What Students Say about Mental Health
School Mental Health Capacity Building Partnership

The National Assembly on School-Based Health Care's *School Mental Health Capacity Building Partnership*, funded through a cooperative agreement with the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), hosted a series of discussion groups to get a youth perspective on what schools can to do to better address the mental health needs of all students. In these 90-minute sessions, youth in Ohio, Maryland, Missouri, and Oregon were asked a series of questions, such as:

- How can adults at your school make all students feel supported, both in school and in other areas of their lives?
- How well do you think adults in your school respond to students with mental health problems?
- If a student had a problem that was serious enough to need some kind of counseling, who in the school would be the best person to give the student this kind of help?

Maryland Youth Discussion Group

The following are key lessons learned from the students, with recommendations for educators and others to consider when developing school mental health programs:

1 Confidentiality is important when helping students.

"Ask if they can share that piece of information… common courtesy works wonders."

"Some teachers will tell others, and it will get around the school...the teachers will share, and that's not right."

Although students understand that there are times when adults may have to share their information with others (e.g., if the student is at risk for harm), they suggest the following ways to establish clear limits for confidentiality:

- Teachers should not share personal information and gossip about students with the class or other staff.
- If a staff member needs to share information about a student, she or he should explain to the student *why*, *with whom,* and *how* the information needs to be shared.
- School-based mental health providers should explain the limits to confidentiality *before* counseling begins.
- Schools should have a confidentiality contract that stipulates when information can be shared.

2 Students are most likely to talk to adults they trust, regardless of their training.

"I'd probably talk to my coach. The reason I'd talk to my coach is because I know him more. Like I've been with him out of school, not just here. I don't know a counselor. I don't know them, so I don't want to talk to them about my business."

Although students will most often talk to an adult they know and trust, they suggest that schools do the following in establishing roles for school personnel:

- Recognize that students will most often seek help from the adults with whom they have most familiarity, such as a coach or security guard.
- Include all adults who have interaction with students in training on how to handle students with problems.
- Make students aware of those professionals who are assigned to help students, while recognizing that students will seek help from school staff in a variety of roles.
- Clarify the roles of the school counselor and the school nurse to avoid common misperceptions about their roles (e.g., the school counselor is only available for academic problems, the school nurse only helps with physical problems).

Staff-student interaction is critical to gaining the trust of students and making them feel supported. 3

Students suggested that school personnel do the following when interacting with students:

- Build a relationship with their students.
- Get to know students on a personal level by asking them about how they are doing and about their interests.
- Be open-minded and don't judge or lecture students.
- Be available to talk to or help students when needed.
- Show an investment in the learning of all students.
- Demonstrate that they value student opinions by taking the time to listen to them.
- Be willing to trust students in order to gain their respect and trust, in return.

"When I tell teachers something, I'm coming to them for advice. It bothers me when they lecture me. It feels like they talk at me and not to me."

"I trust them because they are willing to trust me...my 'metals' teacher gave me a chance."

Extracurricular activities provide many positive benefits for students.

Students suggest that schools do the following to encourage the participation of students in extra-curricular activities:

- Offer a wide range of extracurricular activities at low or no cost to students.
- Provide students with an opportunity to lead extracurricular activities, since adults' attitudes and behavior may negatively influence students' motivation to participate.
- Acknowledge and promote the many benefits of extracurricular activities, including:
  ◊ stress reduction
  ◊ social skills
  ◊ increased self-esteem
  ◊ sense of connectedness to school
  ◊ leadership development
  ◊ positive alternatives to negative influences

"*It changed my life...it showed me that there is something else I could do instead of doing drugs and all that bad stuff.***"**

"It separates people who want to enjoy school. It gave me a reason for coming to school."

5 School staff should be open to and learn more about students' backgrounds and cultures.

Oregon Youth Discussion Group

Students recognize that it is unrealistic for teachers to know every distinct culture that may be represented at a school. The following are insights regarding how schools and school staff can better address the needs of students from diverse backgrounds:

- Teachers should treat everyone equally, regardless of their ethnicity or background.
- Both students and teachers should be free to express their culture openly.
- Teachers should simply ask students about their culture as a way to become informed.
- Teachers should incorporate culture into their lessons in order to provide students with an opportunity to talk about their culture.
- Schools should recruit teachers from different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.
- School staff should show caution when asking questions that could be perceived as invasive, such as those about immigration or legal status.
- Schools should offer clubs or programs that celebrate all cultures.

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Schools play an important role in reducing barriers to accessing mental health services.

"Yeah, like we have two counselors, and they each have two grade levels. So I'm sure it's hard for them to see everyone that needs to see them."

"We have a nurse on certain days; we don't always have a nurse."

