

BETTY A. ROSA, Ed.D.

Commissioner of Education
President of the University of the State of New York

ANN MARIE T. SULLIVAN, M.D.

Commissioner
Office of Mental Health

April 16, 2021

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,



Betty A. Rosa
Commissioner
New York State Education Department



Ann Marie T. Sullivan
Commissioner
New York State Office of Mental Health

Recommended Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Resources for NYS Schools, Families, and Students

For Educators:

1. [The Mental Health Association in NYS's \(MHANYS\) School Mental Health Resource & Training Center](#)
This is a website that offers tools, webinars, and trainings that schools can use to educate students about mental health – from instructional resources to staff development, and information for families.
2. [National Alliance on Mental Illness of NYS](#) (information for educators, families, and teens).
This website offers resources for mental health education and curriculum development in schools.
3. Brief videos on suicide warning signs and providing a warm handoff
 - a. [Video – Warning Signs](#)
 - b. [Video – Warm Handoff](#)
4. Handouts from the Suicide Prevention Center of NY:
 - a. [What every teacher should know about suicide](#)
This brochure details how to recognize suicide risk in students and the role of teachers in getting help.
 - b. [Talking points for classroom discussions about suicide](#)
This brochure discusses the do's and don'ts of suicide prevention discussions in the classroom.
5. The [Directing Change Program and Film Contest](#) was created to educate young people about critical health topics through the medium of film and promote social justice by changing conversations in schools and communities. Students are educated about the topics and provided with support to create their own messaging directed at peers, which then can be used in schools and communities to raise awareness and engage in dialogue in an effort to reduce stigma.
 - a. View the [Tip Sheet](#) for ideas to enhance prevention and outreach efforts using the films through social media, with community partners and in your school.
 - b. There are many films to choose from – explore the links on the [Directing Change website](#) to find a PSA that best meets the needs of your school community.
 - Below are a few examples:
 - [The Empty Seat](#) (suicide prevention) – provides a hopeful message that by recognizing warning signs and connecting peers to help, youth can save a life.
 - [Naiveté](#) (mental health stigma) – debunks the myth that people with a mental health issue are debilitated and unable to function. Instead, it sends the message that youth with mental health problems “just need a little help”.

- [Caged Bird](#) (Mandarin w/English subtitles) – addresses mental health stigma in the Chinese community, specifically illustrating generational differences in beliefs and attitudes about mental health.

For School Leaders:

1. [The New York Trauma-Informed Network](#)
This website offers trauma–responsive tools and resources.
2. From the Suicide Prevention Center of NY: [A Guide to Suicide Prevention in New York Schools](#)
This is a comprehensive guide about understanding suicide and the role that schools can play in preventing suicide.
3. Suicide Safety Training for school staff: [Contact SPC-NY](#) to identify a local staff development professional who is certified to provide brief suicide awareness training.

For Parents/Families:

1. [NY Project Hope website -- Coping with COVID: Tips for parents of children and adolescents](#)
This is a resource that helps parents and other caregivers recognize and help children and adolescence cope with stress.
2. *Parenting in the Pandemic: A guide for the perplexed.* Teen mental health and wellness resource This is a collection of articles relevant to parenting during the pandemic including useful tips and reminders.
 - a. [Schools can order from 30-100 hardcopy booklets and have them shipped to them for free using this link.](#)
 - b. [Alternatively, a free digital flipbook version is also available here.](#)
3. [Brief \(< 4 min\) suicide prevention awareness video from the Mayo Clinic](#) (YouTube)
This is a video that dispels the myths about suicide and instructs parents on what to do if their child is depressed or if the parent suspects their child is having suicidal thoughts.
4. From the Suicide Prevention Center of NY: [What every parent should know about youth suicide](#) (PDF Handout)
This brochure coaches parents on recognizing suicide risk in their child and how to navigate the conversations that will inform the next steps.

For Students:

1. [Press Pause](#) (webpage)
This website is a wellness skills builder, with videos and tips for stress reduction/coping.
2. [“What every student needs to know: warning signs” - Suicide Prevention Student brochure from SPCNY](#) (PDF)

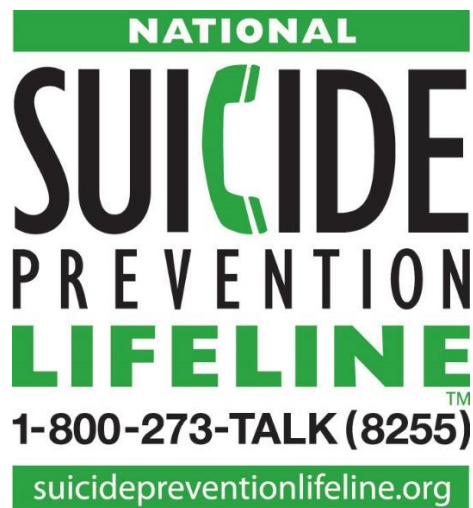
3. [From the Jed Foundation-- Help a friend in need](#) (PDF)
This brochure is a helpful guide on how to help a friend that a student is worried about.

At Risk Populations:

1. [BEAM](#) is a national training, movement building and grant making organization dedicated to the healing, wellness and liberation of Black and marginalized communities.
2. [Therapy for Black Girls](#) has a great podcast and offers other resources and tools.
3. Survival Guide for Wise Latinas
 - a. [Survival Guide for Wise Latinas \(English\)](#)
 - b. [Survival Guide for Wise Latinas \(Spanish\)](#)
4. The [Trevor Project](#) offers tools, resource, crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning (LGBTQ) young people under 25.
5. [Act to Change](#) grew out of a White House public awareness initiative to address bullying, discrimination, and hate crimes against Asian American Pacific Islander, Sikh, Muslim, and immigrant youth. The website has a Racism is a Virus Toolkit for classroom use along with an anti-bullying presentation that can be downloaded.

Suicide and Crisis Resources:

[A toolkit for the Crisis Text Line, including a school section, can be found here.](#)



We've got time to listen
Text **"Got5"** to 741741 to start a conversation



Free, 24/7, Confidential Crisis Support