When students’ mental health needs are properly addressed, students thrive. School counselors are in the ideal position to ensure this happens.
Schools play a critical role in preparing our students to be knowledgeable, responsible and caring citizens. They allow students to build a wide variety of foundational skills, which enable them to navigate the ever-changing complexities of living in a 21st century global economy. Thanks largely to the standards-based education movement, educators have shifted from a whole-child focus to a results-oriented focus.

With the implementation of federal and state accountability measures as well as Common Core state standards, an increasing number of school districts, students and parents are focused on meeting end-of-year benchmarks.

As the focus on academic achievement has increased, many schools have seen initiatives and programs focused on mental health prevention and intervention dwindle. Initiatives such as character education, health and wellness promotion and in some cases school counseling positions have been reduced. Without these preventive schoolwide educational efforts, students’ mental health needs have largely been left for school-based mental health professionals to navigate on their own.

In recent years, we have seen the tragic impact of untreated mental health disorders. The National Institutes of Mental Health reports that half of the mental health disorders in the United States appear by age 14, suggesting school-based prevention and early intervention efforts are critical to getting needed help to children. With an increasing national dialogue focused on how to support mental health needs, more schools and school systems are beginning to rethink how they support the variety of mental health disorders among children and adolescents.

In their book, “Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood: What Every Policymaker Should Know,” authors Cooper, Masi and Vick state that through the implementation of schoolwide comprehensive mental health efforts, research has shown increases in academic achievement, decreases in problem behaviors, improvements in relationships that surround each child and positive changes in school and classroom climates.

By the nature of their work, school counselors provide a comprehensive school counseling program that enhances awareness of mental health; promotes positive, healthy behaviors; and seeks to remove the stigma associated with mental health issues. Through the design and implementation of preventive programming, creation of protocols and trainings to assist school staff and parents with the identification of possible mental health concerns and disorders and through collaboration with other school- and community-based professionals, school counselors can bring focus and increased awareness to students’ mental health needs.

Preventive Approach
A significant component to addressing students’ mental health needs includes a preventive and educational approach. Due to the scope of their work, school counselors are in a prime position to lead these efforts. In my school district, school counselors have implemented school wellness weeks focused on exercise, laughter, good nutrition, mental health
education and teaching students how they can get help for themselves or a friend in need. This intervention educates the entire school community on mental health awareness and resources as well as providing preventive and positive coping strategies to students. Programming such as this creates a climate that destigmatizes mental health and fosters conversations with all stakeholders about student wellness.

With training in child and adolescent development, school counselors can provide educational programming to staff and parents focused on cognitive and social/emotional changes in students as well as potential mental health symptoms. Providing fliers during back-to-school night or presenting during a faculty or PTA meeting are easy ways to share information regarding mental health disorders with key stakeholders. Having an understanding of these changes helps school staff and parents know when they should seek out help as opposed to dismissing the behaviors as “being a teenager.”

According to the Mayo Clinic, common mental health disorders in children include anxiety, ADHD, mood or eating disorders, autism and schizophrenia. In his book, “Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind,” Eric Jensen states that it is important to keep in mind that the prevalence of mental health problems is markedly higher for children in families facing economic hardship and other stressful circumstances. In some cases, the school counselor may be the first or only school staff member with whom the student or family interacts. Although all of these disorders require identification and treatment from a licensed community mental health provider, school counselors are often at the forefront of identifying problem behaviors that may indicate presence of a disorder. The presence of the items below isn’t a definitive indicator of a mental health disorder. However, it is important to note the frequency, intensity and duration of these symptoms to aid in the prevention, identification and support of students:

