The evidence for greater mental health support for students of all ages is everywhere. You do not have to search far to find various statistics and information on this pressing need, particularly post-pandemic. For example, Mental Health America (2023) reports that more than 16 percent of youth ages 12–17 has experienced at least one major depressive episode in the last year, which is an increase from approximately 12 percent in 2018. Almost 60 percent of these youth did not receive any mental health treatment. It is also six times more likely that youth will participate in mental health treatments provided at school compared to community settings (National Center for School Mental Health, 2023b); therefore, it is imperative for us to think through these issues in our Lutheran schools.

In a recent survey of LCMS K-12 teachers, more than 36 percent indicated that they were very dissatisfied with on-site mental health supports for students, such as a social worker or counselor, and only 7 percent indicated high satisfaction (Hensel & Bratton, 2024). This is not surprising given how difficult it is to have the needed resources and professionals to address mental health challenges of students within the school day.

A rising number of LCMS schools are discussing the need for counselors or social workers, but even with additional support, it can be difficult to adopt an integrated approach rather than working in silos. Mental health promotion needs to start with a whole school approach.
promotion needs to start with a whole school approach. Activities that foster positive emotional and behavioral skills should be provided universally to students and staff. This promotes the educational success and well-being of all students while reducing the stigma surrounding mental health. A schoolwide approach also helps in laying the foundation for additional mental health supports that some students will need. Adopting universal strategies addresses mental health proactively and may reduce the need for some students to receive further support, whether the school has counselor support on site or not.

Another silo may exist between faith and mental health. However, in Lutheran communities, we find strength and peace through our faith and Scripture. This is another component we have the privilege to integrate as we support adult and student mental health in our communities. In John 16:33 (ESV), Jesus said to his disciples, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Jesus is our healer, and we should incorporate Scripture into our mental health conversations, being careful not portray other mental health supports as unnecessary in our sinful world. Faith helps us persevere and find hope in suffering, and it is a resource to point students and families to as we discuss these topics.

One proactive approach to fostering positive mental health in schools is to incorporate restorative practices into classrooms to promote healthy relationships and as a constructive way to address conflict. Many schools are considering these strategies in their schoolwide behavior and discipline plans, and they are effective for students’ mental health since they are trauma-informed and meant to precede challenging student interactions.

Trauma often plays a significant role in behavior and relationships, yet it will not always be known by those in the school. Teaching and modeling restorative practices helps students and adults resolve conflicts and use effective problem-solving strategies. Incorporating restorative strategies such as restorative circles leads to improvements in academic
achievement, school climate, and decreases in fighting, bullying, and exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions and expulsions. Restorative circles proactively build community and allow students to develop and practice social skills, but they are also used to respond to a conflict, share perspectives on the issue, and listen to each other. You can find one helpful resource for incorporating restorative practices in the article *Restorative practices: Approaches at the intersection of school discipline and school mental health* by Leora Wolf-Prusan, EdD, Meagan O’Malley, PhD, and Nancy Hurley, WestEd. Find a copy here: [https://dm0gz550769cd.cloudfront.net/shape/5d/5d7541890f4ed14b77d94193032dc8e.pdf](https://dm0gz550769cd.cloudfront.net/shape/5d/5d7541890f4ed14b77d94193032dc8e.pdf).

The Schott Foundation also has a toolkit on restorative practices that you can access here: [https://schottfoundation.org/restorative-practices/](https://schottfoundation.org/restorative-practices/).

Another critical area for addressing mental health at a schoolwide level is understanding the current mental health literacy of the adults and students. Mental health literacy entails not only one’s knowledge of mental health but also beliefs surrounding pertinent issues. For example, do students and adults view mental health through a strengths-based approach or through a deficit lens? Even in some faith communities, mental health challenges have historically been viewed as a spiritual or moral failing. Mental health literacy also encompasses how to maintain positive mental health and understanding common mental health challenges, along with treatment. Educating students and adults in these areas decreases the stigma often associated with these difficulties. These activities should be ongoing throughout the year and reassessed at least every year to look for areas where additional resources may be needed and areas in which the school has grown.

The *Mental Health Literacy* website offers a variety of free resources for educators. The *National Alliance on Mental Health* offers free presentations for schools and communities geared toward middle and high school students on the warning signs of common mental health challenges.

Finally, an exciting new curriculum to focus on mental health through a Christian lens is available this month from Concordia Publishing House! *Resilient minds: Christ-centered mental health curriculum* [https://teachthefaith.cph.org/resilient-minds](https://teachthefaith.cph.org/resilient-minds) is available for middle school, with a high-school level coming in 2025. This curriculum offers a strengths-based approach to mental health with connections to Scripture and is meant for whole class instruction. Visit the website for more information and to download free samples of these lessons.
Broadening the lens from only students, the mental health and well-being of faculty, staff, and all adults are also imperative. Stress, burnout, and high turnover among adults have a negative impact on students’ well-being and learning. Within the LCMS schools, there may be different statistics and underlying reasons for decreasing teacher well-being, but adults in our schools who are stressed have more negative interactions with students. This includes responding in a negative way to students’ mistakes and greater uses of sarcasm, among others (National Center for School Mental Health, 2023a), and the trickle-down effect has a deleterious effect on students’ mental health, as well as our own.

