter. What are your identities? What past experiences have shaped your worldview? What were your experiences like as a learner in schools? What is your opinion of and experience with mental health and mental illness? What strengths can you bring to redesigning your classroom or school? This kind of self-reflection is critical to transparency and honesty as you begin to design your approach.

The next step is to take a long, honest look at your school and community. What are the assets and strengths of your school and community? How can you build upon these? What aspects do you want to make sure remain?

How does organizational history and memory get brought into your MHAP without getting in the way of innovation? What are the nonnegotiables that must be maintained in any design? This is also the moment to think about all the challenges facing your school and community. List them and talk about them. This kind of acknowledgment, again with lots of honesty, can put “all your cards on the table” and prepare you for the design phase that takes them into account. You’ll want to look at past surveys, reports, and data, as well as how things are today. Get all your stakeholders to identify both strengths and weaknesses. Ask people outside your school and community to weigh in on their perspectives of your school and your assets and challenges. This kind of “critical friend” perspective is also important.

PAUSE AND REFLECT



Take a moment to think, discuss, or write about these questions:

1. What identities do you hold?
2. How have your overall past experiences shaped who you are today?
3. What is your opinion of and experience with mental health? Mental illness?
4. What are the strengths and challenges of your current school and community context?

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK AND YOUR PLAN

In the next chapter, we’ll spend some time defining mental health and exploring the important “mental models” that undergird our approach to creating mentally healthy schools. We will lay out important facts and considerations when beginning to develop your Mental Health Action Plan. You’ll also link your school vision and mission to your approach to mental health.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, we will dig into the different levels of mental health and mental illness by using the Multitier System of Support (MTSS) model to organize the implementation of a MHAP. In each of these chapters, we identify the challenges schools face with increasingly more complicated mental health issues. Then we explore the ways some schools have chosen to respond to these issues. Tier 1 is the most important because it addresses the needs of ALL students and adults in a school. It is also the place where we can do the most work in preventative strategies to increase prosocial behaviors, resilience, and positivity. Tiers 2 and 3 focus on response systems for supporting students and staff who are grappling with mental health challenges, both small and large. At some point, every one of us will need some kind of additional support!

In Chapter 6, we provide lots of concrete implementation examples. In many ways, this is the most technical or “nuts-and-bolts” section of the book. While we can’t address every subtle nuance in implementing your MHAP, we try to address the most essential elements of classroom and school operations so you can make sure that changes are occurring at both the policy level and the instructional level. We also address the need to change school culture and monitor that culture through comprehensive school climate research.

WHAT COULD THIS LOOK LIKE?

Over the years, we have visited many schools across the country and talked with hundreds of teachers and administrators about rethinking schools through the lens of mental health. There are classrooms and schools that are working very hard on this vision but there are, unfortunately, not enough that have transformed themselves into truly mentally healthy schools. It means we don’t have enough examples or models we can visit to inspire others or to get help when they are ready to develop their first MHAP. Throughout this book, we will reference examples of schools, classrooms, and organizations that are on the leading edge of creating the schools we need now. For a moment, here at the beginning, let’s take a look at a school that is one example of this kind of mental health-focused school.

One school we have worked with is a large public middle school located in North Carolina. The school culture is a central focus for Anne Marie Adkins, principal, and Jesse DiMartino, dean of culture. Entering into year two, the school has led with restorative practices, while keeping what is best for students at the forefront. Principal Adkins says the vision for the school is simple and impactful: “Our school learning community collaborates to facilitate equitable outcomes and growth through social, emotional, and academic opportunities.” Their core values are defined as the following:

- Love of Learning and Perseverance
- Curiosity and Creativity
- Teamwork and Kindness
- Open-Mindedness and Fairness
- Integrity and Self-Control

This vision comes to life in many aspects of the school’s intentional systems, structures, and design. The physical space is inviting and allows for collaborative spaces throughout the building so students can fluidly collaborate. The school’s systems and structures reverberate what is best for kids as they strive toward an intentionally inclusive strengths based learning environment. It was designed to ensure an inclusive environment that provides opportunities for students to have their voice heard and included in their learning during sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

For example, before opening the school, the administrators led the staff on an exercise of following a fictitious student through their day. . . and life! Adkins and DiMartino write, “This helped guide us to design what we wanted students to feel and experience upon arrival, throughout the school day, and then finally through dismissal. As a result, we now have staff positioned all throughout the building and outdoors to positively/warmly greet students each morning and then to send them at the end of the day.” Several times each year, school leaders and the dean of culture meet with the staff to review current structures, expectations, experiences, and student feedback to make changes to the school system “to build a runway for students so they can enter a calm, welcoming, and inclusive environment.”

Other feedback from students, staff, and families led to other changes in the traditional school day that are focused on mental health. All sixth grade students are enrolled in a course focusing on social and emotional learning. In designing the daily and weekly schedule, administrators built in time in the master schedule on Wednesdays for students and staff to meet together for in-school clubs so no one would be left out. The school also adopted a year-round calendar that is flexible and differentiated based on student needs. Coteaching is also a feature of the classroom so teamwork is modeled by the teachers and multiple adults can support individual students.

