

## **Integrating Mental Health Education and Well-being in New York State Schools**

CCSI staff recently met with Glenn Liebman, CEO, Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. (MHANYS) and Amy Molloy, Director of Schools Mental Health Resources and Training Center, MHANYS, to talk with them about New York State's new law requiring schools to provide mental health education as a component of health instruction. Thanks to Mr. Liebman and Ms. Molloy for providing their insights below into our questions about what is required of schools now as a result of this new law, why this is important, and how the MHANYS' School Mental Health Resource and Training Center can assist educators in implementing what is required in their classrooms.

### **What is included in this new law, and how did it come about?**

*In 2016, Governor Cuomo signed into law a bill that requires schools to include mental health instruction as part of the required K-12 health education curricula. To inform and guide this important work, in August of 2017, the New York State Education Department (NYSED), with the support of the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) and MHANYS, established the New York State Mental Health Education Advisory Council, bringing together over 75 expert cross-disciplinary and cross-sector partners. Their goal was to assist schools in effectively maximizing students' knowledge and understanding of the multiple dimensions of health, including mental health wellness. They developed a [comprehensive guide](#) as well as evidence-based and best practices resources to support mental health and wellness instruction in schools. The law then went into effect on July 1, 2018.*

*In addition to the health education curricula changes, schools are encouraged to embed mental health wellness throughout the school culture by providing mental health professional development for school staff, educating families about mental health, integrating mental health into other academic subject areas, and developing partnerships with local community mental health agencies. Each school/school district determines how they can best implement these changes. For instance, many popular novels students read in their ELA classes include themes about mental health, suicide, trauma, substance use, etc. A school could also organize a peer mentoring program or a student wellness club that meets once a week. Schools could consider adding community-based services to the resources available through the school.*

### **Why is this law important for young people?**

*Youth experience many serious challenges which can affect their mental health including bullying/cyberbullying, addiction, mental health stigma, teen suicide, and more. [Fifty percent \(50%\) of mental illness begins by age 14, and half \(49.5%\) of US adolescents reported having a mental disorder sometime in their lifetime](#). With high prevalence rates in our young people and mental illness starting at young ages, it is vital to both integrate mental health education and well-being within schools so students build the skills necessary for healthy development and to create trauma-informed school cultures where students feel safe, accepted, valued and respected.*

*When the first signs and symptoms of mental health problems go unrecognized and untreated, this elevates the risk for mental health crises and self-medicating symptoms with alcohol and/or drugs. Also, important milestones like high school graduation and involvement in gainful activities like employment or enrollment in college or trade school are also negatively affected. These negative outcomes are all potentially avoidable as studies have shown that when students learn about mental health, they are more likely to identify symptoms in themselves and others. On average, people typically wait 10 years before seeking help for mental health*

concerns, however research demonstrates that those with mental health education are more likely to reach out sooner for help as they better understand who to go to when help is needed. The stigma surrounding mental health that often prevents youth from seeking help, is broken down when school personnel, students, families, and communities work together in a positive school culture focused on mental health wellness with more open discussions about mental health.

Creating and strengthening school - community agency partnerships is also beneficial because it improves access to existing behavioral health services, so youth are more likely to be engaged in services and follow through with getting the help they need. With both staff and students feeling more supported, the overall school environment is healthier.

### **How does MHANYS' School Mental Health Resource and Training Center help schools to comply with the new law?**

*Our Center offers assistance in three ways:*

- 1) Our **in-person or over-the-phone Technical Assistance** gives educators the information and resources they need to develop comprehensive plans for including mental health in their health curriculum and school culture. Our team evaluates what is already in place, identifies any gaps, and then offers assistance to meet needs. We offer different trainings and webinars, and are excited that our online mental health training module for school personnel will launch this month on our [website](#). We also have instructional resources for educators, and mental health resources for parents and guardians, students, and community-based mental health providers.
- 2) Our **professional development** helps educators learn how to best support students, especially with students now sharing more personal information. The goal is to help educators feel more confident in their ability to support students.
- 3) We **provide resources and facilitate connections with community partners**. We help develop strategies to strengthen pre-existing partnerships, as well as establishing new ones. We can help educators assess where there may be gaps in partnerships, and help schools understand who they should be reaching out to, such as County Mental Health Directors, peer/family support, and/or providers.

### **How can an individual or school get more information about this new law and connect with your Training Center?**

*Our Center can be accessed in three ways:*

- 1) **Online** – Please visit [www.mentalhealthEDnys.org](http://www.mentalhealthEDnys.org) to access our on-line inquiry form and resources for education professionals, students, parents and caregivers, and community partners.
- 2) **By phone** – Call us Monday through Friday from 8 am to 5 pm at (518) 434-0439. Our Education Consultant responds to calls daily.
- 3) **By email** – send us a message to [schools@mhanys.org](mailto:schools@mhanys.org).

We also have a network of 26 MHA affiliates throughout the state, so if you are interested in talking with someone locally, we can connect you with one of our Regional Representatives. Each affiliate also has professional development opportunities to offer, including Youth Mental Health First Aid, Suicide Prevention Programs, and more.