- Exhibits problems across a variety of settings (home, school or with peers)
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Decline in grades
- Social withdrawal, spending more time alone
- Increased irritability or anger
- Shows signs of being upset, such as sadness or tearfulness
- Shows signs of self-destructive behavior, including possible drug or alcohol use
- Complains of aches or pains
- Feels hopeless
- Bright Futures, a national health care promotion and disease prevention initiative that uses a developmentally based approach to address children’s health care needs in the context of family and community, has developed a set of pediatric symptom checklists for children designed to facilitate the recognition of cognitive, emotional and behavioral problems so appropriate interventions can be initiated as early as possible. The checklist gives school counselors and parents the ability to assess 35 of their children’s behaviors as never, sometimes and often and can provide some early indicators of the presence of a mental health disorder. Find the checklist at www.brightfutures.org/mentalhealth/pdf/professionals/ped_symptom_chklst.pdf.

As school counselors work to support student mental health needs, it is vitally important that we recognize how various cultures view mental health disorders and treatment. For some cultures, mental health is not readily acknowledged, and in others it is seen as a stigma shared by the entire family. As a result, some families may opt their children out of receiving school counseling services or be resistant to preventive approaches or conversations pertaining to mental health. In these situations, I found it helpful to work through parent or community liaisons such as pastors, imams, rabbis or local community outreach groups. They are often trusted and respected by the family and in positions to help support with acculturation and societal norms. Oftentimes, they were able to help lessen the stigma of speaking with the “counselor” and became a conduit for me to speak with parents about the concerns regarding their child.

Traditionally, educators have considered the need for counseling, special education services or other social skills supports for youth displaying many of the previously mentioned behaviors. If some of the behaviors are not readily resolved, persist over time or intensify, that could signify more significant problems that go beyond school-based counseling and classroom interventions. It is important for school counselors to build networks of support including other school-based mental health professionals such as school psychologists and school social workers. Collaborating with these professionals allows school counselors to better support students and families and can help provide access to a greater array of clinical resources that can ultimately benefit the student.

Some school divisions use a clinical team-based model consisting of the school counselor, school social worker and school psychologist working collaboratively to assist in the timely intervention and coordination of mental health services to students. In my previous role as director of student services in a middle school, our clinical team met weekly to discuss student concerns. The concerns varied from student attendance and declining student academic performance to student behavior and emotional wellness. As a team, we created a student services database that allowed us to track interventions and assign case managers. By creating a system that allowed us to track and monitor the data and work collaboratively, we were able to provide effective interventions to students. These data allowed us to show our administration the impact of our work...
and its direct connection to academic achievement. It also allowed classroom teachers to see how our targeted interventions supported student success in their classroom and made them more willing to release students so they could access our services.

The purpose of mental health resources in schools is to provide students with the necessary support to access the educational environment. It is not the school counselor’s role to diagnose or treat mental health disorders. For some students, their needs will go beyond school-based interventions. It is important for school counselors to have a solid working knowledge of the community and private mental health resources in the area and know how to refer students and parents to them. As a school counselor and district-level specialist, I always found it beneficial to call these agencies and programs to learn about their intake procedures and, when possible, visited these programs and facilities so I could explain in great detail to students and parents what the process would look like. As the link between school and home, school counselors often have significant knowledge about the student, situational or ongoing stressors and the family dynamic. This information can be paramount during a mental health crisis. Lastly, seeking a consent release to exchange information is important to help in the timely and accurate treatment for the student.

In my current role as an elementary assistant principal in a Title I school, I depend on the school counselors to keep me abreast of students and families in crisis and potential or rising mental health needs in students. Our students are not available to access learning or function throughout the school day unless these needs are being met. This means that as an administrator, it is my responsibility to remove barriers and ensure the school counselors are spending a large majority of their time providing direct and indirect services to students. Without the intervention and access to resources our school counselors provide, my duty to educate students will fail.

When students’ mental health needs are properly addressed, students thrive. As we continue to bring mental health needs to the forefront, it is important to lessen the stigma associated with mental health disorders and provide safe havens for students in school. By the nature of their work, school counselors are in a key position to identify mental health symptoms and connect students and families to appropriate services.

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