

The Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts



The Jed Foundation

Table of Contents

01 | About the Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts

01 | Purpose Statement

01 | Guiding Principles

02 | Alignment With MTSS and WSCC

02 | About The Jed Foundation

03 | Domains

05 | Strategic Planning

08 | Equitable Implementation

11 | Develop Life Skills

14 | Promote Social Connectedness and a Positive School Climate and Culture

17 | Encourage Help-Seeking Behaviors

19 | Improve Recognition and Response to Signs of Distress and Risk

22 | Ensure Student Access to Effective Mental Health Treatment

25 | Establish and Follow Crisis-Management Procedures

28 | Promote Means Safety

31 | Conclusion

32 | References

About the Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts

Purpose Statement

The Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts provides pre-K–12 school districts with a framework to support and improve student mental health, reduce risk for suicide, and promote thriving. The approach encompasses a series of recommendations grouped under broader, thematic domains, which districts can undertake to ensure a holistic approach to promoting student mental health and reducing risks for suicide.

Guiding Principles

- Mental health promotion and substance misuse prevention support thriving school communities for youth and enhance educational outcomes, health outcomes, social connections, and long-term life outcomes. They also reduce the risk of risk of suicide (The Jed Foundation, 2020).
- The promotion of student mental health and well-being must be a shared and primary value for the entire school community, including district staff, educators, families, students, leadership, and community partners. School mental health staff and health professionals cannot accomplish this important work alone.
- The onset of some mental health challenges can begin by age 14 (Kessler et al., 2005). Given the significant amount of time young people spend at school, it can be a stable and regular place for prevention, intervention, education, and ongoing support of mental health needs. Early intervention is especially important because it can reduce the severity of an illness and interruptions in students' lives and education (Psychiatry.org, n.d.).
- Students bring diverse sociocultural identities to school. Well-documented inequities place some students in marginalized and underserved groups at increased risk for emotional distress and suicidality. To equitably and effectively promote student mental health and reduce risk, school districts must take special care to learn about and plan for the needs of those students.
- Many school districts work to support emotional health and well-being, yet efforts often are implemented in silos and without strategic planning, coordination, and collaboration. The use of strategic planning, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and evaluation can make efforts more integrated, create efficiencies, and increase effectiveness to promote long-term impact and sustainability.
- Districts cannot do this work alone. Enduring, systemic change requires partnership, technical assistance, and resources.

Alignment With MTSS and WSCC

As a framework, the Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts aligns with other frameworks, including Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC).

Like the MTSS framework, the Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts recognizes that no single intervention will be effective for all districts, schools, and students. Both frameworks underscore the importance of a multi-tiered prevention and intervention system of support to leverage district- and school-level resources to meet student mental health needs (Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports, n.d.).

The Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts also acknowledges that school districts do not operate in isolation and are vital members of their local communities. As such, the framework is also consistent with the WSCC approach (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Both frameworks ensure that program activities, recommendations, and strategic plans consider and include the connection among district, school, and community partners, knowing their influence and impact on student mental health and suicide prevention.

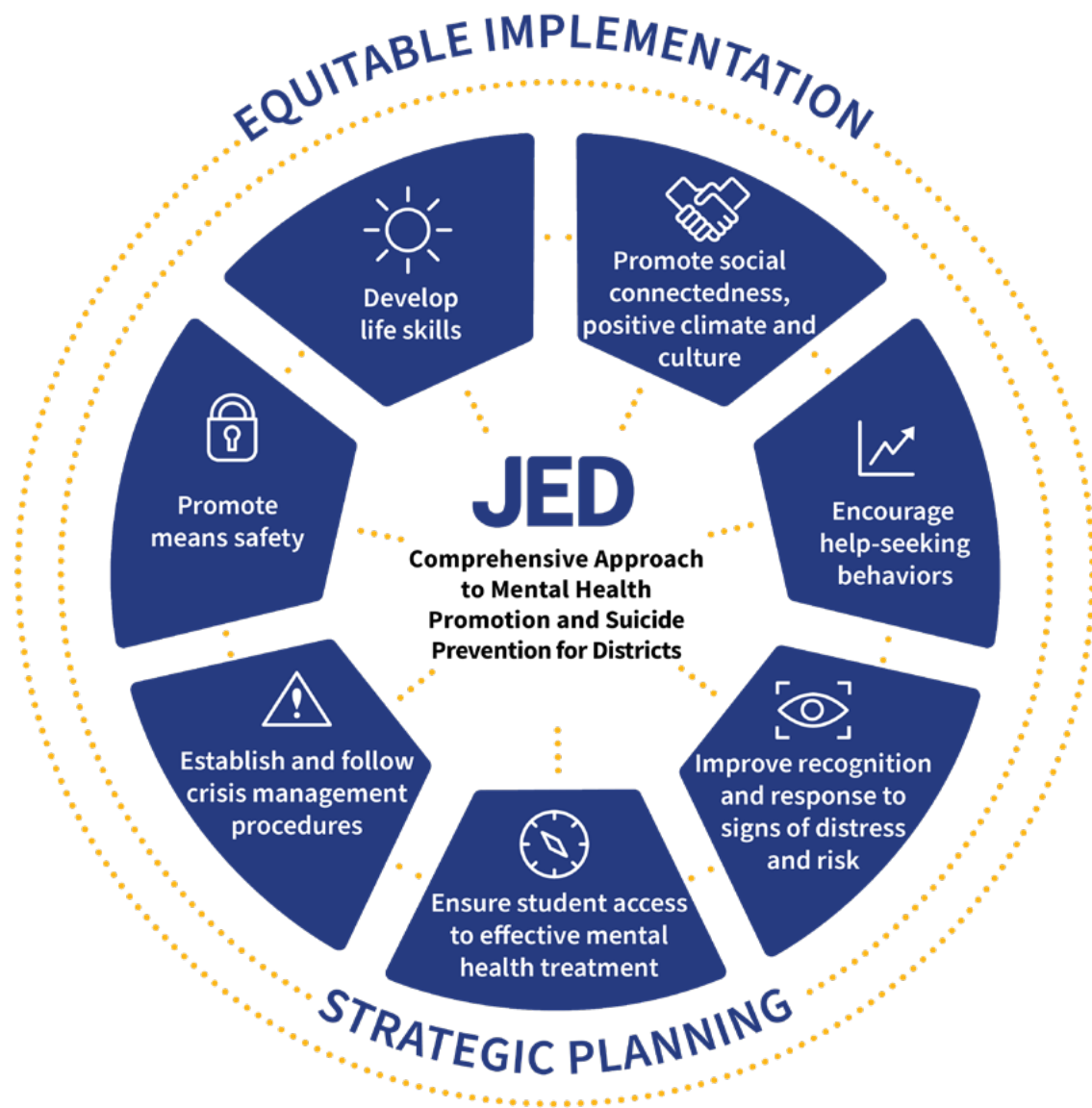
About The Jed Foundation

The Jed Foundation (JED) is a leading nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We partner with high schools, districts, and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We equip teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge to help themselves and each other. We encourage community awareness, understanding, and action to support young adult mental health.

