New York State EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
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NEW YORK STATE | Office of Mental Health

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Dear Colleagues:

With Mental Health Awareness Month rapidly approaching in May, we are writing to you to offer some guidance on supporting student mental health over the remaining months of the school year.

Many media outlets have recently highlighted the growing concern around youth mental health as the pandemic continues, with some experts calling it a 'global mental health pandemic.' Research suggests that during the pandemic, prevalence rates in the general population have quadrupled and tripled for depression and anxiety disorders, respectively. A recent national survey of parents that nearly half noticed a new or worsening mental health condition in their teenage children since the pandemic started. All of this has added to concern regarding the potential for increased suicides. Though suicide surveillance reporting lags by several months, preliminary data have not borne this out thus far. As leaders, it is our responsibility to both raise awareness and create a sense of urgency to meet the very real mental health challenges students are facing during the pandemic without creating panic.

As disruptive and challenging as the pandemic has been, it has created a unique opportunity for trained school personnel to have a more impactful conversation about student mental health with students, families, and community partners. We would like to offer schools assistance to take advantage of the moment before us.

As the pandemic wears on, schools may see students on many paths. Less vulnerable students may be able to leverage protective factors and make the transition to post-traumatic growth, though the existence of protective factors does not preclude a student's risk. More vulnerable students, however, including those with pre-existing social-emotional or behavioral challenges such as depression and anxiety, can be at greater risk. Schools, in partnership with students, their families, and community partners, have an enormously important role to play in keeping students on the path of healing.

What Can Be Done Now?

1. **Share Resources.** The attached resource list has been constructed to provide a curated list of high-quality resources targeting four separate groups: educators, school leaders, parents/families, and students.
2. **Ask students how they are doing and what they need—and listen.**
   a. *At the individual level*, having a trusted adult who can listen non-judgmentally is a well-established protective factor for suicide, substance use, and a host of other problems. A model school-based program in this area with an associated tool kit can be found here.
   b. *At the school and district level*, there are a number of possibilities, including focus groups, listening tours, and Mental Health Matters – suggestion/comment boxes.

Research suggests that it is important to recruit for broad student participation, beyond those most likely to volunteer for principal and/or superintendent created panels.

3. **Get students involved in creative solutions.**
   a. A promising example of this is work done by a group in California called [Directing Change](). Their website highlights culturally and linguistically diverse student-created short video PSAs on a host of topics, including [mental health matters]() and [suicide prevention]().

4. **Promote mental health resources for those currently in distress/crisis.**
   a. [Project Hope]() is a FEMA-funded crisis services initiative that offers support to individuals impacted by COVID. The Project Hope Emotional Support Line is available to all, including youth. It's confidential, anonymous, and free. 1-844-863-9314.
   b. Crisis Text Line (CTL) is a service that offers free anonymous 24/7 text-based crisis counselor support. 150,000 New Yorkers have used the service since 2013 and ~75% of them are under the age of 25. NYS has formed a "keyword" partnership with CTL. Those in crisis text "Got5" to 741-741 to enter the system. NYS receives data reports on usage. [A toolkit designed to help with marketing Got5 and Crisis Text Line, including a section specifically for schools, can be found here]().

5. **Contact your local system of care if students need more.** Contact your county mental health department if a student needs a mental health care referral; here is a [directory]().

6. **Plan ahead for students returning to school.** While there is great anticipation to return to a more normal school year, many students may find the return disorienting and require additional supports. Schools and providers must prioritize social and emotional well-being during transitions back to school and for as long as necessary to appropriately support student needs. Physical and emotional safety is necessary so that students' brains and bodies are ready to learn. CASEL provides an [SEL Roadmap]() which helps build relationships and partnerships between students, families and school communities to create safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments that promote all students' social-emotional development.

Despite the mental health challenges posed by the pandemic, there is hope. The enormous amount of work that many schools have put into social-emotional learning and wellness prior to the pandemic have left our communities less vulnerable. While it may not feel like it at times, please know that the herculean effort by school staff to maintain a sense of normalcy and connection for students over the last year has saved lives. We want to express our deep gratitude for everything you have done.

With ongoing strategic actions over the next several months, such as those highlighted above, schools, in partnership with communities, can strengthen students' resilience against the most detrimental mental health effects of the pandemic.

Sincerely,

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