CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being in Schools: An Action Guide for School and District Leaders

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Recent data trends have amplified the importance of schools in responding to the mental health needs of students

- **When youth experience poor mental health, they are also at increased risk of school absence and dropout, risky sexual behavior, and illicit substance use.[1,2]**

- **Measures of mental health suggest worse outcomes for some groups of youth[3,4]:**
  - female students,
  - lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or questioning students (LGBTQ), and
  - students who have experienced racism in school.

In 2021…

- 42% of high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless for at least 2 weeks in the past year
- 22% of high school students reported that they had seriously considered suicide.[4]

Important Role of Schools

- **Opportunity to promote the well-being of students** through education, prevention, and early intervention efforts
- **Potential to establish safe and supportive environments** that connect students to caring adults and encourage positive peer relationships
- **Link students and families to mental and behavioral health services**

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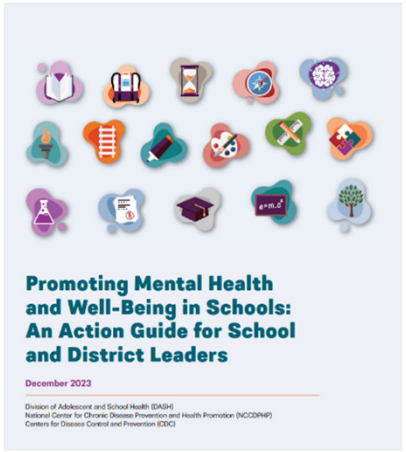


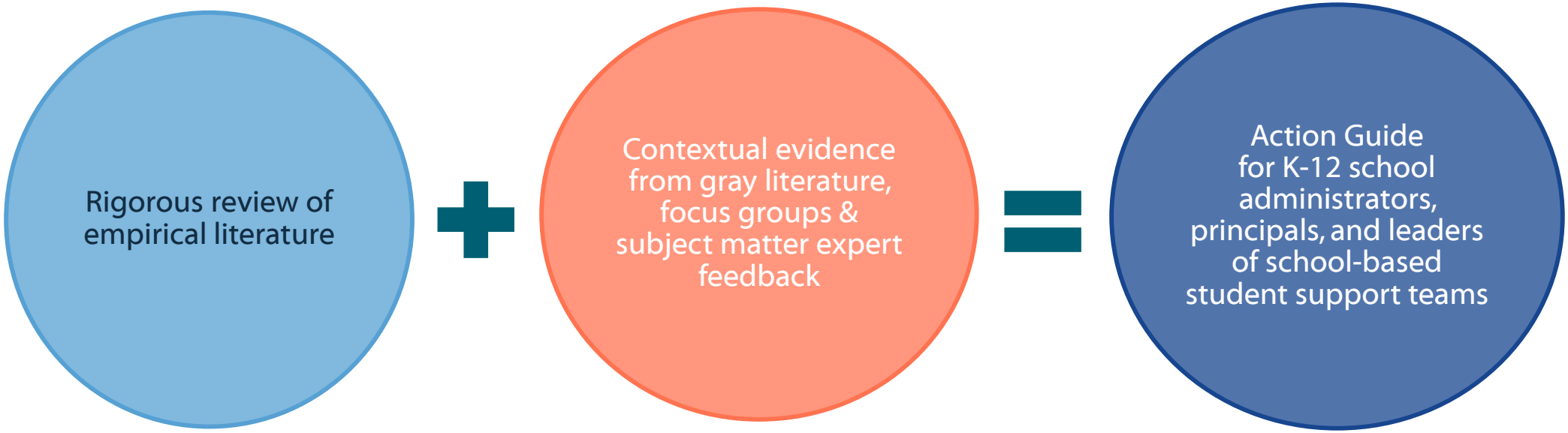
Purpose:

- To identify evidence-based strategies, approaches, and practices that can positively influence students' mental health