Connect With JED!

[Email](#) | [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [YouTube](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Snapchat](#) | [Pinterest](#) | [TikTok](#)

Domains



The Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts structures evaluation and implementation efforts around two foundational domains — Strategic Planning and Equitable Implementation — and the following seven thematic core domains:

- Develop Life Skills
- Promote Social Connectedness and a Positive School Climate and Culture
- Encourage Help-Seeking Behaviors
- Improve Recognition and Response to Signs of Distress and Risk
- Ensure Student Access to Effective Mental Health Treatment
- Establish and Follow Crisis-Management Procedures
- Promote Means Safety

The domains are key to driving districtwide efforts that meet the needs of the diverse identities represented in the district’s student body. Each domain is highlighted below and contains a summary, plus answers to five key questions:



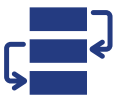
Why is this domain important?

Identifies key concepts and definitions in the domain. Outlines the importance of the domain theme based on current knowledge of the health, well-being, safety, and achievement of pre-K–12 students.



How can JED support districts in this domain?

Highlights how JED can leverage strategies, expert support, recommended practices, and data-driven guidance to facilitate strategic planning and evaluation. Focus is on long-term impact and sustainability.



What key actions can districts take?

Describes key actions districts can take to examine current systems, policies, practices, and programs related to the domain. These actions are supported by evidence or are promising practices in the domain. They represent a menu of possible actions that can be useful in supporting progress and improvement.



What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

Outlines the impact on students and staff across the district to support and improve student mental health, reduce risk for suicide, and promote thriving in pre-K–12 school communities.



What does effective implementation look like?

States what success looks like in the domain as a result of DCA.





Strategic Planning



! Why is strategic planning important?

Engaging in an active and dynamic strategic planning process is one of the most important things a district can do to ensure the success of its mental health promotion and suicide risk reduction programming. Strategic planning is distinct from planning as part of state or local improvements. The process is specific to mental health promotion, substance misuse prevention, and suicide risk reduction. The planning:

- Focuses on district policies, programs, and practices
- Outlines implementation strategies
- Specifies actions to be taken
- Establishes how the district will allocate and use resources
- Defines benchmarks for tracking progress and evaluating impact

Strategic planning empowers the district to develop a unified vision; anticipate and evaluate clinical and programming needs; examine and structure the deployment of policy, personnel, and resources to address challenges and coordinate efforts across the district; and evaluate programming effectiveness.

Strong strategic processes are collaborative, engage key partners early, and focus on building consensus around goals and actions. Strategic actions resulting from those goals should consider all students' identities, the resources in the school and community, and the strengths and needs identified in a baseline evaluation process.

The resulting **district strategic plan for comprehensive student well-being** serves as a reference for focused action rooted in and developed through collaboration and consensus building. The plan's goals are driven by baseline evaluation findings and district priorities. The goals are focused on strengthening the district's multi-tiered and multifaceted approach to mental health promotion and suicide risk reduction, and they are guided by the seven core domains.

Strategic planning empowers the district to develop a unified vision.



JED How can JED support districts in this domain?

JED can introduce and orient the district to the Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts as a framework to support mental health and reduce suicides and substance misuse among students in the district community.

JED can support districts as they:

- **Convene a steering committee** of district and school personnel to guide the course of the program, share learnings, and build capacity through each stage of the project.
- **Share assessments and synthesize results** with district and school personnel, as well as guide the district team through an intentional examination of assessment results to draw meaningful conclusions, consider various areas of need, and devise future actions.
- **Lead development** of a district strategic mental health and well-being plan informed by assessment results and customized to the district's needs and priorities.
- **Provide expert guidance and consultation** to support districts in measuring benchmarks throughout the course of the program.
- **Intentionally monitor progress** against strategic plan goals and priorities.
- **Identify opportunities and creative solutions** to overcome implementation challenges in a way that is nimble and responsive to the needs of students and schools.
- **Collaborate with and learn from other districts** on domains and other topics that support thriving and student well-being.

What key actions can districts take?

Sponsorship and prioritization of districtwide student mental health and well-being efforts by the superintendent and top-level leadership is critical to full engagement. To examine and strengthen the organizational and human resources supporting mental health, substance misuse reduction, and suicide prevention across the district, key actions include:

- **Appointing a steering committee** made up of key district and school personnel to lead the district initiative.
- **Identifying barriers** to implementing change and improving mental health at both the district and school level.
- **Determining a communication plan** and roll-out strategy at the district and school level.
- **Engaging with the school board or district governance body** on district policy review, development, and specification of policies relating to mental health, well-being, suicide prevention, and equity.
- **Regularly communicating with staff, students, and families** about programming and progress.
- **Effectively tracking results and outcomes** in terms of support for student mental health, reduction of substance misuse, and suicide prevention.
- **Participating in a learning community with other districts** to celebrate success, reinforce the work being done, identify areas of development, and provide structure for moving forward.

What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

A district will be considered successful if all schools:

- Have a comprehensive approach to supporting emotional health, mental health, and suicide prevention.
- Have a cross-functional team dedicated to addressing student mental health, substance misuse reduction, suicide prevention, and adjacent topics (e.g., bullying prevention, school climate, school safety, and equitable implementation).
- Regularly administer schoolwide surveys to faculty, students, and families to measure topics relevant to mental health and suicide prevention.

Faculty and staff will:

- Know there is a good support system at school for students experiencing mental health issues.
- Have greater confidence in supporting student mental health.
- Report that students' mental and emotional well-being is a priority.

Students will:

- Show more awareness of mental health services available through school.
- Receive better support from school when they are struggling or in distress or crisis.
- Experience a culture of caring and compassion at their school.
- Feel an enhanced sense of belonging and connectedness at school.



What does effective implementation look like?

