Supporting the Mental Health of Young People:
Guide for School Staff

Our Vision

Chicago Public Schools recognizes and values the importance of mental health supports and services for the well-being of our students, staff, and school communities.

We promote, provide, and develop a robust continuum of care through the convergence of policy creation, behavioral health services, multi-tiered systems of social and emotional support, restorative practices, and community partnerships to advance a culture of mental health and wellness in equitable ways across the District.

A mental health or substance use challenge can have varying signs or symptoms for students. If they are frequent, lasting, and begin affecting school performance, relationships, and participation in activities, it's important to connect the student to available resources.

If you suspect a student is experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge, refer the student to your school's clinician or Behavioral Health Team (BHT). You must refer the student to a clinician if you believe they are in crisis.

Signs of mental health illness in youth¹:

- Excessive worrying or fear
- Feeling excessively sad or low
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning
- Extreme mood changes
- Chronic absenteeism
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger
- Avoiding friends and social activities
- Difficulties understanding or relating to other people
- Feeling tired or experiencing chronic fatigue
- Changes in appearance and/or hygiene

According to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 17% of Chicago high school students and 33% of Chicago middle school students have seriously considered attempting suicide. Any student can be impacted by a mental health challenge. Data from YRBS show students who experience sadness or hopelessness, or those who have suicidal thoughts, are more likely to report earning D's and F's.² Research on suicide risk factors also suggests high achieving young people may have characteristics that put them at high risk of suicide ideation. Addressing mental health in schools can have lasting benefits on all Chicago youth.³

³ Suicide Among Gifted Adolescents: How to Prevent It. The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (1990-2013). https://nrcgt.uconn.edu/newsletters/spring012/#
What You Can Do

Do you suspect immediate crisis?

If yes, immediately refer the student to a school nurse, social worker, counselor, or psychologist. Maintain supervision of the student until they are in the care of one of these professionals.

If immediate crisis is not suspected and the student needs general support, refer them to your school's Behavioral Health Team (BHT).

If for any reason none of these professionals are available, call the CPS crisis hotline at 773-553-1792.

An immediate crisis refers to any situation where an individual is at risk of harming themselves or others (on purpose or accidentally), or getting in trouble with the law. If you are unsure, it is safer to assume yes and refer the student to a professional.

Current Support Resources

Chicago Public Schools utilizes the public health Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) approach to provide guidance on the promotion and practice of mental health supports.

Tier 1 encompasses universal, whole school, supports that help build a culture of wellness.

Tier 2 supports are targeted interventions aimed at specific groups.

Tier 3 supports are offered on an individual basis to cater to the unique needs of our school populations.

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Note: Additional resources may be available. For specific questions, contact OSHW@cps.edu.

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