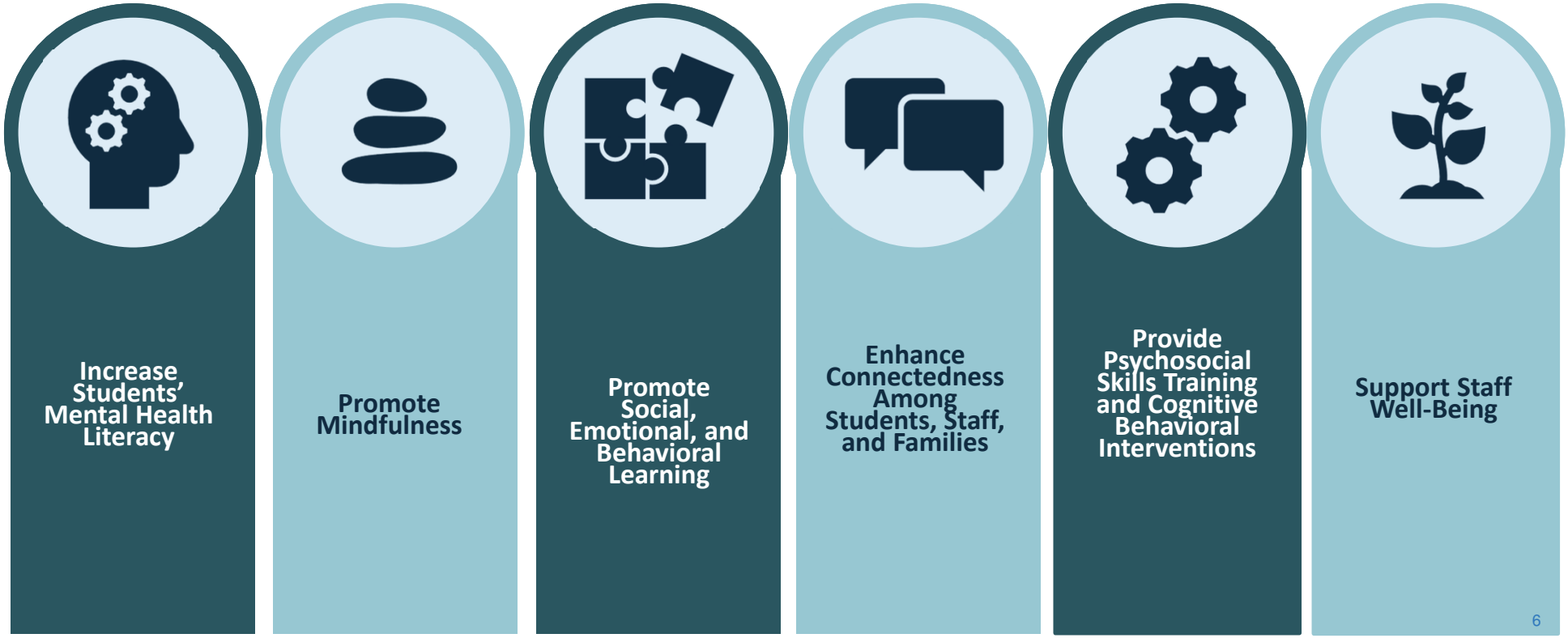
Audience:

- School administrators in kindergarten through 12th grade schools (K-12)

