Provide more mental health care to students through community providers

The challenge

It can be difficult to know how and when to engage community-based mental health providers in schools, yet doing so can enhance a district's wellbeing strategy and better address students' mental health needs.

These partnerships can lead to:

➔ More care delivered at schools.

➔ A more effective referral pipeline for care outside school.

➔ Better two-way communication between schools and community providers regarding student needs.

Purpose of this Promising Practice

This Promising Practice includes:

➔ An overview of three potential ways to provide more mental health care to students.

➔ Templates for identifying a working group and creating a project plan for working with community providers.

➔ Working group materials to determine what you hope to gain through working with community providers (e.g., what services you need, an estimate of how many students need them, site requirements, and mode of delivery).

➔ A sample checklist of factors to consider in identifying community partners.

After completing these exercises, **you will know what steps you can take** to begin or deepen your work with community mental health providers.

Your next step could be to make and launch an action plan for your district. Consider reviewing the Chiefs for Change Implementation Engine for resources to support execution.

Who might use this Promising Practice, and when?

This Promising Practice is designed for school and district staff responsible for ensuring sufficient mental health care is available for students (e.g., district head of student support), and can be used any time in the school year.

Three potential ways of providing more mental health care to students

Review these three potential approaches to providing more mental health care to students. Then, consider identifying a working group to help plan your district's strategy.

Many districts use multiple approaches. For example, a district that decides to staff more mental health professionals in schools may likely also need to partner with community providers to meet the most acute student needs.

Both school-employed and community providers support mental health in schools; it is not an "either/or" scenario (National Center for School Mental Health). Given the immense needs of students, and the provider shortage that exists in many parts of the country, your district may find that a variety of resources and strategies need to be deployed in parallel. Clear definition of those resources and strategies, and how they will work together, is critical to a partnership strategy.

> **Alongside the potential considerations listed below, your district can think holistically about the options that work best for you.**
>
> **The local supply of mental health professionals can affect which options are available. You may also find that certain options are more suitable for your district's youth and families than other options.**
>
> **Assembling a representative working group to identify solutions, and contacting the local department of health early in the process, can help your district determine the right way(s) to expand mental health care for students.**

	1. Partner with community providers	**2. Directly employ additional mental health professionals**	**3. Contract with community providers**
What could expanded mental health provision look like?	Community providers deliver services at no cost to the district. For example, the district reaches out to a community provider (e.g., private provider group, local health center, behavioral health company) to provide services to students. There is no exchange of funds between the district and the community provider. Instead, the community provider bills student health insurance or uses other funding sources to cover the costs (e.g., grants).	The district directly employs more staff who can provide mental health services and support. For example, the district could increase the ratio of counselors to students at each school.	The district pays community providers to deliver services. For example, the district establishes a contract with a provider or organization to provide student mental health services. The district pays for services using funds from the operating budget or other district sources.
Potential considerations — **Labor market dynamics**	This approach may provide additional capacity to serve unmet needs where district funding cannot be deployed. However, it may be challenging to recruit large numbers of providers willing to opt in to this type of arrangement, depending on district needs and other factors (e.g., the provider landscape in your community).	Depending on the labor market in your community, it may be challenging to find mental health professionals to fill all open positions. Districts without existing mental health staff may also need to dedicate time and resources to learning how to attract, retain, and manage providers.	Contracting with community providers opens a broader pool of mental health professionals, potentially easing workforce constraints.
Flexibility	Since there is no exchange of funds, this approach may allow both the district and the partner to exit the arrangement easily. This could be beneficial, but it may also present the risk of the partner departing unexpectedly, leaving a gap in capacity to serve students.	This approach can create additional consistency and familiarity for students and families, but potentially leaves less ability to flex staffing up or down in response to fluctuations in student needs.	This approach may provide additional flexibility to increase and decrease capacity while maintaining a minimum guaranteed provider presence to meet student needs, as defined by the contract.
Quality and accountability	Short of stopping the partnership, the district may have a limited set of levers to ensure ongoing accountability for high-quality services.	Successful retention and management of professionals may allow the district to set high standards and shape a positive environment.	With this approach, there may be potential to build incentives into the contract for partners that meet the district's specific access and quality goals.

Develop a working group and create a project plan for working with community providers

Who is this tool for?

This tool is designed for school and district staff responsible for expanding student access to mental health care, including by identifying community health organizations or other external partners to provide student mental health services.

Example roles include district head of student support, member of district student support team, and community partnership coordinator.

Steps for using this tool *(supporting materials follow)*:

1. Develop a working group to plan and execute the district strategy for identifying community providers to deliver school-based mental health services.