The district has an explicit and robust mental health and well-being strategic plan that is fully integrated into the larger district strategic plan. The strategic plan is reviewed regularly by a cross-functional group of school partners, and considers the needs of diverse and underserved district populations. It includes components such as policy, programs and systems, implementation strategies and actions, funding and sustainability, well-defined goals, and methods for progress monitoring and evaluating impact.



Equitable Implementation



! Why is equitable implementation important?

The Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts emphasizes attention to equitable policies and practices so *all* students can thrive in school.

Students bring diverse sociocultural identities to school, including gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, country of origin, citizenship, ability, geographic location, community membership, and socioeconomic status. Marginalized and underserved students experience elevated risks for suicide. The elements of that risk are different for different individuals (Welch, 2018; Dodd et al., 2016).

Diversity of identity can and does foster resilient adaptations to stress, but well-documented inequities in educational and health-care outcomes place some students at increased risk for emotional distress and suicidality. The mechanisms that put some groups of adolescents at greater risk for death by suicide are complex and vary from group to group (Gopalkrishnan, 2018). They include:

- Lack of access to the right treatment and supports for emotional distress and mental health needs
- Exposure to stressors that intensify those needs
- Lack of availability of educational or community supports that mediate the impact of needs and stressors

Districts are encouraged to use evaluation and strategic planning approaches to better understand what works best for students with diverse identities in their unique school community.

Equitable implementation is not a one-and-done process. Each district is encouraged to continually search for, try, and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies aimed at improved access to supports and opportunities for success for all students.

Equitable implementation is not a one-and-done process.



JED How can JED support districts in this domain?

Because of the complexities of equitable implementation to support all student identities, JED's approach to this domain is one of responsiveness and reflectiveness.

JED can support districts as they:

- **Examine current policies and practices** through a lens of equitable implementation.
- **Establish guidelines and recommendations** to ensure the district community is following equitable practices in curriculum implementation, programming, staffing, and communication in support of student mental health.
- **Navigate conversations with partners** about the importance of equitable implementation, especially for vulnerable student groups.

What key actions can districts take?

District leaders must take intentional steps to plan for and implement strategies that improve support, emotional wellness, and opportunities for success for all students, including students whose identities or challenges may put them at heightened psychological risk.

Key actions by the district include:

- **Creating and using a framework** for understanding sociocultural differences among students, staff, and leadership.
- **Providing different ways** for students from different backgrounds to access help.
- **Designing, implementing, and refining frameworks** for MTSS, Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) for schools, and equitable discipline practices.
- **Establishing and following equitable hiring practices** to ensure students' identities are represented among staff.
- **Educating the district community** about cultural humility — the ongoing process of self-learning and discovery, self-awareness, and willingness to learn from others — and its role in educational success.
- **Explicitly standing against microaggressions** and educating the school community on racial and identity-related stress management.
- **Providing outreach and information** about mental health in multiple languages.
- **Engaging with different community partners** that students and their families might turn to for support.
- **Regularly reviewing data** to ensure that supports, interventions, and resources are being implemented equitably, including for underrepresented groups.
- **Developing expectations for training and learning experiences** for students and staff about equitable implementation and culturally responsive practices, and then evaluating them for impact.

What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

A district will be considered successful if all schools:

- Conduct surveys and focus groups with students to understand their needs for mental health and emotional well-being.
- Create programming and opportunities for engagement for underrepresented groups.
- Implement district protocols for incidents of bullying, bias or discrimination, and harassment with fidelity and monitor implementation of those protocols.
- Schedule and provide staff training on culturally responsive teaching.
- Offer resources in multiple languages.

Faculty and staff will:

- Report a school climate that encourages free and open discussion about mental health.
- Report that the support system at school for students experiencing mental health issues is available and reliable.
- Be more comfortable approaching a student who may be struggling.
- Have more conversations with students about their mental health.

Students will:

- Experience a culture of caring and compassion at their school.
- Feel more positively about their own lives.
- Experience an enhanced sense of belonging and connectedness at school.
- Experience fewer attitudinal barriers to accessing care, such as more supportive help-seeking messaging from adults and peers and less internalized shame about seeking help.
- Show more awareness of mental health services available through school.
- Receive improved support from school when they are struggling or are in crisis or distress.



What does effective implementation look like?

The district adopts an explicit framework to understand, include, and elevate sociocultural differences among students, staff, and leaders. The framework is meaningfully integrated into all facets of the school community, including mental health, instructional practices, programming, staffing, and communications.

The district actively demonstrates that the school community is a place where all students belong, are welcome, and have their needs met. Additionally, the district engages in continuous reflection and action planning to ensure fit and relevance, identify and remove barriers, and eliminate disparities in student outcomes and inequities in the student experience. This work is done with intentional focus on students' diverse identities.



Develop Life Skills



! Why is developing life skills important?

Learning fundamental life skills and coping skills protects mental health, and it's a powerful way to build resilience, decrease symptoms of anxiety and depression, and reduce substance misuse and suicide risk. Developmentally appropriate life skills education also promotes learning readiness, school engagement, and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). Teaching life skills in a culturally responsive way, and including the skills across all school activities, improves health and well-being. Robust life and coping skills that are contextualized to the diverse developmental, cultural, and mental health needs of youth constitute important buffers for the increasing level of stress and distress reported by today's students.

JED How can JED support districts in this domain?

With expert guidance and technical assistance, JED can work with school districts to identify areas of strength and opportunity in their current life skills programming. Identifying developmentally appropriate curricula for each level, a robust scope and sequence of materials and resources, and alignment with the MTSS model are prioritized. JED further supports the district in the creation of a customized plan and timeline for implementation.

JED can support districts as they:

- **Identify the critical skills students must demonstrate** to successfully transition to the next level of education, the workforce, or postsecondary education.
- **Systematically evaluate** whether the skills required for the successful transition out of secondary education, the workforce, or postsecondary education are evident in curricula or through external resources or supports.
- **Evaluate existing life skills curricula** to enhance current programs and practices, and identify gaps between recommended and current practices.
- **Develop an MTSS structure** for life skills programs across Tiers 1, 2, and 3.
- **Strategically plan to mitigate gaps** by reviewing internal and external resources, including funding opportunities.
- **Identify resources**, including evidence-based life skills curricula, as part of the custom strategic plan.

What key actions can districts take?

District leaders must promote clear opportunities for engagement in life skills curricula and associated activities within the school day for students of all ages and at all grade levels. They should also support the programs with long-term sustainability in mind. An integrated districtwide life skills program ensures all partners can benefit from the intentional and regular inclusion of developmentally appropriate fundamental life skills and social and emotional learning.

