K–12 student mental health needs are growing. Here's how school districts can measurably improve student well-being outcomes to ensure student success.

Mental Health Awareness month is observed each May. Awareness plays an important role in reducing stigma and normalizing discussions of invisible disabilities. However, when it comes to K–12 student well-being, awareness alone won't be enough to provide relief. The National Center for Education Statistics still reports a significant decline in K–12 student mental health since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increased support and services in schools has already shown promising results in reducing the number of youth mental-health-related hospitalizations. However, many districts are facing budget shortfalls and the loss of ESSER funding that put them at a crossroads for how to do more to address student well-being — with fewer funds.

Luckily, district leaders can take steps to measure and strengthen mental health support for students by focusing on improving school climate, implementing multi-tiered systems of support, and rethinking funding strategies, even in resource-scarce environments.

How to Excel Beyond K–12 Mental Health Awareness

Mental health awareness remains an important first step to boosting the well-being of a student population. However, districts must also implement actionable methods to repair school climate.

Consider the following tips when seeking to elevate your student well-being strategy at the district level:

- Work with school leaders to identify short, medium, and long-term goals for school climate revitalization.
- Promote accountability by continually evaluating the progress of these goals and metrics over time.
- Prioritize policies, practices, and initiatives that focus on preventing unhealthy conflict and bullying and modeling healthy social connections.
- Emphasize shared values and intercultural understanding.
- Regularly collect and analyze surveys, interviews, and feedback forms from students, families, and staff to provide accessible avenues for them to voice their ideas and concerns.

Learn how to how to balance all aspects of a positive school climate with our infographic, [The Why and How of a Positive School Climate](#).

Exploring Multi-Tiered Support Systems for Sustainable Intervention

Student mental health persists as a multifaceted issue, influenced by factors such as [income](#), [race, and gender.](#) Moreover, not all students require the same level of support. By identifying the risk factors and warning signs of mental health challenges, districts can scale resources for the students who need it the most.

A multi-tiered support system (MTSS) organizes intervention strategies along a continuum, starting with prevention and graduating to more intense support to match student need. Districts with a strong MTSS in place prioritize [data-based decision-making and problem-solving](#) to more efficiently connect students with appropriate tiers of support. Implement or enhance structures and practices to build capacity for a MTSS model in your district, including:

- Identify and engage in community and family partnerships to better understand how systemic bias, mental illness, and other disabilities inform the unique support needs of different student groups.

- Modify school schedules to include protected time for problem-solving meetings, intervention delivery, universal screening and progress monitoring, and professional development.
- Clearly define the gradient of support beyond generalized prevention measures by identifying intervention methods that support students with targeted needs in a group environment and methods that address individuals with the highest needs and risks profiles.
- Refine screening tools to identify specific risk factors and warning signs.

Strengthen your student well-being strategy with data by tuning into our prerecorded webinar, [Enhancing Student Outcomes in K–12 Districts: Strategies for Success](#).

Diversifying K–12 Student Mental Health Funding Options

Funding remains a major challenge for districts that aim to improve student mental health support systems. With ESSER funding rapidly expiring, it's a challenging environment for districts to adequately allocate resources for both academic and behavioral programs.

To counter budget constraints, a [benchmarking study](#) by Hanover found that some districts and educational service agencies have found success with a blended or braided model of funding streams to implement comprehensive school-based mental health supports. Leverage the following tips when navigating funding options for your student mental health programs:

- Explore options for implementing a braided funding model to support school- based mental health support and services, using a combination of federal [grants](#), state funding, and funding from private donors/foundations to cover the expenses.
- Form community partnerships with organizations that could support and/or directly provide mental health services in district schools or offer telehealth services.
- For example, consider how local hospitals, universities, non-profits, and existing outpatient behavioral centers could help triangulate support.
- Connect with Medicaid and other government agencies to learn about ways to lighten the district financial load through insurance coverage.

https://www.hanoverresearch.com/insights-blog/k-12-education/supporting-k-12-student-mental-health-in-2024-25/ 01.29.25

ESSER funding may be expiring but you can read our [2024 Trends in K–12 Education](#) report to learn how other districts are overcoming funding challenges.

Everyone needs support when overcoming mental health hurdles — and students are no different. Awareness provides a terrific opportunity to shed light on potentially overlooked issues. However, district leaders should also focus on action and accountability to support growing K–12 student mental health needs. Districts and schools can find success in promoting student well-being by using data to establish actionable goals, providing a multi-tiered system of support, and taking innovative approaches to funding and resourcing.