

Improving Suicide Prevention in Schools & Communities

A Whole Child, Whole Schools Approach

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@ProcAnna

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Introduction


Mental Health in Adolescence

1. Most youth do reasonably well
2. But adolescence is a period of developmental vulnerability
 - So much is changing!
3. Significant increases in youth suicide since 2007
 - Unprecedented rates for youth ages 10-14 and girls ages 15-19

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The Importance of Schools to Suicide Prevention




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It Takes Everyone in the School Building

Carrie (School Mental Health Worker):

***"The perception continues on that this work is just ours.** It's like, oh, the mental health team is going to do that. The mental health team is going to do all the things. And it makes sense that we would take leadership for [suicide prevention] and that we are the experts in that area, but **it takes everybody to do this work when it comes to suicide prevention in schools, period, it just does.**"*

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Study Goals


- Community-engaged project
- Collaborative project with two Colorado school districts
 - "Front Range" & "Western Slopes" Colorado
 - All names are pseudonyms
- Today's focus is on Front Range
 - 83% white, non-Hispanic/Latinx
 - Latinx is the second most prevalent race/ethnic group

Methods

- Data
 - Interviews
 - students, families, school & district staff
 - N=192
 - Fieldwork
 - 22 months
 - Surveys
 - Family: N=1,230
 - Response rate: 10-20%
 - School & District staff: N=1,004
 - Response rate: about 50%


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School Information			
Demographic Characteristics ^a	High School 1	High School 2	High School 3
Latinx or Hispanic (%)	9	14	31
White (not Latinx) (%)	81	78	59
Free and Reduced Price Lunch (%)	7	10	25
AP Exam Pass Rate (%) [^]	82	70	51

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Sources: ^a National Center for Education Statistics data unless otherwise noted;
[^] US News; ^{*} School districts website

Results Overview
1. Schools' strategies to promote well-being and prevent suicide
2. The role of the School District
3. The role of Safe2Tell
4. The role of families
5. Necessary community resources
6. Advice from youth for adults

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The Role of Schools

Strategy 1: Including the Whole Child in the Aims of Education

- A Whole Child Approach:
 - Academic development
 - Social emotional development
 - Identity development
 - Physical health
 - Mental health

WHOLE SCHOOL, WHOLE COMMUNITY, WHOLE CHILD
A collaborative approach to learning and health

Journal of School Health, Volume: 88, Issue: 11, Pages: 778-784, DOI: (10.1111/josh.12388)

Including the Whole Child in the Aims of Education

First School Strategy

Whole Child

Strictly Academic

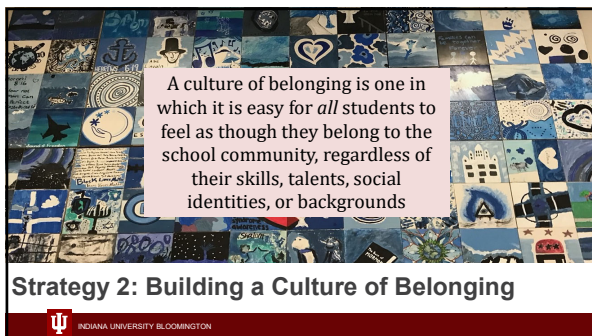
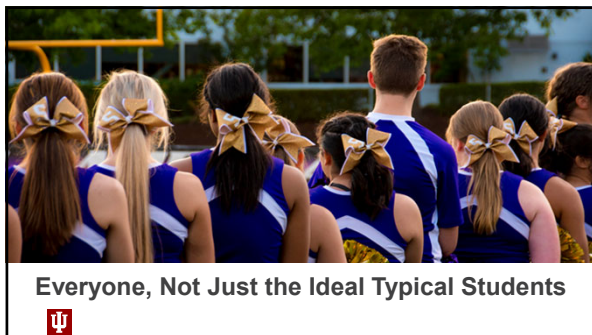
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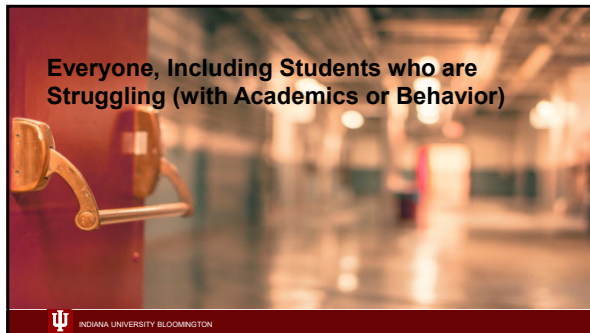
Why Including the Whole Child Matters