Key actions by the districts include:

- **Systematically evaluating curricula** and external resources to determine if they clearly teach the skills students need to successfully transition to the next level of education.
- **Identifying and gathering decision-makers** from every part of the school system.
- **Determining the overall approach to life skills curricula** across all grades (e.g., scope and sequence of learning standards).
- **Outlining the program's implementation and evaluation**, and setting a realistic timeline.
- **Providing teacher training** and support of the life skills curricula.
- **Determining and allocating budgets** for life skills curricula.
- **Planning communication** and consenting process for life skills assessments.
- **Ensuring content of life skills curricula complies** with legal requirements.
- **Creating accountability measures** to ensure that any adjustments or enhancements made to the content, methods, or materials are sustainable and continue to benefit students.
- **Adopting policies** that fully support teaching life skills to further student success.



What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

A district will be considered successful if all schools:

- Participate in developing a life skills curriculum to decide the best approach and evaluation plan.
- Form a districtwide life skills committee with representation from various members of the district community.
- Ensure relevant staff members from each school participate in regular training to learn and teach the life skills curriculum and receive regular coaching and consistent feedback.
- Foster collaboration between schools and the district to agree on how to implement the life skills approach.
- Lead communication and consenting process for life skills assessment.

When these measures are in place, faculty and staff report that students' life skills have increased.

Students will:

- Experience a culture of caring and compassion at their school.
- Feel more positive about their own lives.
- Be better able to identify and manage emotions.
- Experience an enhanced sense of belonging and connectedness at school.



What does effective implementation look like?

The district's life skills model supports learning readiness, school engagement, mental health, and academic achievement for all students. The curriculum includes a robust scope and sequence of developmentally appropriate lesson plans, materials, and resources. They align with the MTSS model for each grade and are designed to fit the different backgrounds and needs of students and their families. Methods for measuring impact and effectiveness are included in the training plan, along with ongoing development for teachers. The curriculum, its components, and the professional development plan should be regularly reviewed to determine fit with, relevance to, and alignment on evidence-based practices. It should also identify opportunities for, and barriers to, continuous improvement.

The district's life skills model supports learning readiness, school engagement, mental health, and academic achievement for all students.



Promote Social Connectedness and a Positive School Climate and Culture



! Why is promoting social connectedness and a positive school climate and culture important?

Loneliness and isolation, including experiences of being bullied or marginalized, are significant risk factors for mental health problems and suicidal behavior. The scientific link between social connectedness and behaviors that promote mental health is powerful and longstanding (CDC, 2023). Students who feel connected to and cared for by others and have a sense of belonging in their school community are less likely to experience emotional distress or suicidal ideation. They are also less likely to engage in substance misuse or attempt suicide.

Schools are a powerful place for children and teens to experience social connectedness. The feel, quality, and character of day-to-day life in each school building, often referred to as the climate of the school, can influence social connectedness. A positive school climate can be protective when youth are experiencing distress, helping them feel supported and less alone. Everyone in the school benefits when schools focus on improving climate, culture, and safety for the students who are most marginalized.

JED How can JED support districts in this domain?

A strong climate and culture in each school in the district fosters a deep sense of community, safety, and connectedness among both staff and students. JED can help ensure a collective and collaborative effort among everyone in the school community and district.

JED can support districts as they:

- **Identify evidence-based recommended practices** for supporting social connectedness and a positive school climate and culture.
- **Evaluate existing programs and practices** to foster social connectedness and a positive school climate and culture, support enhancement of current programs, and identify gaps between recommended practices and current district offerings.
- **Strategically plan** to reduce gaps by reviewing both internal and external resources, allocation, and additional funding opportunities
- **Identify necessary resources** to carry out the strategic plan.

What key actions can districts take?

District leaders are critical to the promotion and maintenance of a positive culture and climate across the district. They establish and implement important components, such as expectation setting, hiring practices, implementation strategies, and family and community engagement.

Key actions by the districts include:

- **Communicating that a positive school climate and culture is central** to supporting student mental health and promoting social connectedness among students.
- **Modeling desired behavior and practices** to each school and the district as a whole.
- **Ensuring that faculty and staff model and support** a positive school climate and culture.
- **Leading assessment of school climate and culture**, including behavioral and punitive measures, to identify trends and areas of improvement.
- **Promoting positive school climate and culture** as everyone's responsibility.
- **Establishing expected behavioral norms and code** for the district community (schools, students, and families), and dealing equitably with behaviors that challenge existing school and district norms.
- **Explaining and modeling for school leaders how to put plans into action**, and offering support on the training sequence and standards.
- **Leading regular evaluation of implementation strategies** with district community members, including staff, students, and families.
- **Engaging with families and the community** to ensure they understand the standards.
- **Setting standards and providing guidance and support** for staff behavior and leadership.

What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

A district will be considered successful if all schools:

- Execute district plans through programs, practices, and curricula that promote social connectedness and a positive school climate and culture.
- Implement regular evaluation of these activities through student surveys and outreach to district community members, including school staff, students, and families.
- Ensure staff receive training so they understand how to model and foster a positive school climate and culture, including connectedness, belonging, and a sense of community among students.
- Make sure staff understand how to integrate the programs, practices, and curricula that will promote social connectedness and a positive school climate and culture.
- Provide yearly trainings for staff that address barriers to social connectedness, such as bystander training and bullying prevention.
- Implement restorative practices to address student conflicts and behavioral problems.
- Encourage a range of student clubs, groups, and committees in school and connect students to community groups outside of school.

Faculty and staff will:

- Report a school climate and culture that encourages free and open discussion about mental and emotional health.
- Implement a strong support system at school for students experiencing mental health issues.
- Have more conversations with students about their mental health.
- Demonstrate greater confidence in supporting student mental health.

Students will:

- Experience a climate and culture of caring and compassion at their school.
- Feel more positively about their own lives.
- Experience an enhanced sense of belonging and connectedness at school.
- Be more likely to seek help from school faculty and staff.
- Experience fewer attitudinal barriers to accessing care, such as more supportive help-seeking messaging from adults and peers and less internalized shame about seeking help
- Receive better support from school when they are in crisis or distress.

What does effective implementation look like?

The district views a positive school climate and culture as central to the experience and success of students, staff, and leadership across the district. Districtwide behavioral norms and practices that support a positive school climate and culture are established. Strategies that foster connectedness among both staff and students and that meet the unique needs of its community are consistently implemented.