Developing the Action Guide

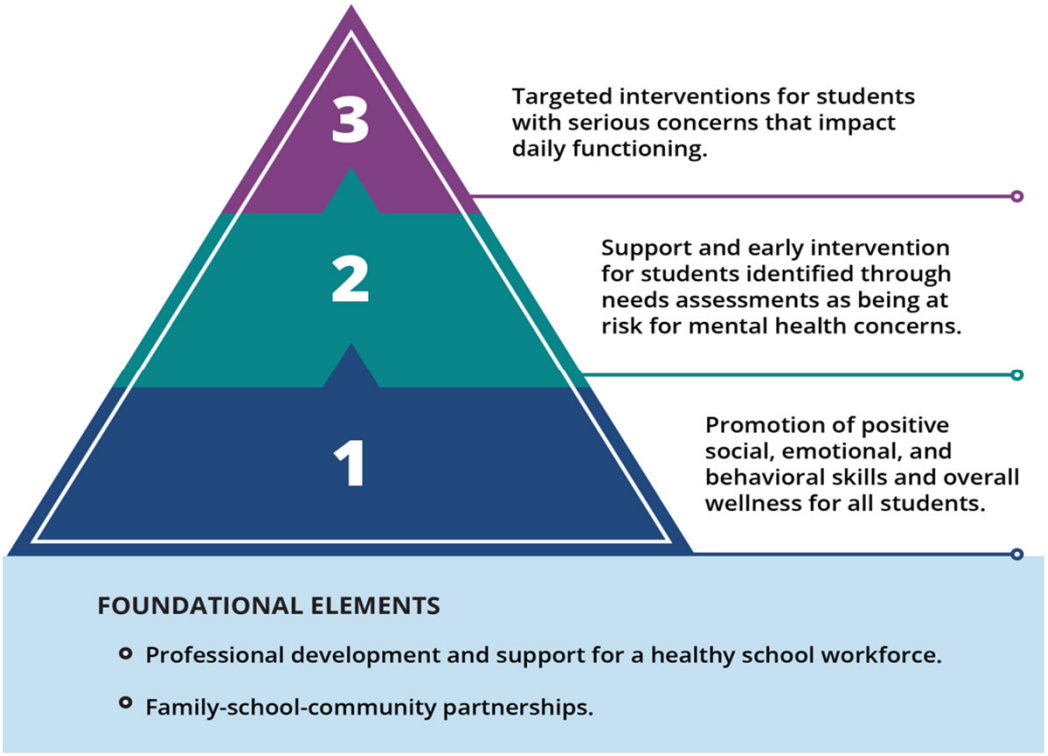


Six Evidence-Based Strategies to Support Mental Health and Well-Being in Schools



Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

Action guide strategies and approaches can align with schools' existing MTSS efforts



Increase Students' Mental Health Literacy

Approaches

Deliver classroom-based **mental health education** curricula

Implement **peer-led modeling** programs

Implementation & Equity

- Partner with local, state, and regional organizations and community-based groups.
- Consider how parents, caregiver, and community members view mental health and how views might affect the ability to find or ask for support.

Additional resource: CDC's Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool

APPROACHES

Promote Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Learning

Provide **classroom instruction** focused on building social skills and emotional development

Offer targeted education focused on **teaching social skills and emotional development**

Implementation & Equity

- Consider using screening tools to support students, but also examine the tools for potential bias and misuse.
- Consider using transformative social and emotional learning to advance equity.

APPROACHES

Promote Mindfulness

Deliver classroom-based **mindfulness education**

Dedicate time for students to **independently practice mindfulness**

Offer small group **mindfulness activities**

Implementation & Equity

- Include student voice in the development of mindfulness activities by:
  - Asking students what visualization strategies they like best
  - Offering students the opportunity to lead mindfulness exercises

APPROACH

Enhance Connectedness Among Students, Staff, and Families

Provide **relationship-building** programs

Implementation & Equity

- Focus on students more likely to be marginalized and to feel disconnected in school.
- Consider ways that school policies and practices can foster connectedness.

Additional resource: What Can Schools Do?: School Connectedness

APPROACHES

Provide Psychosocial Skills Training and Cognitive Behavioral Interventions

Promote acceptance and commitment to change

Provide cognitive **behavioral interventions**

Engage students in **coping skills** training groups

Implementation & Equity

- Consider and address the unique mental health needs of students who have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences and trauma
- Use trauma-informed policies and practices