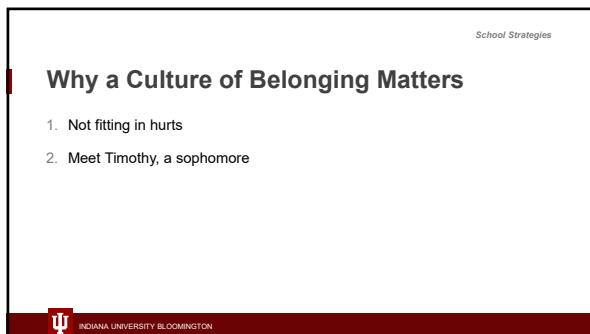
School Strategies

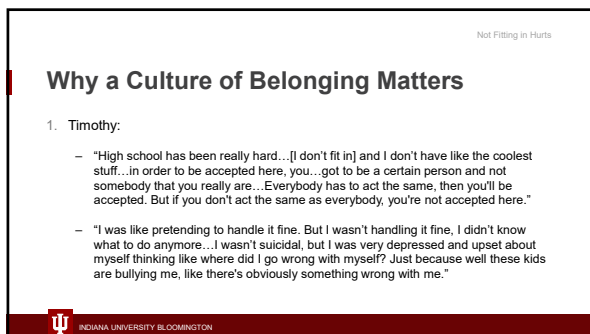
- Inspires school staff to see suicide prevention as *the job of schools*
- Inspires staff to find supports for all student problems *in the building*
- Increases trust between students and staff
 - Increases student disclosures of mental health problems
 - Ideal for suicide prevention

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[illegible][illegible][illegible]








Not Fitting in Hurts

Why a Culture of Belonging Matters

1. Luckily, Timothy's school staff were able to become adults Timothy really trusts and relies on
 - "After turning to administration, I really felt more accepted. I feel like I have people to talk to. Whenever I need anything, I'd go talk to my administrator or whoever. And that's very comfortable for me to go talk to them."
2. But school is still a daily grind
 - "Why can kids come into the school and be so hateful toward others and get away with it? Why is that acceptable at our school?"

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Combats Cultures of Exclusion

Why a Culture of Belonging Matters


2. Combats cultures of exclusion that social media almost inherently promotes
 - Amber, a teen, shared:
 - "if I have friends, who I'll spend a whole weekend with, and then they'll say something else about all the other friends they spent time with that weekend or whatever, **that hurts.**"

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Students Speak Up

Why a Culture of Belonging Matters

3. Students Speak Up
 - Meet Alex, also a sophomore

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Students Speak Up

Why a Culture of Belonging Matters

1. Alex chose her school for its culture of belonging
 - The [staff I spoke with during 8th grade recruitment] basically said 'inside these walls is a representation of what society is and who is in it...you'll see...two girls holding hands, two boys holding hands. And if you don't like any of that go away.' And I was like, 'Okay cool. This is great. This is where I need to be.'
2. She feel welcomed and supported by school staff
3. She also turns to them for problems large and small
 - Including mental health crises that eventually happened

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Strategy 3:

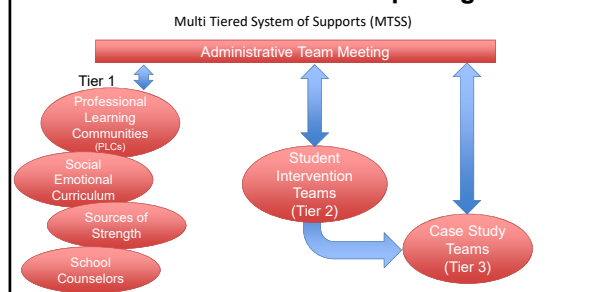
Incorporating Mental Health into Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

https://www.cde.state.co.us/mtss

How Schools Work to Accomplish Goals

- Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports
 - System to ensure students get the supports they need
 - Team-based, shared leadership
 - Data-based problem solving and decision-making
- Both a system and a philosophy
 - What interventions are emphasized?