The district regularly measures school climate and culture among students and staff to identify strengths and areas of growth. Using that data, the district examines districtwide practices to ensure the equitable application to meet the needs of all students.





Encourage Help-Seeking Behaviors



! Why is encouraging help-seeking behaviors important?

In the wake of the youth mental health crisis, it is critical that students are comfortable seeking help in school and know where and how to get it. Many students may be reluctant to reach out for help or uncertain how to access it when they experience emotional distress or suicidal thoughts. Obstacles to help-seeking include lack of knowledge about available treatment options, fear of stigma or getting in trouble, and concerns about the cost, safety, and helpfulness of mental health treatment.

Students who identify with marginalized groups may be particularly hesitant to seek help. Districts can increase students' willingness to seek help by making sure they understand what resources are available, encouraging them to use those resources, building trust in the providers offering services, and creating an environment in which students feel safe and secure expressing their emotions.

JED How can JED support districts in this domain?

JED can support districts as they:

- **Identify evidence-based recommended practices** for supporting a culture of help-seeking behavior among students in schools.
- **Strategically evaluate existing district- and school-level programs and practices** that support student help-seeking behaviors, and identify gaps between current school offerings and recommended practices.
- **Strategically plan to reduce identified gaps** by reviewing both internal and external resources, including funding opportunities.
- **Identify necessary resources** to carry out the strategic plan.

What key actions can districts take?

Districts should adopt a variety of culturally responsive activities to promote mental health and suicide prevention throughout the school community. The activities should target barriers to mental health treatment and build facilitators to assist help-seekers as a foundational component of mental health promotion and suicide risk reduction.

Key actions by the district include:

- **Modeling and communicating a comprehensive approach** to support a culture of help-seeking within the district community and among school staff, students, and families.
- **Regularly offering mental health training programs** to educate and prepare school staff and encouraging students to seek support when needed.
- **Allocating funds** to carry out mental health training programs.
- **Determining a clear protocol and path for students to get support**, including teacher response protocol, referral to school mental health personnel, communication with family, and referral to outside care.

What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

A district will be considered successful if all schools:

- Promote shared responsibility among all school personnel — especially teachers — to support students who reach out for help with mental health or substance use or misuse.
- Support a culture of student help-seeking, which may include information on ways to reach out for help, staff sharing messages that normalize help-seeking behaviors, and sharing information with families.

- Support and promote the development of student clubs that promote help-seeking behavior, resource sharing, and peer-to-peer support.

Faculty and staff will:

- Report a school climate that encourages free and open discussion about mental and emotional health.
- Find a good support system at school for students experiencing mental health issues.

Students will:

- Be more likely to engage a trusted adult when they see a student in distress.
- Be more likely to seek help from school faculty or staff.
- Experience fewer attitudinal barriers to accessing care, such as more supportive help-seeking messaging from adults and peers and less internalized shame about seeking help.
- Demonstrate expanded awareness of mental health services available through school.
- Report reduction in stigma related to mental health.

What does effective implementation look like?

The district has policies and practices that ensure each school clearly and consistently communicates how students and families access mental health support, how adults connect students to support, and the types of support available. Explicit systems and multifaceted strategies for mental health promotion and clear access to services are in place, and they are regularly reviewed and refined to address barriers and meet the needs of students and families in culturally responsive ways. These three pillars create multidirectional pathways for students and families who seek help throughout the district. They also help provide clarity and instill confidence in the systems and facilitators to render appropriate assistance.



Improve Recognition and Response to Signs of Distress and Risk



! Why is improving recognition and response to signs of distress and risk important?

The majority of young people who die by suicide are struggling with untreated mental health challenges (Johns Hopkins Medicine, n.d.). Districts must ensure that programming and practices promote early recognition of those challenges through gatekeeper approaches, properly planned and implemented screenings, and referral practices. The approaches can support effective school community response to warning signs of emotional distress and risk. Gatekeeper programs and referral practices that include trusted community members outside of school are likely to be more effective for many Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), LGBTQIA+ students, and other underserved youth.

JED How can JED support districts in this domain?

JED can support districts as they identify areas of need, select programming, and develop training plans and timelines to ensure that all campus staff are trained to recognize and refer students in need.

JED can support districts as they:

- **Identify evidence-based recommended practices** for recognition and response to warning signs and risk.
- **Evaluate existing district- and school-level programs and practices** to support recognition and response to warning signs and risks that enhance current programs and practices, and identify gaps between recommended practices and current school offerings.
- **Develop MTSS structure** to respond to warning signs and risks.
- **Strategize ways to reduce identified gaps** through review of internal resources, allocations, and potential external resources, including funding opportunities.

What key actions can districts take?

Across the district, those who interact with students the most are in the best position to recognize signs of distress and suicide risk. Training school staff, faculty, administration, students, and family members in mental health support approaches prepares them to recognize and respond to signals that a student is struggling.

Key actions by the districts include:

- **Communicating that early identification of warning signs** is central to supporting student mental health and suicide reduction.
- **Determining the overall approach** to the school's role in screening for student mental health challenges.
- **Identifying, communicating, and implementing a clear protocol** for the school's role in assessing students and responding to identified mental health concerns, such as suicidal ideation, nonsuicidal self-injury, suicide attempts, risk of violence, and threat to others.
- **Ensuring a clear school and district response** to identified student risk for harm to self or others.
- **Ensuring alignment with state and federal law.**

What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

A district will be considered successful if all schools:

- Implement screening procedures and plans based on the district recommended approach, including communication and consenting processes with families and a response plan for when a student has been identified as being at risk.
- Have teams that meet regularly to discuss status updates of students at risk and ensure care is provided as needed.

- Ensure students have individualized care plans that include in-school and re-entry support (e.g., identifying needs, providing accommodations, and managing out-of-school care) and parent education.
- Have school personnel participate in training to understand and respond to student warning signs of distress and risk.
- Use allocated budget for school personnel to participate in mental health training programs to learn how to identify students who may be at risk.
- Develop and adopt a clear protocol for students to get support when they reach out for it, including teacher response, referral to mental health personnel, communication with family, and referral to outside care.

Faculty and staff will:

- Ensure that the school climate encourages free and open discussion about mental and emotional health.
- Communicate that there is an effective, easy-to-access support system at school for students experiencing mental health issues.
- Be better able to recognize the signs of distress among students.
- Be more comfortable approaching a student who may be struggling.
- Have more conversations with students about their mental health.
- Feel more comfortable referring students with mental health concerns.
- Develop greater awareness of the role they play in referring and facilitating student access to mental health supports.
- Become more confident in their ability to support student mental health.
- Be better equipped to help manage a student mental health crisis at school.

