Issue Date: January 8, 2024

The Vermont School Mental Health Systems Toolkit

Purpose Statement

Educating students to be healthy, strong, critical thinkers is most successful when we address students' mental health and social-emotional needs. Healthier students feel connected to their community and are more likely to succeed. Building an effective, comprehensive school mental health system improves student and school outcomes and academic success, reduces exclusionary discipline, improves school climate and safety, and enhances student social and emotional behavioral functioning. (Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems Guidance From the Field, 2019)

The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE), in partnership with the Vermont Department of Mental Health (DMH), has created this toolkit to support Local Education Agencies, schools, community advocates, and local leaders working together to assess, identify, prioritize, and fund school-based mental health services. This toolkit is a collection of resources for school/community leadership teams to enable them to learn about a problem of practice and identify approaches for addressing it.

Using research-based guidance from the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH) with a contribution by the (former) Vermont Department of Public Health and Mental Health, Laurin Kasehagen (CDC Epidemiologist assigned to Vermont), we can be confident that the tools we create align to best practice. The Core Features of a Comprehensive School Mental Health System, p. 21 of Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems Guidance From the Field 2019, provides a structure for our toolkit, consistency of messaging, and visuals to link resources to the comprehensive system approach.

On page 26 of the The VTmtss Field Guide, Principle 4 states that a system supports all students by providing each student with the highest quality classroom instruction – instruction informed by research, supported by a standards-based curriculum, and provided by highly qualified educators. Excellent, relevant research on teaching and learning shows compelling findings that high-quality instruction can reduce the number of students who experience academic, behavioral, or mental health challenges through intentional, proactive prevention approaches.

Contact: Tracy Watterson, Student Support Services,
tracy.watterson@vermont.gov

How to Use This Document

Although the Vermont School Mental Health Systems Toolkit is designed with multiple entry points to support students to be healthy, strong, critical thinkers, the AOE and DMH recommend school systems engage in collecting and analyzing their data with the families, communities, and local leaders. A few benefits of such collaborative efforts are collective expertise is available to address students' mental health and social needs, identify and prioritize a problem of practice, and data-inform agreed upon equitable and sustainability goals.

Each school system determines their point of entry based on their identified needs. For example, a school system may identify the need for an appropriate universal screener for social and emotional learning (SEL) and social-emotional behavior (SEB), while a neighboring school system may be working to understand why their efforts have not had their intended impact. The AOE VTmtss Team is available to support school systems to identify their point of entry.

The Eight Core Competencies of a Comprehensive School Mental Health System

With permission from the [Center for National Mental Health](#) (NCSMH), the AOE and DMH is **using** the eight core competencies of a comprehensive school mental health system to organize its resources in this toolkit. For each core competences related VTmtss Framework component, VTmtss Framework tools, AOE and DMH guidelines and resources, and national social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health resources are provided.

1. Well-Trained Educators and Specialized Instructional Support Personnel - A full complement of school and district professionals, including specialized instructional support personnel, who are well-trained to support the mental health needs of students in the school setting.

Related VTmtss Framework Component: Expertise

VTmtss Framework Tools:

- [Specialized Service Providers: Making Connections with VTmtss](#)

  This tool connects the best practices of specialized service providers to related component characteristics within the VTmtss Framework to help leaders identify areas of their system in need of improvement or expansion.

- [VTmtss Field Guide](#) - Expertise pp. 53-58.

  When we have a job that needs to be done well, we usually seek a person with expertise – *deep knowledge or skill about the specific field*. We know that experts are often good problem solvers, collaborators, innovators, life-long learners, and

agents of change. In Vermont, the importance of expertise in teaching and leadership roles is heavily emphasized and detailed in professional teaching and leadership standards, educator quality policies, and various professional evaluation systems.

AOE and DMH Guidelines and Resources:

- [Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle](#) - Commendation #5, p. 45.

