It is estimated that 10 to 20 percent of children in the United States at any time have significant emotional or behavioral disturbances. It is further estimated that only one in five children receive services to address these concerns. Yet research shows that timely access to quality mental health services can reduce emotional and behavioral problems and enhance children's well-being and success.

Schools often function as the "de facto mental health system" for children (Calfee, 2004). In a 1995 study, Burns and colleagues found that 70 percent of children with a mental health diagnosis received services through the school (compared to 40% served in community mental health,16% served in child welfare, and 11% served in primary care). For almost half of these children, schools were the sole service provider.

School-based mental health, which broadly includes mental health services offered in a school setting, is an important strategy to meet the needs of children and their families. This brief provides a general overview of school-based mental health and its benefits for students.

School-based mental health services are generally more accessible and less stigmatizing than services offered in other settings

Offering services in a school setting addresses several barriers that may prevent children from receiving mental health support. Schools are accessible, reducing challenges related to transportation and inconvenient service times or locations that some families face when scheduling services from other agencies. Schools can also be a non-threatening and comfortable environment, reducing the stigma families may feel when seeking treatment from clinic-based services. One study compared students randomly assigned to different treatments, finding that almost all students referred to school-based counseling (96%) began services, compared to 13 percent offered community-based treatment (Catron, Harris & Weiss, 1998).

A wide variety of services can be offered in schools, ranging from prevention and early identification to intensive supports

Because they are a natural environment for students, schools provide a unique opportunity to observe students, screen for emotional and behavioral problems, and complete diagnostic assessments. This role may be especially helpful in reaching students with disorders that are more difficult to observe, such as depression and anxiety (Weist et al., 1999). Schools also provide opportunities for prevention, such as classroom—or school-level programs designed to promote social and emotional competence.

Students who need mental health programming can be offered a variety of services/supports, including:
- Therapy—offered to individual students, groups of students, or families
- Skills training—offered to individuals or groups
- Consultation—offered to families or school staff to help them better understand and support children
- Case management—offered to students and families who require services from multiple providers

For students requiring more intensive support, some schools offer day treatment, an integrated approach combining education, counseling, and family services. Some schools also have separate classrooms for students with emotional/behavioral disorders.

School-based mental health programs can effectively address students' social and emotional concerns

Reddy and colleagues (2009) reviewed 28 studies that assessed the effectiveness of school-based prevention and intervention programs for children and adolescents with emotional disturbances. They concluded that "prevention and intervention programs implemented in the schools are generally effective in alleviating the early onset of emotional and behavioral symptoms and reducing persistent symptoms found among children and adolescents with [emotional disturbance]" (p. 91). The most common outcome in these studies was prevention or reduction of externalizing problems (such

as aggression or hyperactivity). Some studies also reported increased engagement in school and reduced internalizing behaviors (such as anxiety or depression).

Outcomes are generally comparable to those reported for community-based services

A number of studies have found no differences in outcomes for students receiving services through the schools and those served in other settings. For example, Weist and colleagues (1999) found no difference between children served in schools and those served in community mental health settings in measures such as life stress, violence exposure, family support, and emotional/behavioral disturbances. Armbruster and Lichtman (1999) had similar results, finding that school-based mental health services lead to positive treatment outcomes and are as effective as clinic-based services. While outcomes are similar, the accessibility of the school setting means that more children may experience these benefits.

Schools may also benefit from school-based mental health programs

To date, limited research has explored whether school-based mental health programs are associated with improved academic success. However, students with mental health issues are at greater risk for a variety of negative outcomes, such as greater discipline issues, lower academic success, greater truancy, and a higher risk of dropping out.

School-based mental health faces significant funding challenges

Despite the benefits of school-based mental health, it can be difficult to adequately fund services. Prevention and early intervention can be especially challenging, as many of the students reached through these services may not have a diagnosable condition, reducing opportunities for insurance reimbursement. Similarly, indirect services such as consultation with school staff are typically not eligible for reimbursement. Even for diagnosed youth with insurance, reimbursement rates may not fully cover the cost of their care. Often, grants from government or private foundations are needed to sustain services. Restrictions in the availability of funding make it difficult to sustain services over time.

Effective programs share several features

The most effective school-based mental health programs develop creative funding streams that blend public or private insurance payments with other sources of grant funding. Hunter (2004) identified several other elements of effective programs, including: (1) collaboration with community partners and school staff; (2) comprehensive array of clinical and preventive services; and (3) ongoing evaluation to refine and enhance programming.

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