Students will:

- Be more likely to engage a trusted adult when they see a student in distress.
- Be more inclined to seek help from school faculty and staff.
- Experience fewer attitudinal barriers to accessing care, such as more supportive help-seeking messaging from adults and peers and less internalized shame about seeking help.
- Demonstrate expanded knowledge of mental health and substance-related issues.
- Display greater awareness of the mental health services available through school.
- Receive better support from school when they are struggling or in crisis or distress.

What does effective implementation look like?

The district has a comprehensive strategy for recognizing and responding to signs of distress and risk for all students. That includes use of evidenced-based tools for screening students at risk, as well as training staff, students, and families to recognize the risks and signs of distress and how and where to access help. Training also includes explicit information about how to manage and support students in distress both in school and outside of school.





Ensure Student Access to Effective Mental Health Treatment



! Why is ensuring student access to effective mental health treatment important?

School districts are well positioned to provide students with — and facilitate access to — effective supports and psychotherapeutic treatments. These interventions can help increase health and well-being; prevent and treat depression, substance misuse, and other behavioral health disorders; and reduce suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The prevalence of stress, behavioral health symptoms, and suicidal thinking in today’s youth makes it essential to offer accessible, consistent, and high-quality mental health services to students. The mental health education efforts that encourage help-seeking behaviors also serve to reduce stigma and increase the likelihood of students engaging in mental health services.

JED How can JED support districts in this domain?

JED supports districts in their efforts to evaluate existing programs and practices that promote access to student mental health care and enhance current practices. JED also helps identify gaps between recommended practices and current school offerings, including in-school, community partnerships, and telehealth mental health services.

JED can support districts as they:

- **Identify and implement evidence-based recommended practices** for providing access to mental health care for students in school or outside of school.
- **Develop an MTSS structure** for school and community mental health supports.
- **Strategize to reduce identified gaps** through review of internal resources, allocations, and potential external resources, including funding opportunities.

What key actions can districts take?

Whether treatment is available and accessible directly in school, through community partnerships, or telehealth providers, districts must ensure providers are properly credentialed, culturally competent, and assigned provider-to-student ratios that facilitate effective care.

Key actions by the districts include:

- **Communicating the importance of access to mental health services** at school and outside of school as central to student mental health and suicide prevention.
- **Creating a structure that provides student access to mental health services**, including clear and efficient pathways across services available at school and outside of school.
- **Communicating types of services available** and the process for accessing those services to all students and families.
- **Ensuring that adequate staffing** numbers and diverse, qualified mental health professionals are in place at schools to provide optimal care and coverage to students.
- **Creating a protocol** for follow-up procedures and re-entry to school once a student has completed care.
- **Reviewing current community health providers** to ensure alignment with school community needs and service to all groups, especially underrepresented student groups.
- **Creating processes** to provide clear instructions and timelines for community partners to apply to become partner mental health providers for the district.
- **Establishing opportunities** for district and community partners to collaborate on reviewing and improving practices and provision of services for students and families.
- **Ensuring documentation is accessible, up to date, and available** for schools, community providers, and caregivers.



What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

A district will be considered successful if all schools:

- Follow a clear protocol for how students will be cared for once identified as at risk.
- Educate and communicate with families about mental health care protocols and individual student needs.
- Have awareness of adequate staff-to-student ratios for qualified mental health professionals, and a plan to address staffing needs.
- Educate and reinforce the importance of mental health care by promoting mental health support services and resources on school grounds using, for example, posters, flyers, crisis numbers, and community resources.
- Advertise out-of-school mental health resources widely and frequently to ensure that students are aware of additional support services in times of distress, both during and outside of school times.
- Create and select appropriate representatives to advise on individual student care plans.
- Facilitate clear communication and collaboration with outside mental health services for student care that is not provided by the school.

Faculty and staff will:

- Ensure there is a good support system at school for students experiencing mental health issues.
- Feel more comfortable referring students with mental health concerns.
- Develop greater awareness of the role they play in referring and facilitating student access to mental health supports.

Students will:

- Experience a culture of caring and compassion at their school.
- Be more likely to engage a trusted adult when they see a student in distress.
- Be more inclined to seek help from school faculty and staff.
- Demonstrate expanded knowledge of mental health and substance-related issues.
- Display greater awareness of the mental health services available through school.
- Receive better support from school when they are in crisis or distress.

What does effective implementation look like?

The district has a comprehensive continuum of mental health services that includes a workforce of highly qualified, diverse providers both in schools and through community partnerships. Available services cover the breadth and depth of the mental health needs of all students and their families. They are accessible through a variety of pathways to meet the diverse needs of students and families. Information on availability of services and the positive impact of mental health hygiene is regularly shared with the broader school community. The district regularly monitors data to understand how students are using services and identify ways to remove barriers and make care more accessible.





Establish and Follow Crisis-Management Procedures



! Why is establishing and following crisis-management procedures important?

Districtwide processes for responding to students in crisis are critical to a comprehensive suicide prevention approach — and to saving student lives. A comprehensive crisis-management procedure should include protocols for responding to any incidents or student needs that impact safety and mental health in school. The death of a student or member of the school community, threats of violence or the experience of violence at school, natural disasters, and accidents are just a few examples of events that can impact the school community. Such events require immediate adult intervention and longer-term follow-up to mitigate ongoing risk and promote healing.

JED How can JED support districts in this domain?

JED can support districts as they identify and develop systematic processes for providing support to students who have been identified as potentially suicidal. JED can also provide recommended practices for managing threats of violence and other community incidents that impact the school community.

JED can support districts as they:

- **Identify evidence-based recommended practices and procedures** for crisis planning and response in schools.
- **Evaluate existing district- and school-level programs and policies** that support crisis planning and response in schools, enhance current programs and practices, and identify gaps between recommended practices and current school offerings.
- **Strategize ways to reduce identified gaps** through review of internal resources, allocations, and potential external resources, including funding opportunities.



What key actions can districts take?

Recommended practices in school crisis response and management call for a team approach and suggest that clear, well-planned, well-communicated, and practiced responses can mitigate the impact of a crisis when it occurs. This approach can also reduce long-term negative effects on student mental health.