  Based on much previous work and analysis in the state's supervisory unions and supervisory districts (SU/SDs), the Agency of Education came to believe that students who struggle both with and without IEPs could be better served. This effort was commissioned by the legislature (2016) to both help specific SU/SDs and provide a road map for the state to more effectively and cost effectively serve students who struggle. The ultimate goal goes well beyond just issuing this report but rather to be a catalyst for a sustained effort to raise achievement, expand services, and manage costs.

National Resources:

- [Interconnected Systems Framework Fact Sheet](#)

  The Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF) is an implementation framework developed by national leaders in the fields of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and School Mental Health to advance a more effective and efficient system of social emotional and behavioral health in schools. This tiered approach is embedded in the VTmtss Framework.

- [Miniseries on Supporting Students' Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Academic Well-Being and Success](#)

  This miniseries is designed to enhance state and district implementation of the [Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates](#) to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn in environments that are safe, inclusive, supportive, and fair.

2. Family-School-Community Collaboration and Teaming - Collaboration and teaming among students, families, schools, community partners, policymakers, funders, and providers to address the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students as well as the predictable problems of practice in crossing systems and roles.

Related VTmtss Framework Component: Effective Collaboration

VTmtss Framework Tools:

- [VTmtss Field Guide](#) - Effective Collaboration, pp. 15-22.

The promise of the VTmtss Framework depends on people – knowledgeable professionals, staff, families, students and community members – who bring the power of their collective expertise to bear on solving problems. Through a systemic and comprehensive approach, diverse stakeholders collaborate purposefully and effectively to ensure equity and to improve academic, behavioral and social-emotional outcomes for all students.

AOE and DMH Guidelines and Resources:

- [Family Engagement Equity and Access](#) - Core Principle 6, p. 16.

  This tool includes an assessment of current practices and highlights strategies to support educators with differentiating their services and supports based on the unique needs of each child and family. The term family is inclusive of all individuals responsible for the care and education of a child. Students may live or be cared for by parents, grandparents, foster parents, siblings, kin, or have other non-traditional family structures.

- [Vermont Family Engagement Toolkit and Self-Assessment](#) - Considerations for Family Engagement, Circumstances That Challenge Family Engagement pp. 32-35, and Working with Diverse Families pp. 36-40.

  This tool was designed to be an easy-to use, practical guide for educators seeking to develop and maintain growth of school, district, Supervisory Union (SU), or Supervisory District (SD) family engagement work, including for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The Toolkit provides researched-based information, proven strategies, a self-assessment to reflect on your own practice, and links to additional tools that can be customized to SU, district and school needs.

National Resources:

- [**Resources for Families Coping with Mental and Substance Use Disorders**](#)

  Family members may be more likely to notice when their loved ones are experiencing changes in mood or behavior. Being able to offer support, family members can connect those in need with treatment, resources, and services to begin and stay on their recovery journey.

3. Needs Assessment and Resource Mapping - A thorough and continuous needs assessment of school and student needs and strengths, coupled with resource mapping of school and community assets, to inform decision-making about needed supports and services.

Related VTmtss Framework Component: Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System

VTmtss Framework Tools:

- [VTmtss Field Guide](#) - Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System, pp. 38-52.
  A comprehensive assessment system contains within it all of the information needed for making decisions that enhance, ensure and improve quality, equity and opportunity. A balanced assessment system contains many types of information about students and about the system so that users can answer and explore a wide range of questions and can gain fresh perspectives on how to improve outcomes for all students.

- [Local Comprehensive Assessment Systems: Making Connections with VTmtss](#)

  This tool connects the best practices of a local comprehensive assessment system to related component characteristics within the VTmtss Framework to help leaders identify areas of their system in need of improvement or expansion.

- [VTmtss System Screener](#)

  The VTmtss System Screener provides school systems with a high-level analysis of their systemic strengths and areas of growth. It is framed within the five VTmtss Framework component characteristics and is a foundational part of engaging with the VTmtss suite of tools.

- [VTmtss Driver Diagram](#)

  This tool outlines a theory of improvement related to a problem of practice using the five components of the VTmtss Framework as primary drivers. It provides questions to consider prompting collective thinking around the best practice indicators of each component, helps to identify system-level root causes, change ideas, and measures used to develop a system level theory of improvement.