2. Adapt the example provided below to create a project plan for your district.

3. Invite working group members to participate in planning, highlighting potential roles as well as action steps and timing.

Develop a working group

Use the table below to list potential working group members who are representatives of each role and school type.

Consider examining your list with the following questions in mind:

➔ Who in my district understands which mental health services are currently provided in the district (including the type of arrangement used to provide those services) as well as the gaps?

➔ Who in my district has worked or knows how to work with the district's legal and procurement teams?

➔ Who in my district may have relationships with community organizations or other partners that could provide mental health services?

➔ Does the group identified fully represent core stakeholder groups (e.g., school-based staff, families)?

Potential position to include	Name of working group member	What are their roles and responsibilities in the working group?
District head of student support		
School counselor(s)		
Social worker(s)		
Other licensed provider(s) in the district		

Create a project plan that your district can use to track and monitor progress on contracting or partnering with mental health providers

Instructions: These steps are for **an illustrative district partnering with community mental health providers** (at no cost to the district). Consider adapting the set of steps provided into a more detailed project plan using the Chiefs for Change Implementation Engine.

> As you adapt this for your district, consider engaging relevant district services (e.g., legal, procurement) to advise on how specific rules and regulations might impact your project plan and timelines.

	Potential action step	Owner	Deadline
Develop a roadmap and strategy	☐ Gather the identified working group to determine what you hope to gain through working with community providers (e.g., what services you need, an estimate of how many students need them, site requirements, and mode of delivery).		
	☐ Reach out to your department of health to learn more about the mental health providers in your community.		
	☐ Establish criteria for evaluating potential community providers. Consider creating a checklist.		
	☐ Create a list of potential community providers.		
	☐ Do some initial research to understand the differences between potential providers, aligned to the items on the checklist.		
	☐ Prepare to share information, including context on your district and goals for the partnership, with community providers.		

Potential action step	Owner	Deadline
If you have decided to identify potential new partners, begin reaching out to them	☐ Gain approval (where needed) to begin updating or establishing agreements with potential community providers. Consider leveraging your existing partnership agreements as a template if you already work with community providers.		
	☐ Identify who in the district will lead outreach for each community provider, being mindful to preserve relationships where they exist and function well.		
	☐ Begin outreach to potential new community providers.		
	☐ Share information on your district (e.g., context, goals for the partnership) with potential community providers.		
Establish or update agreements	☐ Work with community providers to understand whether they can meet the district's needs. Use the checklist you created to guide your conversation.		
	☐ Work with district counsel to begin developing or updating memoranda of understanding with community provider(s), including clear success metrics, roles and responsibilities, and information-sharing agreements.		
	☐ Finalize agreements with selected community provider(s).		
Launch and assess partnerships	☐ Develop an operational plan with the selected provider(s).		
	☐ Schedule recurring check-ins with partner(s) to evaluate the success of the partnership and areas to improve.		

Determine what you hope to gain through working with community providers

(e.g., what services you need, an estimate of how many students need them, site requirements, and mode of delivery)

Who is this tool for?

This tool is designed to be used in a school or district working group meeting by a team that is looking for external providers to deliver mental health services.

The leader(s) of the district working group (e.g., district head of student support, department of community partnerships) can guide the team in using these materials.

Steps for using this tool *(supporting materials follow)*

1. Before the meeting, identify data to understand student mental health needs. The working group will use this data during the meeting. *(See this Promising Practice on reviewing data with community providers to learn best practices for sharing data to improve care while protecting the privacy of students.)*

2. Before the meeting, review the materials in this document, schedule the working group meeting, and invite working group members.

3. During the meeting, guide the working group members to:

   a. Understand mental health needs and discuss where the biggest gaps in support are.

   b. Set goals for working with community mental health providers.

   c. Determine the location (e.g., in schools) and format (e.g., in person) of student mental health services.

4. At the end of the meeting, identify next steps.

5. Follow up with accountable members of the working group to ensure planned actions are completed.

Identify data (quantitative and qualitative) to understand student mental health needs

Instructions: Before the working group meeting, identify information that could help the district answer the questions listed below.

