

RESPONDING TO THE
TRAUMA OF COVID-19:

Roadmap for Beginning MTSS in Schools

MEADOWS
MENTAL HEALTH
POLICY INSTITUTE



MMHPI COVID-19 Response Briefings

Mini-Roadmap and Embedded Tools for Schools

Introduction

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust schools into uncharted territory, forcing them to close their campuses, and necessitating the implementation of distance learning using online technology platforms. This rapid shift to virtual classrooms hindered the connection between students and the teachers and school staff who support them. Difficulties with access to the availability of technology and broadband services have only complicated matters. More broadly, widespread social isolation and the economic crisis have made it challenging for schools to deliver services, including mental and physical health supports. As schools struggle to find and bring their students back to campus, educators and school counselors are experiencing a dramatic increase in mental health referrals. This number is only expected to increase as more students return to the classroom this fall.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, studies indicated that one in five of our nation's young people will experience a mental health challenge,¹ and that one in ten² will have a serious mental health condition that will impact their ability to function at home, in school, and in the community before they reach the age of 18. Between mid-March and October 2020, the proportion of mental health-related ER visits increased 24% among children age 5 to 11 and 31% among adolescents age 12 to 17.³ While these numbers were staggering prior to the pandemic, we can expect issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder to emerge and persist for weeks, months, and even years to come. That is why now, more than ever, our nation's children and youth need access to evidence-based, school-linked treatments that lead to measurable and sustained positive outcomes.

Overview

In 2018, the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (MMHPI) published its [Mental and Behavioral Health Roadmap and Toolkit for Schools \(Roadmap\)](#). This in-depth resource provides educators with a framework for implementing evidence-based practices (EBPs), such as the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and the Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF) that help schools and districts develop and implement comprehensive programs designed to meet the behavioral, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students. See Figure 1 for a visual overview of both models.

As a means to mitigate the challenges schools face due to the challenges created by COVID-19, MMHPI has created this abbreviated version of our Roadmap as a quick and practical guide. It is designed to help schools address growing behavioral and mental health needs of students, staff, and families. This resource includes:

- introduction to the Roadmap's recommended frameworks (MTSS and ISF) that can be used to implement successful multi-tiered supports;

¹ Kessler, R. C., Avenevoli, S., Costello, E. J., Georgiades, K., Green, J. G., Gruber, M. J., He, J., Koretz, D., McLaughlin, K. A., Petukhova, M., Sampson, N. A., Zaslavsky, A. M., & Merikangas, K. R. (2012). Prevalence, Persistence, and Sociodemographic Correlates of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication Adolescent Supplement. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 69(4), 372–380. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2011.160>

² Kessler, R. C., Avenevoli, S., Costello, J., Green, J. G., Gruber, M. J., McLaughlin, K. A., Petukhova, M., Sampson, N. A., Zaslavsky, A. M., & Merikangas, K. R. (2012). Severity of 12-Month DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication Adolescent Supplement. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 69(4), 381–389. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2011.1603>

³ Leeb, PhD., R., Bitsko, PhD., R., Radhakrishnan, MPH, L., Martinez, MPH, P., Njai, PhD., R., & Holland, PhD., K. (2020, November 13). *Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged 18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, January 1–October 17, 2020*. CDC.Gov. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6945a3.htm>

- links to Evidence-based Practices (EBPs) that align with these frameworks and comply with legislative requirements related to school behavioral and mental health; and
- implementation and community involvement tips.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports and Interconnected Systems Framework⁴

MTSS emphasizes the use of EBPs and provides schools with early identification and intervention strategies to enhance student academic and behavioral outcomes. It describes three tiers of supports and interventions to assist all students and address more individual needs. ISF enhances the MTSS framework by helping schools extend the array of mental health supports provided to students and families through collaboration with community providers. (See Figure 1 for a representation of the MTSS triangle).

Tier 1: Universal Interventions and Supports

The primary goal of schools is to educate students and to do that successfully students must feel safe and supported and be ready to engage in the education process. Universal interventions and supports (Tier 1) help all students on campus. Tier 1 programming supports the delivery of the core curriculum (academic and behavioral), prevents challenging behaviors, and builds students' social and emotional skills. When universal supports and interventions are implemented with fidelity (implemented and delivered as designed), approximately 75–85% of students will have their behavioral health needs met by these supports and will not require further intervention.