AOE and DMH Guidelines and Resources:

- [AOE Comprehensive Needs Assessment Toolkit](#)

  The comprehensive needs assessment process serves as a first step in continuous improvement planning. It is a process of analyzing data about a school or school system to learn what has occurred, is occurring, and needs to occur to improve student outcomes. The comprehensive needs assessment process leads to the identification of specific and measurable goals for improvement and high-leverage change ideas to achieve them.

- [Local Wellness Policy Development and Implementation: A Focus on Assets Mapping](#)

  This Asset Mapping template was developed as part of a set of resources to support Supervisory Unions/Districts (SU/SDs) and Independent Schools in local wellness policy (LWP) development and implementation activities This tool

supports goal setting and action planning processes as outlined in the updated Vermont Model [Local Wellness Policy Guide](#) and should be completed by local wellness policy teams and/or wellness community advisory councils.

National Resources:

- [Interconnected Systems Framework Initiative Inventory](#)

  Purpose of this tool is to provide an overall picture of existing social emotional behavioral related initiatives or programs available to the larger community, and determine (a) the effectiveness, relevance, and fidelity for each, (b) funding and resource allocation, and (c) areas of redundancy.

- [Federation for Community Schools: Community Asset Mapping](#)

  This is an overview of the types of information you may want to collect as part of a data driven decision making practice to better understand the current resources that may be available in a community to help address student and family needs.
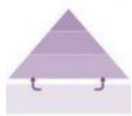
4. Multi-tiered System of Support - A full array of tiered, evidence-based processes, policies, and practices (called a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) that promotes mental health and reduces the prevalence and severity of mental illness.

Related VTmtss Framework Components: Systemic and Comprehensive Support, and Effective Collaboration

VTmtss Framework Tools:

- [SEL/MH: Making Connections with VTmtss](#)

  This tool connects the best practices of a social emotional behavior and learning, and mental health and wellbeing related component characteristics within the VTmtss Framework to help leaders identify areas of their system in need of improvement or expansion.

AOE and DMH Guidelines and Resources:

- [VTmtss Field Guide](#) - Systemic and Comprehensive Support pp. 7-14.

  Systems, especially educational ones, involve buildings, programs, materials and – most importantly – people. Various elements of the system, such as institutional history, past practice, curriculum, facilities, and standards, need to be examined for their contributions to the current culture, and

  Effective Collaboration pp. 15-22.

  When school and district leaders believe strongly that students, parents, and communities have an inherent right to be involved in important decisions and they value the expertise and resources these stakeholders bring to the goal of

improving equity and outcomes for students, their actions inspire a strong systemic commitment to effective collaboration.

National Resources:

- [Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being in Schools: An Action Guide for School and District Leader](#)
  This action guide provides K–12 schools, districts, and administrators with strategies and approaches to promote mental health and well-being in schools based on the most current research evidence, lived experience of students and school staff, and subject matter expert opinions.

5. Social Emotional Behavioral Screening - Use of screening and referral as a strategy for early identification, intervention, and treatment. (The NSCH framework used the term Mental Health Screening. In applying this framework in Vermont, we are focusing on Social, Emotional, and Behavioral screening.)

Related VTmtss Framework Component: Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System

VTmtss Framework Tools:

- [VTmtss Field Guide](#) - Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System, pp. 38-52.

  A comprehensive assessment system contains within it all of the information needed for making decisions that enhance, ensure and improve quality, equity and opportunity. A balanced assessment system contains many types of information about students and about the system so that users can answer and explore a wide range of questions and can gain fresh perspectives on how to improve outcomes for all students.

AOE and DMH Guidelines and Resources:

- [Universal Screening for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Needs and Strengths in Vermont Schools](#)

  These guidelines are designed to support the work of LEA leadership (Supervisory Union, School District, and Independent Schools) in the universal screening of students for social, emotional, and behavioral needs and strengths. Just as with academic needs, addressing social, emotional, behavioral, mental health, and wellness needs in school is a core component of a multi-tiered system of support and needs to be specifically addressed in continuous improvement plans at the school and LEA level.