APPROACHES

Support Staff Well-Being

Offer mindfulness-based **training programs**

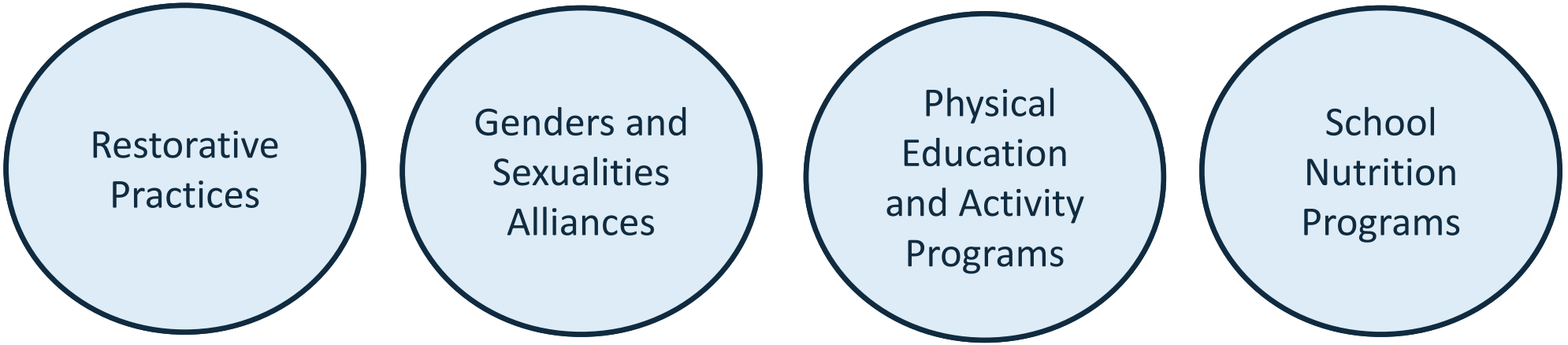
Provide therapeutic **resources**

Implementation & Equity

- Strategies that reduce discrimination and improve inclusivity are critical for promoting staff wellness. Examples include:
  - Culturally relevant supports and services
  - Safe spaces (e.g., affinity groups) and activities that provide social support and promote resilience.

Additional Practices to Promote a Nurturing and Welcoming School Environment

Approaches to promote nurturing and welcoming school environments may positively impact mental health and well-being. Schools can promote nurturing and welcoming environments through:



Physical Activity and Mental Health

- Physical activity linked to mental health and wellness
- Physical activity in school linked to
  - School connectedness
  - Positive self-concept
- Integrating Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Learning into PE classes

School Nutrition and Mental Health

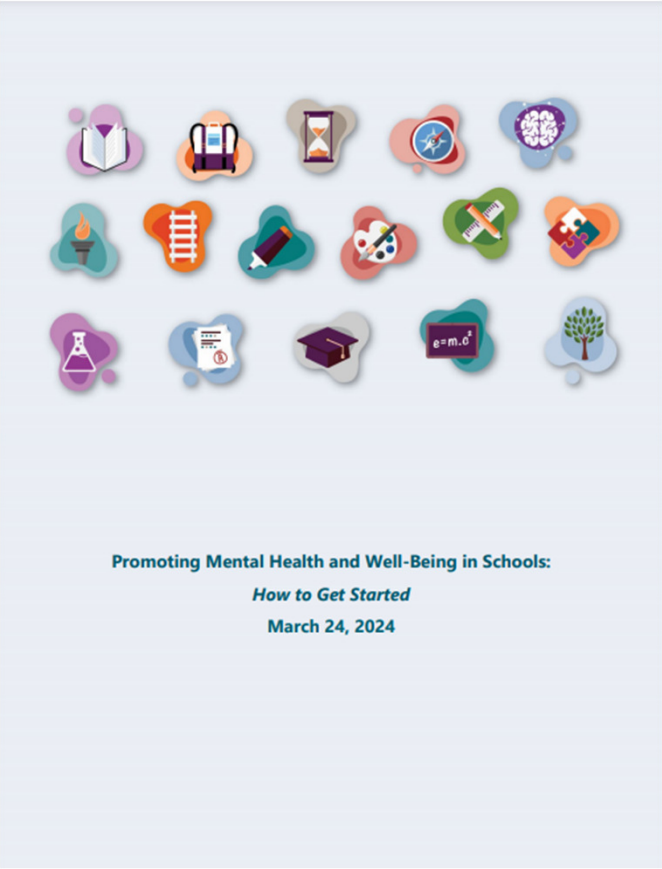
- Food insecurity linked to poor mental health
- Students' dietary behaviors associated with mental health
- School meal and garden programs
  - Address food insecurity
  - Promote healthy dietary intake
  - Support positive social and emotional school climates

NEW IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS!

“How to Get Started” Resource

- **WHO:** Leaders of K-12 schools and districts, and their mental health and well-being support teams

- **WHAT:** This resource offers practical tools to help leaders…
  - **1) Reflect** on what their school or district is already doing to promote mental health and well-being,
  - **2) Prioritize** strategies and approaches from the Action Guide to fill gaps and strengthen what is already in place
  - **3) Plan for Action** to implement the strategies and approaches.



Presentation Template

- **WHO:** Leaders of K-12 schools and districts, and their mental health and well-being support teams

- **WHAT:** Presentation template that can be adapted and used to communicate to key partners (e.g. school staff, district administrators, school boards, parent groups) about plans for implementing strategies and approaches from the Action Guide

https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health-action-guide/ppt/CDC-MH-Action-Guide_Presentation-Template.pptx

Thank you!

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The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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