How schools work to accomplish goals



MTSS Systems Vary Between Schools

1. Some schools emphasize mental health more in their MTSS than others
 - When trying to understand students' academic struggles
 - Interventions include mental health interventions



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Strictly Academic Focus

1. Jacob, school staff who does a lot with MTSS:
 - **"We meet for one hour a week.** It's hard to really dive into a kid in less than 20 minutes if you're going to do **a good deep dive of test scores**, and did something happen in between fifth and seventh grade? That's where we see a dip. They missed four months of school. The reality is they're struggling in math **because they have gaps in knowledge** and we never went back to fill in those gaps"



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More of a Mental Health Focus

1. Jessica, a staff member:

- “We say...all the time in this building, **students by name and need**, by name and need...When we start digging into students by name and by need, **we are taking on so many more responsibilities by finding out what's really going on with every single one of our students...**and they need that because **they can't learn how to write well in my class without all of those pieces.**”



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Variation in How Many Staff Members are Involved in MTSS

Denise (staff member):

- “**Teachers are having to look at a kid and say, there's something different about this kid today and know what to do about that...**truthfully, teachers are not trained mental health professionals. So I think teachers need a little bit more of this professional development that I think we're offering lately around in this building, in within the building and also outside of the building, **to try to help them help kids in these new ways.**”



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Variation in How Many Staff Members are Involved in MTSS

1. Important to build MTSS systems that work for overworked teachers

Connie (staff member):

“We really spent creating systems that worked for teachers that streamlined, that created efficiencies for teachers”

- By building a system so that teachers can refer students to specialists
- By giving teachers time in their schedules to do SIT and Case Study teams if they chose



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MTSS That Works for Suicide Prevention

1. Tuned to mental health as well as academics
2. Being large enough to serve kids
3. Stable and highly institutionalized
4. High in communication between groups involved in the MTSS, including leadership
5. More referral strategies
6. Efficient



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MTSS Systems Can Work!

- "[This MTSS system] has been **eye opening because I've never been in a school that's operated like this.** In my previous districts and schools, we called it multi-tiered system support **[but it] ended up sadly just being a complaining session about the student. So I always had a bad taste in my mouth about it.** [But here at this school] **this has been pretty amazing to be a part of this [system that supports kids]** and....Just to see all the different ways that teachers can contribute, admin and counselors contribute and how we're able to support so many students."
- Katherine, Mental Health Staff



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Why the MTSS Matters

1. The MTSS can serve as an early detection and support system for challenges students are experiencing
 - It's a way schools can identify students at risk of suicide and other mental health challenges
2. Encourages and supports non-mental health school staff engaging in mental health promotion & suicide prevention
3. Families & students end up feeling well supported in schools where the MTSS has a stronger whole child focus



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The Role of the District

The Role of the District

- 1. Helps shape the educational philosophy of schools
- 2. Trains staff, especially mental health staff, & provides clear, effective, an nonburdensome protocols for school staff on suicide risk reviews etc.
- 3. Supports schools with all suicide risk assessments, crisis responses, and other social, behavioral, or mental health issues students are facing
- 4. Connects families to clinicians outside of schools
- 5. Supports Sources of Strength

The Role of Safe2Tell

The Role of Safe2Tell

1. Safe2Tell helps
2. Involvement of police as responders to mental health crises may diminish youth's willingness to use Safe2Tell
3. Youth are aware that friends of color may not be comfortable with having police show up at their house
4. Fits with national calls in the suicide prevention world to have mental health specialists be crisis responders in these moments
5. Some adults (parents) and students abuse Safe2Tell
6. Safe2Tell is a lot for school staff to deal with...



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The Role of Families

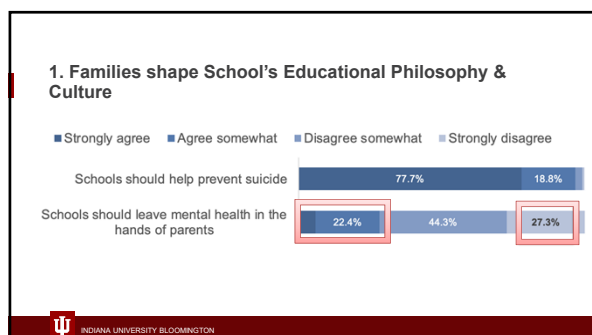
1. Families shape School's Educational Philosophy & Culture

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree somewhat ■ Disagree somewhat ■ Strongly disagree