National Resources:

- [Best Practices in Universal Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Screening: An Implementation Guide](#)

  The purpose of this guide is to provide leadership teams with information based on the current state of research, policy, and legal and ethical considerations related to social-emotional screening.

6. Evidence-Based and Emerging Best Practices - Use of evidence-based and emerging best practices to ensure quality in the services and supports provided to students.

Related VTmtss Framework Component: High-quality Instruction and Intervention

VTmtss Framework Tools:

- [Coordinated Curriculum: Making Connections with VTmtss](#)

  This tool connects the best practices of a coordinated curriculum to related component characteristics within the VTmtss Framework to help leaders identify areas of their system in need of improvement or expansion.

AOE and DMH Guidelines and Resources:

- [VTmtss Field Guide](#) - High-quality Instruction and Intervention pp. 23-34.

  The VTmtss Framework is designed to ensure that all students experience high-quality teaching and related supports so that every learner can achieve excellent outcomes. Instruction and intervention can only be effective when there is a continuous improvement process for developing and sustaining a comprehensive system that cultivates expertise, promotes collaboration, and uses high-quality assessment data effectively to make good decisions.

National Resources:

- [Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being in Schools: An Action Guide for School and District Leaders](#)

  This action guide was designed for school administrators in kindergarten through 12th grade schools (K-12), including principals and leaders of school-based student support teams, to identify evidence-based strategies, approaches, and practices that can positively influence students' mental health.

- [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#)

  The Prevention Services Clearinghouse, developed in accordance with the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) as codified in Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, rates programs and services as *well-supported*, *supported*, *promising*, or *does not currently meet criteria*.

7. Data - Use of data to monitor student needs and progress, assess the quality of implementation, and evaluate the effectiveness of supports and services.

Related VTmtss Framework Component: Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System

VTmtss Framework Tools:

- [Local Comprehensive Assessment System: Making Connections with VTmtss](#)

  This tool connects the best practices of a local comprehensive assessment system to related component characteristics within the VTmtss Framework to help leaders identify areas of their system in need of improvement or expansion.

AOE and DMH Guidelines and Resources:

- [VTmtss Field Guide](#) – Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System, pp. 38-52.

  A comprehensive assessment system contains within it all of the information needed for making decisions that enhance, ensure and improve quality, equity and opportunity. A balanced assessment system contains many types of information about students and about the system so that users can answer and explore a wide range of questions and can gain fresh perspectives on how to improve outcomes for all students.

National Resources:

- [School Health Index (SHI)](#)

  An online self-evaluation and planning tool for schools. The SHI is built on CDC's research-based guidelines for school health programs that identify the policies and practices most likely to be effective in reducing youth health risk behaviors.

- [Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool (HECAT)](#)

  An assessment tool developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in partnership with heath education experts from state and local education agencies, schools, colleges and universities, and national organizations.

8. Funding - Diverse and leveraged funding and continuous monitoring of new funding opportunities from federal/national, state, and local sources to support a sustainable comprehensive school mental health system.

Related VTmtss Framework Component: Systemic and Comprehensive Approach

VTmtss Framework Tools:

- [VTmtss Field Guide](#) - Principle 10

  These principles (p. 6) are interrelated and most effective when integrated within a coherent plan for continuous improvement that recognizes how recursive assessment, reflection and adaptation improve instruction and increase student achievement. Schools and districts should think through the implications for funding.

AOE and DMH Guidelines and Resources:

- [Options for Funding Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health Support in Schools/Districts](#)

  This resource is intended is to provide a high-level overview of the different federal, state and local funding options that can be considered when a need for an activity, support, or service is identified to address SEL, mental health, and wellness in a school or district.

National Resources:

- [Understanding School Medicaid (CCSSO)](#)

  This primer explores what Medicaid is, what it covers - in and out of school, - and new opportunities for expanding school Medicaid programs statewide.