Key actions by the districts include:

- **Communicating the importance of crisis planning and response** as central to supporting student mental health.
- **Developing and sharing districtwide protocols** — including postvention protocols — for responding to emergencies that threaten the safety of the district community, including staff, students, and families (e.g., responding to a student who is a threat to self or others, death of a community member, or other imminent-danger scenarios).
- **Identifying leadership and staffing models** that handle crisis response at both district and school levels (e.g., roles, organizing regular drills, and communication to families).
- **Providing training on policies and procedures** for school leadership.
- **Ensuring seamless partnership with the community and law enforcement.**
- **Maintaining legal compliance with state and federal law.**
- **Setting regular meetings for the crisis team** to refresh and review the policies.
- **Establishing channels for collaboration and communication** among the operational facets of the crisis team, such as communications, transportation, law enforcement, and counseling.
- **Creating accountability measures** to ensure recommended practices are implemented for crisis-related intervention and services. Make sure, for example, the crisis team meets at regular intervals, determines the frequency of meetings, and holds debrief and retrospective meetings following crisis interventions.



What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

A district will be considered successful if all schools:

- Follow district protocols and establish clear roles and responsibilities to prepare for — and respond to — mental health emergencies that threaten the safety of the school community.
- Ensure that a postvention protocol is in place.
- Require a crisis team to meet regularly and conduct debrief and retrospective meetings following crisis interventions.

Faculty and staff will:

- Become fluent in the emergency protocols and procedures.
- Report that students' mental and emotional well-being is a priority.
- Create a good support system at school for students experiencing mental health issues.
- Feel more comfortable referring students with mental health concerns.
- Develop greater awareness about the role they play in referring and facilitating student access to mental health supports.
- Display more confidence in their ability to support student mental health.
- Be better equipped to help manage a student mental health crisis at school.

Students will:

- Be more likely to engage a trusted adult when they see a student in distress.
- Be more inclined to seek help from school faculty and staff.
- Display greater awareness of the mental health services available through school.
- Receive better support from the school community when they are in crisis or distress.

What does effective implementation look like?

The district has a comprehensive crisis-management procedure that includes plans for responding to any incidents or student needs that impact safety and mental health in school, such as natural disasters, community violence, death of a student or staff member, or other imminent-danger scenarios; it also provides guidance on postvention support. Additionally, the district crisis-management procedure involves a multifaceted response team composed of counseling, transportation, law enforcement, school leadership, and communications partners. The district plan is regularly communicated to all school community partners. It is reinforced through monitored training intervals and is regularly reviewed and updated to align with recommended practices, as well as to ensure it meets the needs of the school community and maintains compliance with state and federal law.





Promote Means Safety



! Why is promoting means safety important?

It has been well established that the reduction of access to lethal and dangerous means is a powerful component of comprehensive suicide prevention (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023). Education of all families in the school community about means safety at home should include safe medication and firearm storage, since they're prevalent, potentially lethal means among both younger and older teens. Pills are the most common method of suicide attempt, and firearms are the most common method of suicide death for youth. When a student has been identified as being at risk for suicide, lethal means counseling for family members is a critical component of effective suicide risk reduction. The counseling includes assessing access to lethal means and working with family members to restrict the student's access until their risk is reduced or eliminated (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, n.d.).

On the school campus, annual environmental scans can promote means safety by reducing student access to potentially lethal means, such as chemicals, medications, unsecured ropes, rooftops, and other potentially dangerous scenarios. Clear and enforced policies about what students can and cannot bring to school also serve to keep potential lethal means such as firearms and medications out of the school community. Taken together, these strategies have the potential to reduce injury and save lives.



What key actions can districts take?

Means safety promotion is important for all community partners. Districts can successfully educate students, staff, and families in the school community about safe medication and firearm storage so they can take action and promote means safety at home.

Key actions by the districts include:

- **Providing leadership and guidance on operations and regular risk assessments** to ensure facility safety on school grounds that will reduce access to lethal means.
- **Setting restrictions and regulations on weapons and potential weapons** in adherence with state and federal law.
- **Gathering information on means safety** to be shared with the district community, including school staff, students, and families.
- **Ensuring that school staff are educated on the impacts of means safety** and trained on lethal means safety protocols and counseling (as appropriate).
- **Partnering with law enforcement** and ensuring strong community partnerships.
- **Ensuring crisis intervention policies include protocols** for means safety education and information sharing about how to limit access to firearms, medications, and other fatal means.

How can JED support districts in this domain?

JED can support districts as they identify areas of need and establish protocols to ensure that means safety is an important factor in maintaining safe and welcoming facilities across the district for students, staff, and community members.

JED can support districts as they:

- **Identify evidence-based recommended practices** for establishing means safety in schools and communities.
- **Evaluate existing district- and school-level programs and policies** that support means safety in schools and communities, enhance current programs and practices, and identify gaps between recommended practices and current school offerings.
- **Identify aligned resources** as part of a customized strategic plan.
- **Strategize ways to reduce identified gaps** through review of internal resources, allocations, and potential external resources, including funding opportunities.

What are the expected outcomes for schools, staff, and students?

A district will be considered successful if all schools:

- Complete regular environmental scans and respond to the results to ensure the safety of school grounds in prevention of any self-harm.
- Enforce district and state protocols for weapons regulation on school grounds.
- Regularly disseminate information to educate students and families on recommended practices for means safety in the home.
- Require that mental health personnel participate in training focused on means safety, such as lethal means counseling.
- Ensure partnership with community law enforcement for safety measures.
- Follow means safety education protocol during crisis intervention situations on school grounds.

Faculty and staff will:

- Feel more comfortable referring students with mental health concerns.
- Develop a greater awareness about the role they play in referring and facilitating student access to mental health support.
- Be better equipped to help manage a student mental health crisis at school.

Students will:

- Be more likely to engage a trusted adult when they see a student in distress.
- Be more inclined to seek help from school faculty and staff.
- Experience fewer attitudinal barriers to accessing care, such as more supportive help-seeking messaging from adults and peers and less internalized shame about seeking help.
- Demonstrate expanded knowledge of mental health and substance-related issues.
- Display greater awareness of the mental health services available through school.
- Receive better support from the school community when they are in crisis or distress.



What does effective implementation look like?

The district approaches lethal means safety and means safety education through both the school campus and students' homes. The district regularly educates families on suicide risk for pre-K–12 students and lethal means, shares information with parents about the importance of means safety in the home, and trains staff in recommended practices for lethal means counseling. Protocols for facility environmental scans are continually reviewed and monitored for compliance. Restrictions and regulations are followed for firearms and medications on campus.