In a typical MTSS or school mental and behavioral health framework, Tier 1 interventions and supports include suicide, substance abuse, and bullying prevention programs, as well as character-building strategies, such as establishing classroom behavioral expectations and teaching children and youth how to appropriately socialize with adults and peers. Tier 1 supports are also designed to teach children and youth how to identify and manage emotions as well as ways to get help when needed. Students should receive instruction on these topics at the beginning of each school year; be taught about them again intermittently throughout the year; and see these topics woven throughout everyday interactions in school common areas (e.g., hallways, restrooms, and cafeterias) as well as in the classroom.

[Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#) is used to teach school-wide and classroom expectations; can establish a social culture and the behavior supports needed to improve social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for all students; and is a free resource. PBIS is included here as it is being considered a standard practice in classrooms around the state. The Tier 1 interventions in Table 1 focus on trauma informed care. It should be noted that PBIS can also be considered a Tier 1 intervention. While a number of universal supports may already be in place in your school(s), Table 1 provides three EBP recommendations to benefit students returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Tier 2: Targeted Interventions and Supports

Targeted interventions and supports (Tier 2) target a subset of students, mild-to-moderate behavioral health needs and academic challenges and support their success in the school by helping them develop

⁴ Resources to learn more about these two frameworks: [Center on PBIS Multi-Tiered Framework](#), and [Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network ISF Fact Sheet](#).

critical skills (e.g., social skills, anger management, and executive functioning) and minimizing undesirable outcomes. Tier 2 supports are delivered in addition to universal supports. They include evidence-based, individual and group interventions delivered by school or community-based specialists working in tandem with the academic team. Examples include social skills training, mentor programs, and trauma intervention groups. Schools often look to school counselors to provide these types of interventions, but they require a team approach. Working relationships with community partners help schools to obtain needed services for students. When targeted supports and interventions are implemented with fidelity, an additional 10–20% of students will require no further intervention. Table 2 below provides three Tier 2 EBP recommendations.

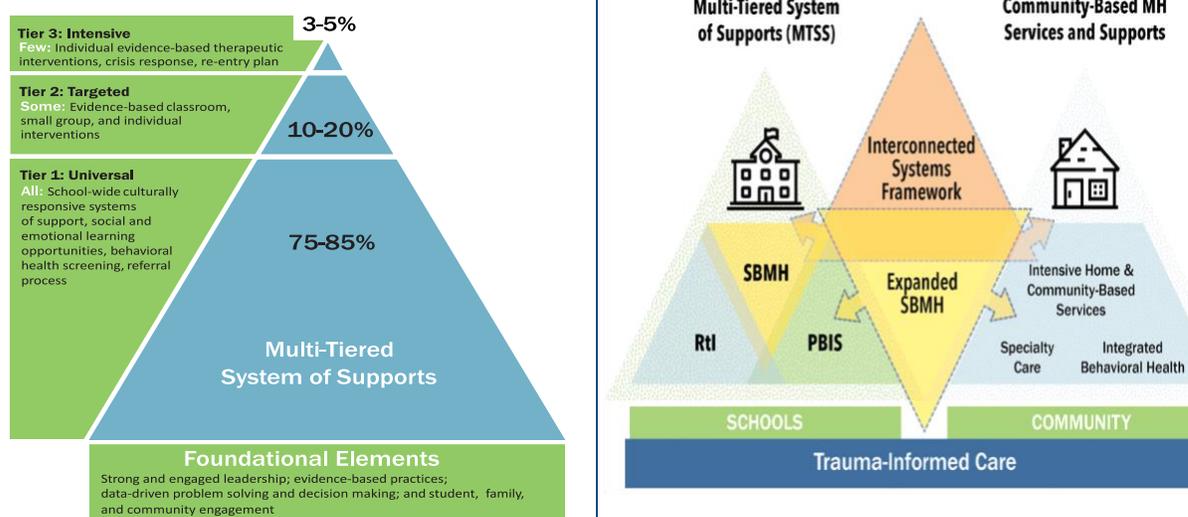
Tier 3: Intensive Interventions and Supports

Intensive interventions and supports (Tier 3) are highly individualized interventions for students with complex behavioral health needs and academic difficulties. Tier 3 supports are needed by approximately 3–5% of students with more intensive needs and possible ongoing or longer-term care. They are provided in addition to the universal and targeted supports students receive in Tiers 1 and 2. These evidence-based services and supports should also be delivered in collaboration with school district experts and community partners, such as Local Mental Health Authorities (LMHAs) or community-based providers. Table 3 below provides our top three Tier 3 EBP recommendations.

Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF)⁵

ISF enhances the MTSS framework by helping schools extend the array of mental health supports provided to students and families through collaboration with community providers. ISF provides a structure and process for education and community providers to interact in an efficient and effective way to improve educational and life outcomes for students. For example, by partnering with your local mental health authority (LMHA) or local community-based mental health providers, schools can more effectively respond to the increased mental and behavioral health needs of students.

Figure 1. MTSS and ISF Visual Overview



⁵ Swain-Bradway, J., Johnson, J., Eber, L., Barrett, S., & Weist, M. D. (2015). Interconnecting school mental health and school-wide positive behavior support. In S. Kutcher et al. (Eds.), *School Mental Health* (pp. 282–298). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107284241.023>

Table 1. Tier 1 Interventions and Supports in Response to COVID 19

Recommended Evidence-Based Interventions and Supports	
EBP 1: Staff Trauma-Informed and Grief-Informed Practices	
<p>Because the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are universally experienced in some way by all students, supports such as staff trainings on trauma and grief are critical to support students. These trainings develop awareness, empathy, and skills that help adults see student misbehavior as a call for help rather than a need to punish. It helps adults move away from asking, “What’s wrong with this child?” to asking instead, “How can I support this child who is acting out because something is not ok?” Learn more from Texas Education Agency (TEA).</p>	
EBP 2: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)	
<p>Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) describes SEL as a process through which children/youth obtain and effectively apply the knowledge, attitude, and skills needed to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve goals, feel and show empathy for others, participate in positive relationships, and make good decisions.⁶ Learn more from CASEL.</p>	
EBP 3: Restorative Practices (RPs)	
<p>Restorative practices are strategies that seek to repair relationships that were damaged by sparking a sense of remorse and restorative action from the offender and forgiveness by the victim.⁷ Restorative circles (RCs) are a restorative discipline practice used in the classroom to build community and respond to conflicts and problems. With RCs, everyone is given an equal opportunity to speak and be heard. See Implementation Tips for more information.</p>	
Implementation Tips	Community Collaboration Tips
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review trauma-informed programs recommended by TEA and select one trauma-informed care training for staff. (Click the link in EBP 1) above for a full list. Once trained, create visuals for teachers of best practices to post in classrooms as reminders; include information in parent newsletters, school websites, and other communications. • Purchase and implement a CASEL-endorsed program, such as Second Step, Raising Health Kids, or Character Strong. Click the link in EBP 2 above for more information. If purchasing a SEL program is not an option, determine the 5–10 most needed social skills for success in your school(s) and teach them to students at the beginning of the year. Reteach as needed, and develop a support system for students to get help when overwhelmed. Supports can include recess for younger children, restroom breaks, quiet spaces to work without distractions, chats with trusted adults, and “cool down” areas or designated places where students can go when they are feeling overwhelmed or upset. • Send a core team of teachers to RP training so they can lead these same trainings for other staff or use guided web and book studies so staff can how to implement restorative circles. Recommended resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Edutopia: Building Community with Restorative Circles – Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide multiple opportunities for student and parent/caregiver input and feedback (e.g., informal focus group chats, climate surveys, participation in school committees, and electronic suggestion boxes with Survey Monkey/an online survey tool. • Engage parent/caregiver groups, such as parent teacher associations (PTAs) or parent teacher organizations (PTOs), to bolster support for school-wide Tier 1 activities and programming. • Develop community and business partnerships that lead to organizations adopting a school and providing a needed resource or funding for that resource (e.g., mentoring, adopt-a-family, incentives, participation in annual health fairs). These partnerships offer opportunities for meaningful community connections with students, staff, and families. • Provide or host events to promote adult education, awareness, and a sense of shared community, such as literacy nights, career fairs, carnivals, and health fairs. Add restorative circles for parents, technology tutorials, virtual learning lessons, and Zoom support groups in light of COVID-19. These are opportunities for families and staff to develop relationships and support one another.

⁶ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (n.d.). *What is SEL?* Retrieved from <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

⁷ *Restorative practice*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/bullystoppers/Pages/methodrestorative.aspx>