Schools should help prevent suicide



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1. Families shape School's Educational Philosophy & Culture

- Tension around what is the job of schools
 - "I can't go as far as to say that I think schools should be the sole source of mental health. That's a big task that **I don't think that's their job personally**. Like with the counselors there...I don't know if they have the training to do the stuff that personal counselors do...I would never expect that from a school."
~ Colleen, a parent

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2. Families connect youth to help

- Families are more likely to turn to health providers re child mental health concerns
 - Only 29% of families would go to a school staff member with concerns about their child's mental health.
- Families do not always tell the school about their child's mental health struggles
 - Of families whose child had had a suicidal crisis, 48% report **not** telling the school
- Families don't know what schools can do
 - 50% of families did not know whether school staff could effectively evaluate their child's risk of suicide
- Collectively, this may weaken schools' abilities to effectively prevent suicide.

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THE ROLE OF COMMUNITIES

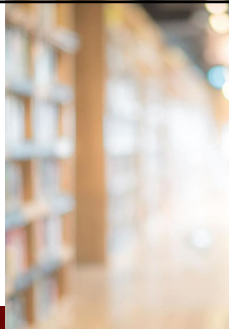
Schools & Families Can't Do this Alone

Community Supports are Needed

- Resource scarcity even in this relatively well-resourced district was a constant problem
- Some students require clinical care – so community resources must be present
- Severe shortage in therapists, psychiatric hospital beds, psychiatrists, etc.
 - Not just Colorado



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Advice for Adults from Youth

Advice for Adults from Youth

1. Just listen & don't tell us "it will get better"
 - MAKE the world better or empathize
2. Diminish pressure & other sources of pain
3. Celebrate diverse forms of "success"
4. Youth should be included in designing mental health supports
5. Mental health should be prioritized year round
6. Mental health and information about drug/alcohol abuse should be incorporated into school programs
7. Youth want to be taught warning signs for suicide & how to support friends in a crisis
8. Work to diminish mental health stigma



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Translating Findings into Action

REQUIRES COLLABORATION – Students, Researchers, School Staff, School & District Leadership, Families, etc.

Recommendations for Schools & the District


1. Stronger whole child educational philosophy;
2. Culture of belonging;
3. Use MTSS explicitly for suicide prevention and mental health interventions
4. Embed mental health and social-emotional learning throughout all aspects of schooling
5. Educate families about what schools can do re suicide prevention



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Recommendations for Schools & the District

1. **More mental health staff**
2. **Consistent training in suicide prevention**
 - For mental health staff
 - Not just the science of filling out a Columbia screener
 - Also need training in the art of talking about suicide in unbiased and un-stigmatizing ways
 - E.g., LivingWorks ASIST training
 - For teachers
 - Gatekeeper training
 - E.g., 90 minute LivingWorks Start training
3. **Clear and evidence-based protocols for screening for suicide and safety planning to support students**

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Recommendations for the State & Communities

1. **School funding is suicide prevention**
 - Schools CANNOT prevent suicide effectively without more resources than they currently have
2. **School staff need suicide prevention gatekeeper training**
 - Mandate & fund at the state level

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The Report:
Mueller, Anna S., et al. 2021. "[Strategies to Prevent Suicide in Schools and Communities](#)." SocArXiv. October 12.
doi:10.31235/osf.io/znrgj.

Thank you!
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Improving Suicide Prevention in Schools and Communities: A Whole School, Whole Child Approach

Anna S. Mueller, PhD, is the Luther Dana Waterman Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Indiana University. She is the Principal Investigator of the Social Worlds & Youth Well-being Study which is a project that aims to identify new, effective, and sustainable strategies to prevent suicide in collaboration with schools and their communities. She has won numerous awards recognizing her contributions to youth suicide prevention in schools and communities. She is passionate about helping schools, families, and communities find better ways to prevent suicide and to heal after suicide losses.

Abstract: Schools are widely recognized as a critical place for suicide prevention, and yet, despite years of research many of our school-based suicide prevention strategies are hard for schools to sustain, particularly when resources (time, money, staff) are limited. This situation is becoming increasingly critical as rates of youth suicide and reports of school-centered suicide clusters climb in the U.S. Drawing on data from a collaborative (community-engaged) project with a Colorado school district and four high schools, this study offers insights into how to improve school suicide prevention strategies by leveraging existing strengths and systems that are already in place in schools. By the end of this presentation, audience members will have increased information about (1) youth suicide, (2) how to prevent suicide in their schools and communities, and (3) will have actionable strategies to take back to their communities to begin conversations for change.

