

# SUPPORTIVE AND SAFE SCHOOLS

## WHY STUDENT SUPPORTS AND SCHOOL CLIMATE ARE IMPORTANT

Students learn most effectively when their school feels safe, inclusive, supportive, and respectful.<sup>1</sup> Creating positive school climates and providing student supports can mitigate the impact of trauma,<sup>2</sup> mental health needs,<sup>3</sup> and other non-academic factors that affect a student's ability to engage in learning.<sup>4</sup> It is instrumental in closing opportunity and achievement gaps in our system and improving student outcomes.

The creation of safe and supportive schools includes strategies such as Social Emotional Learning (SEL), tiered systems of support, partnerships with families, partnerships with community-based organizations, and providing access to mental health services, among others. Between 50-80% of students in need of mental health services do not have access,<sup>5</sup> and schools are likely the first point of access for many students that do seek services.<sup>6,7</sup>

School climate reform strategies have been shown to decrease school violence and bullying, increase academic achievement, and improve the school experience for students, staff, and families.<sup>8</sup> The implementation of universal SEL programs have also been shown to result in significant academic gains<sup>9,10</sup> as well as a robust return on investment of \$11 for every \$1 spent.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the traumas that students have undergone as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic make the need for schoolwide mental health and SEL support even more urgent,<sup>12</sup> especially among communities of color who are disproportionately experiencing the impacts of COVID-19, as well as the added traumas of racism and discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

## CREATING SUPPORTIVE AND SAFE SCHOOLS

To create positive school climates and ensure the effective identification and resourcing of student supports, many states, districts, and schools utilize a tiered model, such as multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). These models identify school-wide,



*Students at Summit Atlas Public School*

universal strategies (Tier 1), targeted strategies (Tier 2), and intensive strategies (Tier 3) to meet both the academic and non-academic needs of students. Particularly for student mental health, MTSS helps increase coordination of supports across academic and behavioral needs of students, encourages collaborative approaches to supporting students across school teams, and increases collaboration with community partners and families.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, one of the key academic components of an MTSS framework calls for the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a teaching principle that puts differentiation at the center of lesson planning as a way to benefit all children's unique learning styles and access needs.<sup>15</sup>

States and districts that have taken up efforts to implement MTSS and improve school climates have established some common factors necessary for success. These include: leadership that is strategic and collaborative; staff capacity, including training and mindset; partnering with families and community to provide supports; data collection and responsiveness to data; and culturally responsive implementation.<sup>16,17,18</sup>

In order for schools to reach success, they need resources, such as a greater flexibility in the use of funds from the Learning Assistance Program (LAP) and a widespread shift away from common practices that have historically harmed children of color, such as the use of K-2 suspensions and School Resource Officers (SROs).<sup>19</sup>

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## WHAT'S ALREADY IN PLACE IN WASHINGTON

Washington state has embarked upon some critical work to create positive school climates. The Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) spearheaded a number of reforms, most recently with the passage of House Bill 1541 that continued student discipline reform and created the Washington Integrated Student Supports Protocol (WISSP).<sup>20</sup>

The WISSP approach includes needs assessments; partnership with community and community based organizations; leadership and integration among school staff, district staff, families, and partners; and data-driven decision making. Washington has also developed Social Emotional Learning benchmarks<sup>21</sup> for district use. The state convened a workgroup on children's mental health as well, which provided recommendations on how to increase access to mental health services across our state systems, including in schools. We can enhance these and other efforts to deliver services to students and enable districts and schools to create welcoming and supportive environments for every student.

## LOOKING AHEAD

In the 2021 legislative session, we are proposing several strategies to help schools and districts support students undergoing trauma as a result of the pandemic and continue to make progress in creating safe and supportive school climates by:

- 1. Encouraging and enabling districts to create positive, supportive school climates by implementing a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework to identify and meet student needs.**
- 2. Providing reliable and consistent access to mental health services for students through either staff or partner providers in every school setting.**
- 3. Supporting educators, districts, and schools in adopting and implementing Universal Design for Learning and other inclusive practices to make learning accessible to all.**
- 4. Ensuring the Learning Assistance Program (LAP), which helps support students struggling academically, effectively meets student need by increasing flexibility in use of funds and partnership with community-based organizations.**
- 5. Transitioning from punitive measures that disproportionately affect students of color, including the use of School Resource Officers (SROs) in school buildings and suspensions for students in grades K-2, to supportive measures such as positive behavior interventions, restorative practices, and access to support staff and services.**

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Education, "Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline," <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Trauma and Learning Policy Institute, <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/trauma-and-learning/the-problem-impact/>

<sup>3</sup> University of Maryland, Center for School Mental Health Analysis and Action. "Education and Systems of Care Approaches: Solutions for Educators and School Mental Health Professionals" (2007), <http://docplayer.net/1331619-Education-and-systems-of-care-approaches-solutions-for-educators-and-school-mental-health-professionals.html>

<sup>4</sup> ChildTrends, "Making the Grade: A Progress Report and Next Steps for Integrated Student Supports" (2017), [https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-52\\_MakingGrade\\_ISS\\_ExecSum.pdf](https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-52_MakingGrade_ISS_ExecSum.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Stein, B, et al. Interventions to Improve Student Mental Health A Literature Review to Guide Evaluation of California's Mental Health Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative. Interventions to Improve Student Mental Health, RAND Corporation. (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Stein, B. 2012 (see above).

<sup>7</sup> Rossen, E. and Cowan, K. "Improving Mental Health in Schools," The Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 96, No. 4 (December 2014/January 2015), pp. 8-13. Phi Delta Kappa International.

<sup>8</sup> Thapa, A., et al. "A Review of School Climate Research," Review of Educational Research, Vol. 83, No. 3 (September 2013), pp. 357-385, American Educational Research Association.

<sup>9</sup> Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D. & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 82(1): 405–432.

<sup>10</sup> Belfield, C., et al. The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning. (2015) Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.

<sup>11</sup> Belfield, C. et al. (2015) see above.

<sup>12</sup> Lee, J. "Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19." (2020) The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30109-7/fulltext#section-7c530872-6235-4433-899c-b3f276970189](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext#section-7c530872-6235-4433-899c-b3f276970189)

<sup>13</sup> Trent, M. et al. "The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health" (2019). The American Academy of Pediatrics, <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/144/2/e20191765>

<sup>14</sup> Rossen, E. and Cowan, K. (2014/2015) see above.

<sup>15</sup> Sailor, W., et al. "Preparing Teacher Educators for Statewide Scale-Up of Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)." (2020) Teacher Education and Special Education, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0888406420938035>

<sup>16</sup> Sebring, P. et al. The Essential Supports for School Improvement (2006). Consortium on Chicago School Research, University of Chicago.

<sup>17</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. "Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework." (2015)

<sup>18</sup> Michigan Department of Education. "Michigan Department of Education (MDE) Practice Profile for Multi-Tiered System of Supports Version 4.5" (2018)

<sup>19</sup> Whitaker, A. et al. "Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students." American Civil Liberties Union Washington, <https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>

<sup>20</sup> Center for Improving Student Learning, OSPI. "Washington Integrated Student Supports Protocol," <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/support-programs/multi-tiered-system-supports-mtss/washington-integrated-student-supports-protocol-wissp>

<sup>21</sup> Washington Social Emotional Learning Benchmark Workgroup Report, <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/workgroups/selb-meetings/selbworkgroup2016report.pdf>