There may be eye-rolls at suggestions for improving staff mental health, such as dress down days or food in the faculty lounge, but that does not mean that efforts should not be made in this area. If teachers and staff are struggling, consider their input on what would be helpful, and look at resources for self-care, stress management, burnout, and compassion fatigue. All of these are schoolwide strategies to assess and educate both adults and students on mental health. Having these components in place does not eliminate the need for additional supports for individual students, but they

**Adults in our schools who are stressed have more negative interactions with students. This includes responding in a negative way to students’ mistakes and greater uses of sarcasm.**

**TeacherWise** is a free research-supported resource that addresses physical and occupational health, intellectual health, and social and emotional health. After signing up for an account, many free modules and resources are available there as well.

If teachers and staff are struggling, consider their input on what would be helpful, and look at resources for self-care, stress management, burnout, and compassion fatigue.

Shaping the Future  ■  May 2024
provide a starting point for everyone in the school community. As you begin incorporating some of these strategies, you may know of students already receiving additional supports, and those should not be stopped if they are beneficial. However, these proactive school-wide approaches will help support students in an ongoing way while others receive additional support as needed.

Much like there may be a schoolwide structure for academic support using a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS or RTI structure), incorporate mental health and any mental health providers into this structure. When schools have a social worker or counselor, they often work in silos without being at the table when student needs and concerns are discussed regarding academics and behavior. There is a strong connection between mental health, social emotional skills, and academic performance; therefore, making sure additional personnel are part of the team and conversations about student performance and progress is critical to an integrated approach. Ensure that any releases are in place to discuss students when people from outside the school are involved in these team discussions.

There is a strong connection between mental health, social emotional skills, and academic performance; therefore, make sure additional personnel are part of the team.

It may be helpful to start by thinking through these questions for your setting:

1. How does our school currently support students academically, behaviorally, and emotionally? Are our responses to these needs timely? Effective? Efficient?
2. How could we work more effectively if we had one team to address academic, behavior, and emotional needs of our students? Who would be needed for this team?
3. What is working well currently and what are the barriers to providing an integrated approach?

You may have insufficient personnel to do this perfectly but consider people and resources you do have and could draw from to create a team. There may be people on staff or in the congregation who would be interested in furthering their education to be able to provide counseling for the school and help meet additional student needs. Check out degree opportunities from Concordia Irvine’s Townsend Institute, which is open to professionals nationally and also Concordia’s Master of Arts Degree options in counseling,
When you have your team assembled, ensure they have time to meet regularly! Silos often happen when this time is not defined and objectives for meetings are not clear. Consider what data the team has, and what additional data would be needed to cover academics, behavior, and emotions. Often, there is plenty of academic data, but this is not viewed along with behavioral and emotional data to look at the needs and progress of the whole child. Incorporate information such as attendance, discipline data, any additional screenings the school may use, and any information accessible on outside counseling or additional services the child may receive. Look at information from Mental Health America for resources on mental health screening in schools. School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation System (SHAPE) is another helpful resource. It provides a library of free and low-cost screening and assessment measures.

One last source to include is community data. What is happening in your immediate area? Consider information such as poverty, substance abuse, and violence. While you often do not know what is happening in specific homes, keeping an eye on these trends in the local area is helpful to know what students may be exposed to outside of school.

**Jesus told us in John 16:33 that we will have tribulation in this world, but our faith in Him is our source of strength.**

In addition to the new Resilient Minds curriculum from Concordia Publishing House, the LookUp Indiana website has many faith-based resources on mental health and resources for those working with youth. Resources on the site are not just for those in Indiana!

Finally, RemedyLIVE has national resources and offers a 24/7 free chat center available to anyone needing to speak to a professional anonymously by texting 494949. Find more resources from RemedyLIVE by visiting their website.

There are excellent secular resources on mental health, but in our Lutheran school communities, we have the privilege of integrating our faith into our work. Jesus told us in John 16:33 that we will have tribulation in this world, but our faith in Him is our source of strength, and this is the ultimate message to share with students!
What are the noticeable trends in mental health among your students, staff, and families?

How could your school community move toward an integrated approach to support academic, behavior, and emotional needs of students?

What impact could this integrated approach have on our students, families, and staff?

**References**


National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH, 2023a). School mental health quality guide: Mental health promotion services and supports (Tier 1). NCSMH, University of Maryland School of Medicine.


---

**Kara Bratton** serves as an Assistant Professor of Education at Concordia University Irvine in the EdD Leadership program.

Kara’s background is in special education, both as a teacher and special education administrator.

---

**Are you familiar with WOW? It’s a weekly pep talk on LEAconnects. Check it out.**