> **Before sharing any data, consult with your legal team to understand and ensure you are adhering to all rules and regulations governing data confidentiality.**

Question	Sources of information
How many students have an indicated mental health need? **Are there groups of students who are disproportionately represented among those with documented needs (e.g., grade-level, classroom, student demographics)?**	Districts may not have complete information, but can estimate indicated needs through data that may already be collected, such as: • Mental health screeners. • Referrals for mental health support or services (from teachers, staff, family, self-referrals for older students). • Crisis events resulting in removal from the classroom or school building (e.g., students transported from school to crisis or emergency facilities due to threat to self and/or others). • Incidents resulting in removal from class (e.g., suspensions, expulsions) that flag indicated mental health needs. • Information from student-specific service documents such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans. • Student wellbeing surveys and pulse data. • Suicide assessments and threat assessments conducted by school staff. • Data sources provided by the state (e.g., state surveys on student health). This Chiefs for Change resource can help educators review student wellbeing factors and conduct a comprehensive analysis of the mental health services available to children in their state. • Attendance data (e.g., chronic absenteeism). In some situations, new data may also need to be collected.
Do services and supports exist to address those needs?	Districts can document the services that are already available. Consider using this template as a guide.

Question	Sources of information
How well are existing services and supports meeting students' needs?	Districts can use data from focus groups or surveys with stakeholders (e.g., staff, students, and families) on satisfaction with existing mental health services and supports.
	If new focus groups or surveys need to be launched, questions could include topics such as:
	Potential areas of need, e.g., "What are the two greatest stressors faced by students?"
	Ease of care navigation, e.g., "If you needed counseling related to stress or other concerns, where would you go for help?"
	Perceived value, e.g.,
	• "Would you recommend the available mental health services to another student?"
	• "If you have used the mental health services in the school before, how satisfied were you with the services on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most satisfied?"
	You can use this evaluation of school-based mental health services (Wilder Research) to create surveys and focus group questions. (In particular, see Appendix D: Interview instruments, starting on page 49, and Appendix E: Survey instruments, starting on page 53.)

Understand mental health needs and discuss where the biggest gaps in support are

Instructions: Review the information your district has gathered on student mental health needs and services. Then, consider using the reflection template provided to consider where the biggest gaps in support might be.

Students could show up in multiple sources of information. For example, some students may be identified by universal screeners as well as referrals for support.

1. Source of information *(example–non-exhaustive)*	2. Based on this source of information, indicate how many students may need mental health services	3. Estimate how many of the students counted in column 2 have not already been captured by previous sources of information
Mental health screeners		
Referrals for mental health support or services		
Crisis events resulting in removal from the classroom or school building		
Incidents resulting in removal from class that flag potential mental health needs		
Information from student-specific service documents such as IEPs and 504 plans		
Student wellbeing surveys and pulse data		
Suicide assessments and threat assessments conducted by school staff		
Data sources provided by the state (e.g., state surveys on student health)		
Other, please specify		
TOTAL STUDENT NEED *Add the rows*		
Student need that is already addressed *Estimate how many students are served by existing resources*	**–**	
Student need that is currently unaddressed *Estimate the unmet need by subtracting the addressed need from the total*	**=**	

Based on the data you reviewed and your knowledge of existing services, what are the biggest gaps?	Are there particular groups of students, school sites, or types of needs that the current model does not adequately serve?

Set goals for working with community mental health providers

Instructions: Before your team launches into planning, it may be helpful to set goals for working with community providers.

What does success look like?

Write down a clear, time-bound goal, focusing on what underlying needs you will address.

For example: "By the end of the school year, we will partner with at least one additional community provider, increasing the total number of students who have access to care by 25 percent."

Determine the location (e.g., in schools) and format (e.g., in person) of student mental health services

Instructions: Services can be delivered in schools and/or in the community. Providers can deliver care in person and/or via telehealth.

Select the option(s) your district plans to use.

When selecting location and format, districts may want to consider factors such as:

- Preferences and needs of students and families in the district.
- Importance of physical presence.
- Potential costs (e.g., transportation, physical space).
- Scheduling constraints (e.g., minimizing academic disruptions).
- Space constraints.
- Availability of providers in your area that represent specific demographics or have specific subspecialties.

Location and format of mental health services		What could this look like?	Select
At schools Research suggests youth are six times more likely to complete mental health treatment in schools than in community settings. (US Department of Education)	**In person**	Community partners are assigned dedicated space at each school to meet students for their appointments and deliver care. Students do not have to leave the building to get services.	☐
	Via telehealth	Students go to a private, dedicated, on-campus space for appointments with partners who may deliver care from their homes or offices. When needed, family members can also join the call wherever they are. For more details on telehealth, review the Telehealth in Schools Blueprint 2.0 (Innovate Ohio).	☐
	At a mobile clinic that travels to multiple locations	A mobile unit, equipped with private rooms, travels to different district locations throughout the school year (e.g., visiting each school once a week or every two weeks) to deliver services to students.	☐
At a community provider's office or care location		Community providers do not come to schools. Rather, students needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 services are transported (e.g., by the district, families, or a partner) to a nearby, off-campus location for appointments.	☐

Identify next steps

Task *What does your district need to do next?*	Owner *Who will be in charge of making sure this task is completed?*	Deadline *When will this task be complete?*
Communicate the partnership strategy with any key stakeholders (e.g., school or district leaders)		

Checklist for identifying community partners

Who is this tool for?