Students identify many ways in which schools can make it easier for them to access help. The following are some of them:

- Inform students about the availability and procedures for accessing counseling services.
- Develop procedures that encourage students to request and receive services.
- Designate a time and place for students to go for counseling.
- Assign staff roles for identifying, assessing, and treating mental health problems.
- Ensure a manageable caseload for counselors.
- Increase the availability of the school social worker and the school nurse.
- Post referral resources for students who are not comfortable requesting help at school.

School staff need to be trained on mental health issues and policies.

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Students feel that in contrast to how school staff respond to student's physical health problems, they are much less informed about how to respond to mental health issues. Consequently, they suggest that schools do the following for their staff:

- Provide training to increase staff knowledge and awareness of the following topics:
  ◊ recognizing signs of mental health problems
  ◊ nature of specific mental illnesses
  ◊ strategies for intervening with aggressive behavior before it becomes a crisis
  ◊ working with family members
- Advise teachers and school personnel on procedures regarding whom to call during a crisis.
- Encourage teachers to ask for help if they lack the knowledge or confidence to respond to students with mental health problems.
- Assign a mental health professional to consult with teachers regarding student needs or difficult situations involving student behavior.

"*I knew a girl who cut herself...I guess she was depressed, and she had friends that told the guidance counselor. Unless it's something that obvious, my teachers ignore it unless students seek help for themselves."*

A positive school environment is critical to the mental health of all students.

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Students suggest the following ways that schools can create a safe environment where students feel supported:

- Make schools visually appealing and comfortable so that students feel welcome and want to spend time there.
- Stagger class bells to minimize the chaos students feel when they are all in the halls.
- Review and revise those school disciplinary policies that may be counterproductive to meeting the mental health needs of students.
- Keep class sizes small and teacher ratios large in order to give students the attention they need.
- Designate a classroom or quiet space for students who are troubled and need a place to calm down.

"*Make sure students don't feel alone, and show students you are with them no matter what.***"**

"I don't like it when teachers just call the police instead of understanding what a kid is going through."

9 **Students with mental health issues may require special attention and may have individual needs.**

"*Students are learning about their mental health issues, too. They may be scared. Calm them down, work together with their families. Make the student feel okay.***"**

Although students with mental health problems don't want to be treated differently because of their mental health status, students describe several ways in which school staff can meet the needs of students with mental health issues:

- Talk to the students and their families to better understand the students' mental health issues.
- Provide students with opportunities to express their feelings (e.g., journals, class discussions).
- Don't ask students questions about their mental health problems in front of others.
- Monitor the halls between classes and make sure the students with mental health problems aren't harassed.
- Offer opportunities to educate other students about mental health through assemblies and group discussions.

10 Youth should be considered in the development of school mental health programs and policies.

"Youth have different ways of looking at things than adults."

"We are directly put in these situations, and we experience these things every day...though adults have been through it, times have changed."

Students recognize that they have a unique perspective because of their familiarity with schools and their knowledge of youth culture and current issues. They suggest that school mental health initiatives do the following to engage students:

- Provide an opportunity to promote the uniqueness of the youth voice.
- Ensure that the contribution of youth is meaningful and that their presence isn't only to meet a requirement to involve youth.
- Make participation enjoyable (e.g., youth can be with friends, go on a field trip, represent their school) so that youth will join and stay involved.
- Provide incentives for youth participation, such as money, healthy food, gift cards, or community service hours.
- Establish an identity for the group (e.g., give it a name, make T-shirts).
- Hold interactive activities and avoid activities that follow a class structure.

Benefits to eliciting the "youth voice"
It is important to note that "lessons" from the discussion groups did not benefit adults exclusively. Feedback after the youth groups revealed that the youth themselves developed an increased awareness about mental illness from what they learned from their peers during their discussions. Additionally, the youth conveyed that they felt valued by having their comments heard. These student discussion groups clearly reinforce the value of including the youth perspective in planning and implementing school mental health efforts. Hearing "*What Students Say about Mental Health*" can set a precedent for how youth engagement in similar endeavors can benefit both a school mental health initiative overall as well as the youth themselves.

How to use these recommendations
School mental health stakeholders, and in particular educators, are encouraged to use the important insights and feedback when engaging in the following school mental health activities:

1) building a positive climate in schools that is supportive to all students
2) establishing and monitoring school policies and procedures for how school personnel interact with students
3) planning staff development activities — including which staff should participate in trainings and which topics should be addressed
4) establishing their roles and responsibilities in supporting students, particularly those with mental health problems
5) engaging youth in extracurricular activities and in school mental health initiatives
6) developing and implementing effective and culturally appropriate policies, programs, and services

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Bringing Health Care To Schools For Student Success

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