School safety and relationships are paramount. The principal and school resource officer (SRO) work collaboratively each day to put the socio-emotional needs of students first so they feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe with all staff, including the SRO. The SRO connects with students in the hallways, cafeteria, and attends classes or engages in lessons alongside them. The Principal and SRO have met with parents proactively to ensure a situation does not escalate into a higher level situation with consequences.

Professional development for teachers and staff is created and delivered in house, focusing on the school’s mission and learning about child development, neuroscience, diversity, learning sciences, and instructional practices. Adkins and DiMartino say, “Collecting targeted data is essential in noticing patterns of student behavior and teacher practices. These data points, along with resolution types used, give us the ability to deliver intentional professional development opportunities.”

With the creation of systems and structures to mitigate exclusionary practices and strengthen schoolwide tier 1 skills, the administrators and teachers embrace the mindset of being a “Warm Demander,” something they learned from the work of Zaretta Hammond (2015). “We know Warm Demanding to be the capacity of educators to be caring adults that value both the student and teacher relationships while holding high expectations for all students,” Adkins says. “These expectations are the foundation in which classroom culture is anchored.”

With that in mind, they shifted to the language of classroom commitments, which are cocreated via a facilitated process between teachers and students. These are then used as the foundation for all the documents, processes, and programs created throughout the school. Adkins explains, “Our Tiered Discipline Flow Chart is intentionally designed to buffer the school to prison pipeline by requiring Tier 1 behaviors to align with Tier 1 restorative consequences that keep students in their learning environment. We utilize a Support Pass system in which teachers can request support for Tier 2 behaviors as support staff triage and implement the appropriate restorative approach.”

The pass is therefore designed to reinforce the skills they want to build within their educators, such as: identifying the appropriate tier of the behavior exhibited, Identifying student emotional state, identifying their own emotional state while engaging with students, taking prior actions before outsourcing the behavior and possibility of transferring the relational status to the support staff.

The school also embraces restorative practices. Restorative practices are a way of strengthening relationships and connections with communities through the use of a series of approaches and tools. Shifting from punitive to restorative discipline is behind the restorative practices mindset. The circle process is the foundational piece of restorative practice. Staff utilize circles weekly in their classrooms, utilizing a variety of methods:

- Check-ins
- Group reflection
- Review of content
- Strengthen relationships
- Refining communication skills
- Develop and showcase character strengths
- Collaboration with peers
- Valuing the opinion of others
- Establish school community

One student describes how the school is different: “I have been a student here for 7th and 8th grade. When I came in 7th grade, one difference I noticed between my last middle school and this middle school was that the students had more opportunities to express ourselves and we could be heard by the staff members better than my old school. At my old school they didn’t try to understand where the students were coming from, they just suspended them. At this school we have mediation. Mediation is where two or more students sit together and talk about their issues and solve them.”

Adkins and DiMartino believe all this work developing a shared vision and focus among teachers and staff changes the very nature of schooling for everyone: “As we strengthen teacher skill sets on managing student behavior via professional development, we begin to enhance teacher self-efficacy in managing ‘challenging’ behaviors resulting in increased instructional time and improved relationships, as we aim for the least restrictive learning environment for all.”

A CALL TO ACTION

Our schools should reflect our society and community. In many ways, the school should be the center of our community, bringing people together and preparing our children for life in a pluralistic democracy. Schools are also built to provide services that address academic, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical dimensions, but if they only emphasize one of these dimensions, the others may not be addressed as well or at all. We also know that in order for kids to really learn deeply, we must draw from all these dimensions. Traumatized, hungry, or stressed out brains just can’t learn, even with the best teachers or curriculum. We must support the whole child if we want to deepen learning.

The schools we need now and into the future must be designed with a whole child perspective. By combining the science of learning with the science of mental health, we can accomplish this goal. It will lead to students who are much more prepared for the challenges of life, whether personal, professional, or societal. It will also result in educators who are better able to do their jobs and stay focused on the kids in front of them. Our schools will become more positive and engaging places that hold the hope for the future for our communities and country. There is no more important responsibility than that.

CREATING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH ACTION PLAN: A TEMPLATE

Take some time to work with your school-based team to think through the following elements of your comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan. The full plan template is located in Appendix A.

School Vision, Mission, Motto

1. Our school's vision is

2. Our school's mission is

3. Our school's motto is

Vision and Mission: Operationalizing Our Core Values and Beliefs

What one sentence represents your school's or district's core values or beliefs about each of the following? Identify at least one specific program, practice, or service that represents your core values or beliefs in that area:

- Children: _____
- Teachers/Staff: _____
- Parents: _____
- Teaching: _____
- Learning: _____
- Assessment: _____
- Behavior: _____
- Mental health: _____
- Physical health: _____
- Equity: _____
- Community: _____
- Relationships: _____

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