Conclusion

Today’s educational landscape requires schools to provide mental health support to students so they can learn and grow. District leaders play a critical role in achieving those outcomes. Developing an integrated and comprehensive school mental health and suicide prevention approach that meets the needs of all learners is a monumental task, but the benefits are clear. Strategic mental health promotion not only improves student mental health and reduces risk for suicide, but also supports thriving pre-K–12 school communities and enhances education outcomes, health outcomes, social connections, and long-term life outcomes.

The Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for Districts provides district leaders with a blueprint to tackle this challenge. Using the evidence-based framework, districts can enhance systems of support to create first-class school mental health systems in every school district across the country.



References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wsc/index.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, August 2). School connectedness. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/school_connectedness.htm

Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports. (n.d.). Multi-level prevention system: Essential components of MTSS. American Institutes for Research. <https://mtss4success.org/essential-components/multi-level-prevention-system>

Dodd, P., Doherty, A., & Guerin, S. (2016). A systematic review of suicidality in people with intellectual disabilities. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 24, 202-213.

Durlak, J., Weissberg, R., Dymnicki, A., Taylor, R., Schellinger, K. (2011). The Impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 81(1), 405-32. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21291449/>

Gopalkrishnan, N. (2018). Cultural diversity and mental health: Considerations for policy and practice. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 6, 179.

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. (n.d.). Lethal Means Counseling. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/lethal-means-counseling/>

The Jed Foundation. (2020, July). Report of JED Campus impact. https://www.jedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/JED-Impact-Report_August-2021_Final.pdf

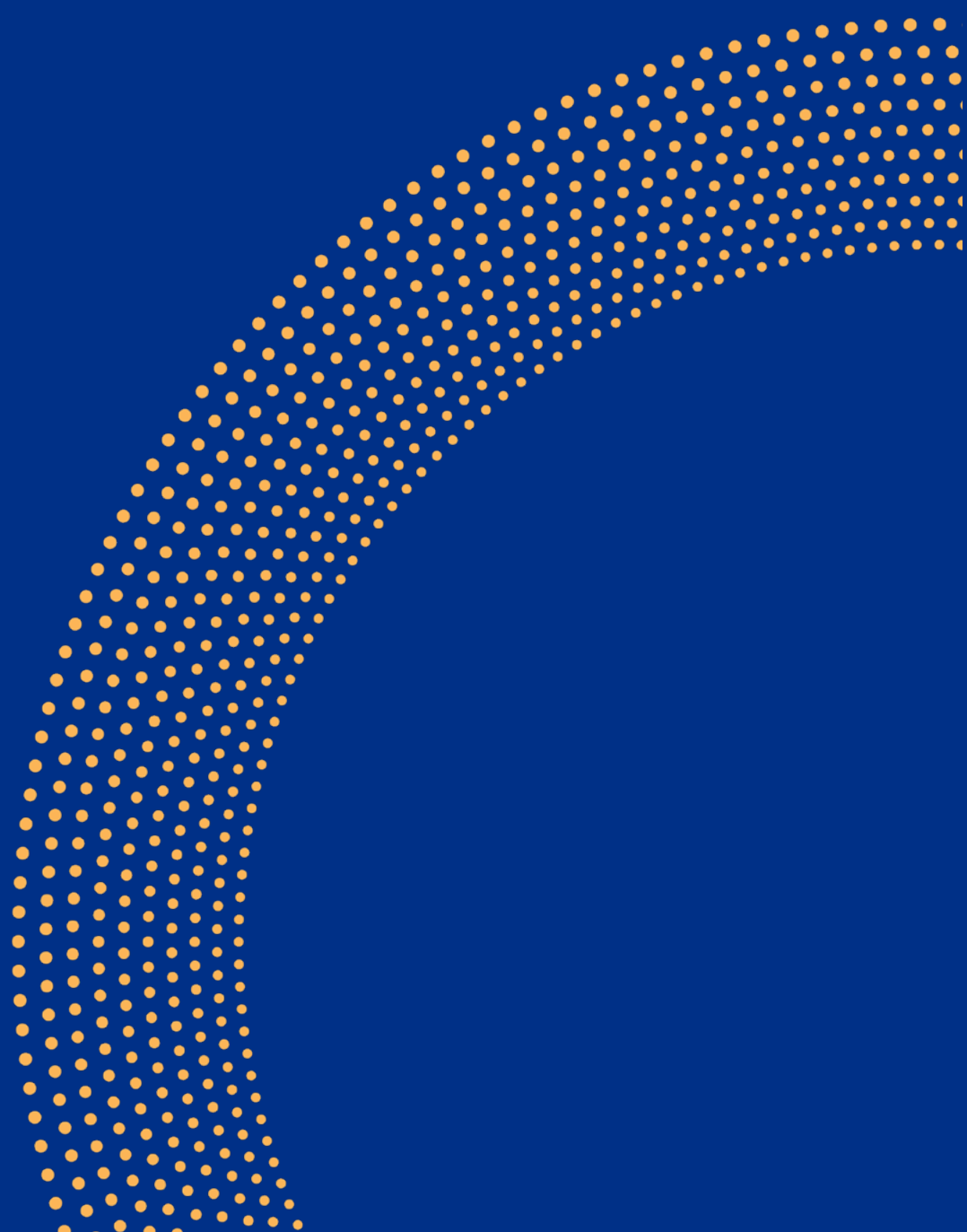
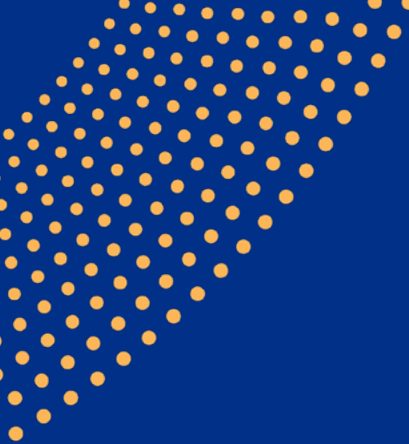
Johns Hopkins Medicine. (n.d.). Mental Health Disorder Statistics. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/mental-health-disorder-statistics>

Kessler, R., Berglund, P., Demler, O., Jin, R., Merikangas, K., Walters, E. (2005). Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 62(6), 593-602. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15939837/>

Psychiatry.org. (n.d.). Warning Signs of Mental Illness. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/warning-signs-of-mental-illness>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2023, September 29). Lethal Means Safety for Suicide Prevention. <https://www.samhsa.gov/blog/lethal-means-safety-suicide-prevention>

Welch, K. (2018). The effect of minority threat on risk management and the “new disciplinology” in schools. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 59, 12-17.



The Jed Foundation