

# Connecting the Dots: The School Counselor Role in Student Mental Health

California's Multi-Tiered System of Support (CA MTSS) is a comprehensive framework that aligns academic, behavioral, social and emotional learning, and mental health supports in a fully integrated system of support for the benefit of all students. CA MTSS offers the potential to create needed systematic change through intentional design and redesign of services and supports to quickly identify and match to the needs of all students.



The evidence-based domains and features of the California MTSS framework provide opportunities for LEA's to strengthen school, family, and community partnerships while developing the whole child in the most inclusive, equitable learning environment thus closing the equity gaps for all students.

## Role of the School Counselor in Supporting Student Mental Health

School counselors use the *Multi-Tiered System of Support* (MTSS) as a comprehensive framework to address the mental health needs of all students within the educational system. This framework of service delivery ranges from preventive services and programs for all students to more intensive services for select students based on need.

MTSS uses a three-tiered system of increasingly intensive interventions that are comprehensive in scope, preventative in design, and developmental in nature. In Tier 1, school counselors provide universal proactive instruction supporting social-emotional development. School counselors frequently monitor student progress and survey data, which allows for early identification of systemwide issues at the first sign of trouble. In Tier 2, rather than a "wait until they ask for help" approach, school counseling teams regularly monitor student social-emotional data. Utilizing a reflective process, school counselors collaborate to determine the appropriate interventions to target the data-driven needs. When the mental health needs of students and their families are determined to be severe and outside the training and scope of school counselors (Tier 3), students and families are supported as they are referred to licensed, community-based professionals for intensive therapeutic interventions.

## How does CA MTSS align with School Counselor support for Mental Health?

School counselors are the primary resource for administrators, teachers and parents about mental health awareness and trauma informed practices. School counselors provide a systemic approach that focuses on prevention and awareness of mental health and intervention and advocacy for those who need intensified support and services. School counselors support the social-emotional development of all students by providing a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate schoolwide curriculum-based on Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL). School counselors provide responsive services through a variety of methods, including individual short-term counseling, group counseling, and crisis response. Their expertise and understanding of mental health, educational services and academic development also position them to assist in the creation of schoolwide and districtwide protocols that support students holistically. School counselors are vital contributors to Leadership Teams, Crisis Response Protocol Teams, Student Study Teams, 504 Accommodation Plan Teams, and Individualized Educational Planning Teams.

*"The school counselor's job comprises much more than just academic services. School counseling is one of the most effective ways to mitigate children and adolescent behavioral and mental health barriers to learning,"*

**Loretta Whitson**, Executive Director-CASC



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Leadership for School Counseling



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## **School counselors are active participants in the MTSS three-tiered system of support:**

### **Tier 1: Universal Support for All students focuses on prevention and awareness**

- Coordinate schoolwide programs and presentations promoting mental health awareness for families, students and staff on stigma reduction, suicide prevention, trauma-informed practices, and adverse childhood experience
- Teach classroom instruction on CASEL's five components (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision making)
- Foster relationships with parents/caregivers, support staff, mentors and community agencies
- Utilize schoolwide early warning systems to identify students who are disconnected, disengaged, reporting need for support, and/or exhibiting at-risk behaviors

### **Tier 2: Supplemental Interventions for some students who need additional support**

- Develop and utilize responsive interventions such as student safety plans, check-in and check-outs, behavior plans, peer to peer support, trauma-informed approaches, etc.
- Provide individual/small group psycho-educational counseling to address data driven needs
- Consult/collaborate with support providers (e.g. nurses, school psychologists/social workers)
- Monitor student's progress during and after interventions
- Refer to outside resources as appropriate

### **Tier 3: Intensified Interventions for a few students who need a higher level of support**

- Conduct crisis response assessments using crisis management protocols
- Provide crisis counseling and short-term solution-focused individual counseling
- Consult/collaborate with support providers (e.g. nurses, school psychologists, social workers) and community agency partners to facilitate student's transition and/or return to school
- Apply and reinforce trauma-informed practices
- Refer student and family to school-based mental health clinician or community agency partner(s) or for chronic mental/behavioral health related issues
- Monitor student progress during intervention and post-intervention services

### **Role of the School Counselor and Community-based Mental Health Services**

*School counselors are well trained to provide both prevention and intervention services in supporting student mental health. However, it is outside the scope of their duties to diagnose mental illness or to provide long-term therapeutic interventions. Licensed mental health clinicians serve as referral partners with school counselors in the MTSS model, especially within Tier 3. The role of the school counselor continues when a student is referred for more intensive mental health services.*

When a student is hospitalized or admitted to an inpatient or outpatient program, school counselors monitor progress and engage parents, administrators, teachers and mental health clinicians. The school counselor coordinates re-entry meetings and collaborates with key stakeholders to ensure the student integrates back into the educational setting with the proper supports and resources to help maximize student learning. Some California school district leaders utilize contract services to provide psychotherapy to students with intensive mental health related issues, supplementing their school-based school counseling program. Quality communication between the contracted agency and school district regarding Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) is essential. This includes agreed upon expectations for the release of information, email communications, and authority to access district student data systems.

### **Want to learn more about the School Counselor Role in supporting Student Mental Health?**

- [ASCA Crisis Response Toolkit](#)
- [Hatching Results Website](#)
- [Covid-19 CASC Website--Mental Health Section](#)
- [CASC Best Practices Document](#)
- [CASC Website](#)
- [Framework for Safe and Successful Schools](#)
- [AB 1767 Mandate for Suicide](#)

# CONNECTING THE DOTS

## The School Counselor Role in Student Mental Health

School counselors are active participants in the MTSS three-tiered system of support.



### ALL STUDENTS

#### UNIVERSAL SUPPORT

Evidence-based priorities and practices that support the academic, behavioral and social-emotional success of all students in the most inclusive and equitable learning environment.

#### Tier 1: Universal Support is for All students and focuses on awareness, education and prevention

- Coordinate schoolwide programs and presentations promoting mental health awareness for families, students and staff on stigma reduction, suicide prevention, trauma-informed practices, and adverse childhood experience
- Teach classroom instruction on CASEL's five components (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision making)
- Foster relationships with parents/caregivers, support staff, mentors and community agencies
- Utilize schoolwide early warning systems to identify students who are disconnected, disengaged, reporting need for support, and/or exhibiting at-risk behaviors



### SOME STUDENTS

#### SUPPLEMENTAL SUPPORT

Additional services provided for some students who require more academic, behavioral and social-emotional support

#### Tier 2: Supplemental support is for for Some students who need an additional level of intervention and instruction

- Develop and utilize responsive interventions such as student safety plans, check-in and check-outs, behavior plans, peer-to-peer support, trauma-informed approaches, etc.
- Provide individual/small group psycho-educational counseling to address data driven needs
- Consult/collaborate with support providers (e.g. nurses, school psychologists, social workers)
- Monitor student's progress during and after interventions
- Refer to outside resources as appropriate



### FEW STUDENTS

#### INTENSIFIED SUPPORT

Targeted academic, behavioral and social-emotional support directed toward the few students with greater needs

#### Tier 3: Intensified support is for a Few students who need an additional level of individualized focus to manage their mental health needs

- Conduct crisis response assessments using crisis management protocols
- Provide crisis counseling and short-term solution-focused individual counseling
- Consult/collaborate with support providers (e.g. nurses, school psychologists, social workers) and community agency partners to facilitate student's transition and/or return to school
- Apply and reinforce trauma-informed practices
- Refer student and family to school-based mental health clinician or community agency partner(s) or for chronic mental/behavioral health related issues
- Monitor student progress during intervention and post-intervention services