Table 2. Tier 2 Interventions and Supports in Response to COVID 19

Recommended Evidence-Based Interventions and Supports	
EBP 1: Check In Check Out (CICO)	
Students check in with an adult at the beginning of the day to receive a daily goal sheet and encouragement. They receive feedback throughout the day. Students check out with an adult at school at the end of the day and take the goal sheet home for a caregiver’s signature and return the sheet the next morning at check in. ⁸ Learn more from PBIS World.	
EBP 2: Check and Connect (A Mentoring Program)	
Mentors check on or monitor students’ levels of engagement and educational progress. Then mentors “connect” or meet with students to consider their needs and perspectives, family influences, and available community and school resources. ⁹ Learn more from Missouri School-Wide Positive Behavior Support.	
EBP 3: Small Groups Interventions	
<p>Trauma: To address trauma, TEA approves a number of trauma-informed and grief-informed trainings, frameworks, interventions, and supplemental programs.</p> <p>Social Skills: Vanderbilt University has compiled the top 10 social skills students need to succeed.¹⁰</p> <p>Emotional Regulation: Edutopia provides descriptions of SEL programs that promote emotional regulation.¹¹</p>	
Implementation Tips	Community Involvement Tips
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CICO allows any staff member to implement this intervention and become a CICO lead, and therefore, supports teachers and counselors. For example, administrators, clerks, secretaries, paraprofessionals, custodians, cafeteria workers, and student teachers can all implement CICO. This intervention can also be completed virtually or through text as it only takes a few minutes to do. • Check and Connect is most effective when the student selects their own mentor. Students need support from someone they know and trust, and someone who they feel cares for them. In addition, mentors must be willing to be a student’s “go-to person.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to some of the most common small groups many schools already provide (social skills, anger management, and developing executive functioning), there are additional group topics relevant to COVID-19 that are important to address, including coping with grief/loss, substance abuse, anxiety, depression and especially, trauma. • As noted earlier, partnering with your LMHA and other local community providers is essential. Counselors need help from outside providers (e.g., licensed professional counselors, social workers, mental health interns) to meet the need for student small group support.

⁸ PBIS World. (n.d.). *Check in Check Out (CICO)*. Retrieved from <https://www.pbisworld.com/tier-2/check-in-check-out-cico/>

⁹ Check & Connect. (2017). *Check & Connect: An overview of a Tier 2 intervention*. Retrieved from http://pbissmissouri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ST12017_5C_Check-Connect-An-Overview-of-a-Tier-2-Intervention.pdf

¹⁰ Vanderbilt University. (2007, Sept. 27). *Top 10 social skills students need to succeed*. Retrieved from <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2007/09/27/top-10-social-skills-students-need-to-succeed-58465/>

¹¹ Edutopia. (2012, November 7). *Social and Emotional Learning research review: Evidence-based programs*. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/sel-research-evidence-based-programs>

Table 3. Tier 3 Interventions and Supports in Response to COVID 19

Recommended Evidence-Based Interventions and Supports	
EBP 1: Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)	
<p>Conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) to identify the function of a misbehavior, and then work with the student and their parent/caregiver to develop a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) to prevent or stop misbehavior(s), starting with the most significant behavior(s) first. Learn more from PBIS World.</p>	
EBP 2: Safety Plans	
<p>Work with students who exhibit severe behavioral problems and could be a harm to self or others. Develop individualized home/school safety plans to ensure the student has a set of coping strategies and a defined plan of action in case of emergency. In addition, ensure you follow-up with these students upon return from any outside placements, such as juvenile detention, alternative education centers, psychiatric hospitals. It is critical to develop a longer-term support plan with regular check-ins by a trusted adult on campus.</p>	
EBP 3: Therapeutic Intervention	
<p>Individualized therapeutic intervention provided by a licensed clinician is recommended when a student needs more intensive daily supports to be successful in the classroom. Schools should connect with their LMHA as a starting point to find local licensed clinicians.</p>	
Implementation Tips	Community Involvement Tips
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop a BIP, it is helpful to use a “behavior tracking form” to analyze a student’s behaviors and then work with the student and their parent/caregiver to develop a plan to address identified inappropriate behaviors.¹² Consult with your district behavior specialists and clinicians for more information or use these Tier 3 Data Tracking Tools • Safety plans should be developed with a student and caregiver and outline when, where, and to whom a student can go for immediate help. Plans should be brief, easy to read, and in the student’s own words. Click the link in EBP 2 above to learn how to create your own safety plan template or use these sample templates (see pp. 143–144). • Train Tier 3 teams in EBPs, such as Dr. Stuart Ablon’s Collaborative Problem-Solving (CPS) Approach. CPS provides a psychometrically-validated framework for assessing a person’s skills, a roadmap for deciding how to handle challenging behavior, and a clear process for solving problems while building skills and relationships. Learn more from https://thinkkids.org 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the most successful results, provide EBPs on-site or connect students to EBPs that have demonstrated outcomes, such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). • Contract or develop memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with licensed clinicians who can provide individualized therapeutic services to students during the school day.

¹² PBIS World. (n.d.). *Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)*. Retrieved from <https://www.pbisworld.com/tier-2/behavior-intervention-plan-bip/>