This tool is designed to be used by a school or district working group looking for external providers to deliver mental health services.

The leader(s) of the working group (e.g., district head of student support, department of community partnerships) can **develop criteria independently** or guide the team in using these materials.

Steps for using this tool *(supporting materials follow)*

1. Establish an overarching view of the types of community providers that will be helpful in furthering your district's goals.

2. Use the template provided to create a checklist for assessing potential partners against your criteria.

3. Use your checklist to assess each potential provider to better understand how they might fit with your overarching approach to engaging community providers.

Defining the types of community providers that will be helpful in furthering your district's goals

Given the immense needs of students and the provider shortage that exists in many parts of the country, districts may find that a variety of different approaches need to be deployed in parallel to best serve students' mental health needs. Establishing an overarching view of the types of community providers that will be helpful in furthering district goals is a critical first step. Your district might consider how community providers can meet needs that are not already addressed through existing district and community resources and capabilities by answering questions such as the following:

How can community partners bolster student access to services?

➔ Are there certain types of services that the district is not available to provide today (or not able to provide at levels commensurate with need) that a partner would be able to provide?

➔ Are there partners that are available at the times and locations that meet student needs (e.g., can come to the school during the school day)?

➔ How well-positioned are current services to meet the various language needs presented by English language learners in the district? Could community partners help fill any gaps related to languages offered?

➔ What are the policies around payment and costs for different community partners? Would the services be cost prohibitive for students or represent a meaningful increase in access?

What characteristics of potential partners would best support meaningful communication and collaboration?

➔ What linkages to broader community service providers currently exist in the district? Would partnering directly with a community provider enhance those linkages?

➔ What information-sharing infrastructure (e.g., secure messaging) and policies (e.g., around confidentiality, data privacy) are in place to support communications with partners?

Checklist template

Instructions: Reflect on how you answered the questions above. What types of criteria do you want to ensure you are evaluating potential partners against? Consider using or adapting the template below to list your criteria for community providers.

Provider name: _____

Checklist completed by: _____ Date: _____

Must-have criteria *High-potential community providers should meet most or all of these criteria.*

Criteria	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No evidence	Agree	Strongly agree
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Evidence:

_____

Nice-to-have criteria *Ideal community providers may also check these boxes.*

Criteria	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No evidence	Agree	Strongly agree
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Evidence:

_____

Choose one:

This organization   ☐ *does not meet*   ☐ *meets*   ☐ *exceeds*   **district needs.**

Questions community providers may have about working with the district

Districts can use this template to prepare for questions community providers may ask about working with the district. Please adapt the example questions for your context. Note that this resource focuses on questions community providers may ask in preliminary conversations; it does not include the broader set of operational questions they will likely have around issues such as allocation of space for providers, timing of services delivered, required district training that community providers would need to receive, etc.

Before sharing any data with community providers, ensure you have consulted with your legal team to understand all rules and regulations governing data confidentiality.

Topic	Example questions
Facts about the district	• How many students does the district serve? • How many schools are there in the district?
Understanding the student population in the district	• What is the racial and ethnic composition of the student population? • What is the percentage of various subgroups (e.g., students in foster care, students experiencing homelessness, languages spoken, eligibility for free/reduced-price lunch) in the district?

Services needed in the district	• Does the district have existing partnerships with any community providers?
	
	• Are there school-based health centers in the district? If so,
	
	    • Do they provide mental health services?
	    • How many students do they serve annually?
	    • How are they funded and structured?
	
	• Where are they located?
	
	• Where does the district and school-site leadership perceive there to be gaps in mental health services and support?
	
	• What mental health screening services can students currently access at school sites?

Topic	Example questions
Services needed in the district *(continued)*	• What mental health treatment services can students currently access at school sites?
	• What services is the district looking to provide to students? For how many students at how many schools?
	• What proportion of students have IEPs or 504 plans? How many of those students have Educationally Related Mental Health Services (ERMHS) in their plans?
	• How are ERMHS provided for students with IEPs and 504 plans? Who delivers the services?
	• Does the district use a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support framework?

	• What are the Tier 1 services?
	   • What are the Tier 2 services?
	   • What are the Tier 3 services?

Source: Adapted from School Mental Health 101 (National Center for Youth Law)