Further Reading:

Mueller, Anna S., Sarah Diefendorf, Seth Abrutyn, Katie A. Beardall, Robert Gallagher, J'Mauri Jackson, Yingjian Liang, et al. 2021. "Strategies to Prevent Suicide in Schools and Communities: The Final Report of the Social Worlds & Youth Well-Being Study, Front Range, Colorado." SocArXiv. October 12. doi:10.31235/osf.io/znrjg. (Executive Summary, translated to Spanish, available [here](#).)

- This article provides a full review of our data from this presentation and has actionable strategies for schools and communities.

Mueller, Anna S., Seth Abrutyn, and Sarah Diefendorf. Forthcoming Fall 2022. "Transforming U.S. Education to Prevent Suicide." *Contexts*.

- This article presents a vision for suicide prevention in schools.

Mueller, Anna S., and Seth Abrutyn. 2022. "The School's Suicide Postvention Response." SocArXiv. June 26. doi:10.31235/osf.io/tf5wd.

- This article helps think through effective school responses to suicide losses.

Mueller, Anna S., Seth Abrutyn, Bernice Pescosolido, and Sarah Diefendorf. 2021. "The Social Roots of Suicide: Theorizing how the External Social World matters to Suicide and Suicide Prevention." *Frontiers in Psychology* (Psychopathology Section, part of a special research topic "Advancing Theory of Suicide and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury") 12(763). doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.621569

- This article provides an overview of the science on how the social world matters to suicide and suicide prevention.

Mueller, Anna S. & Seth Abrutyn. 2016. "Adolescents under Pressure: A New Durkheimian Framework for Understanding Adolescent Suicide in a Cohesive Community." *American Sociological Review* 81(5): 877-899.

- This article identifies factors in schools and communities that increase risk of youth suicide clusters.

Ackerman, John and Lisa Horowitz (eds). 2022. *Youth Suicide Prevention and Intervention:*

Current Best Practices and Policy Implications of the Advances in Child and Family Policy and Practice Springer.

- This open-access volume provides the latest on evidence-based suicide prevention and postvention for schools, mental health professionals, and beyond.
- Dr. Mueller contributed the chapter on postvention and suicide contagion.

Want to learn more?

Talking about suicide directly, clearly, and in a kind, compassionate and non-stigmatizing way saves lives, but we often need help learning how to talk about such a difficult topic; these resources will help you learn to talk to kids about suicide.

1. We recommend adults listen to this 14 minute podcast that covers the major issues in how to get help for someone you love who is at risk of suicide. The information is correct and is similar to what Dr. Mueller recommends:
<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/02/983823424/how-to-reach-out-when-someone-you-know-may-be-at-risk-of-suicide>
2. We recommend adults review the “What Not to Say” and “10 Things to Say” overviews provided on the website www.speakingofsuicide.com, and refresh their knowledge as needed.
3. The book *After a Suicide: A Toolkit For Schools* (2nd Edition), a joint publication between the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, the Education Development Center, and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, also has information and tips for how to talk to youth about suicide as well as how to design safe and supportive suicide postvention in schools and communities. This publication is free as a PDF online here: <https://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf>.
4. Finally, we recommend that all adults do a suicide gatekeeper training which will help them become comfortable discussing suicide effectively, such as LivingWorks SafeTalk, LivingWorks Start, or QPR training. Some of these trainings are accessible online (LivingWorks Start). We have no affiliation with any of these organizations.

About suicide more generally

1. O'Connor, Rory. *When It Is Darkest: Why People Die by Suicide and What We Can Do to Prevent It*. Random House, 2021.
 - a. This book offers an accessible and scientifically up to date overview of why people die by suicide and how we can help. The author is one of the world experts in suicide.
2. Freedenthal, Stacey. *Helping the suicidal person: Tips and techniques for professionals*. Routledge, 2017.
 - a. This book is for mental health professionals and offers concrete tips for working with suicidal patients in a supportive and caring manner.
 - b. <https://www.helpingthesuicidalperson.com/89-tips/>
3. Freedenthal, Stacey. Coming soon! *Loving Someone with Suicidal Thoughts*.
 - a. This book provides guidance for families and friends of people who live with suicidal thoughts.