'Critical Questions' Series
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How Does Social Emotional Learning Intersect with School Mental Health?

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." SEL provides us a wonderful lens to examine the intricacies of daily life in school settings, as well as cumulative benefit, when students are supported to achieve both socially and academically. The definition for mental health is one's ability to achieve well-being and contribute meaningfully, realize abilities, be productive, and cope with adversities. Here we begin to see the confluence of mental health and SEL.

Specifically relating to mental health in schools, the Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF) is a structure and process for blending education and mental health systems through a multi-tiered structure approach. ISF promotes a continuum of mental health supports embedded in all three tiers of multi-tiered systems of behavioral support in schools. ISF supports schools and providers in collaborating for student well-being, mental health promotion, and academic success in a cohesive and integrated way.

Much like the public health model, universal behavior supports are intended to prevent new cases of problem behavior. These supports are delivered to every student, everywhere, by every staff member. In the tiered framework, supplemental layers of supports are available when a student is in need. The universal supports are always there, working as a foundation.

Here we see the most obvious intersections with mental health and Social Emotional Learning; the emphasis on foundational supports that help our students thrive. We also see that school mental health and SEL cannot be represented by any singular, isolated service or activity. School mental health is an integrated process that asks staff, providers, and school communities to deeply explore avenues for improved student well-being. SEL also requires a growth mindset that asks us to frame interpersonal and academic exchanges with warm reception, curiosity, and a commitment to supportive relationships. When schools promote mental health, integrate treatment, or refine referral services, it is a demonstration of comprehensive social emotional learning. CASEL's 5 Core Competencies include self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship

skills, and social awareness. Although school mental health is only one school-wide practice driven by SEL, it is one that can save lives.

We know that SEL and school mental health initiatives can contribute to improved academic and health outcomes. Working together within a tiered system, SEL can be the universal approach that allows for students to gain the skills and resources necessary to thrive. SEL is not a universal screening process; which is why it is important to integrate school behavioral health services into a tiered system. SEL offers students resources and skills to bolster their ability to persevere in school, control their impulses, have a sense of belonging, and practice appropriate judgement and decision making. Through a tiered school mental health system, students can connect with behavioral health providers who can deliver acute care. Many districts have success with this effort, what successes can you share? What big impacts have you seen?

2014 Healthy Youth Survey Data shows that over 50% of youth in grades 10 and 12 reported not being able to stop or control worrying in the past 2 weeks. Over 60% of youth in grades 10 and 12 reported feeling nervous or anxious. Our students are affected by mental distress caused by environmental stressors (i.e., family crisis, end of a significant relationship, or death of a loved one). This impacts their daily experience in school and at home. However, we still struggle with the stigma of mental health in schools and society. How can we continue to improve mental health and SEL awareness? SEL contributes to student success in school through relationship building and problem solving in interpersonal interactions with peers and staff. This allows for the learning of competencies necessary for managing emotions and resolving conflict. Students who may be suffering from environmental stressors will benefit from the positive effects of the SEL environment. Adding mental health supports into the tiered system offers services to those students who may need more intensive supports. What shifts are you seeing as SEL and school mental health continue to take shape in Washington state?

Reference:
Interconnected Systems Framework: Integrating School Mental Health and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports by Kelly Perales

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