

Insights is published by ESS as a service for educational professionals. Each issue highlights an important research article and provides practical applications of the findings for the classroom and the school environment.

Proposing an RTI Framework for Mental Health Support

It is widely known amongst educators that Response to Intervention (RTI) is a model that aims to identify a student's learning challenges early on, so that targeted teaching or "interventions" can be implemented before that student falls behind academically. The three-tiered, pyramid approach to general education is designed to ensure that differentiated instruction is offered based on students' needs. Many states have adopted RTI as an instructional approach, while approximately 30% have mandated the use of RTI to help determine which students are eligible for special education.

If you are a regular reader of *Insights*, you may have noted with alarm the statistics quoted in our May issue on mental health awareness. A March, 2019 study published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* reported the following findings about 12 to 17 year-olds, comparing 2005 and 2017 data: the percentage who reported symptoms consistent with depression increased by **52%**; the percentage who reported "serious psychological distress" increased by **71%**; and the percentage who reported suicidal thoughts increased by **47%**.

Prompted by our own data collection over the years, as well as by the national findings reported above, ESS has begun to conceptualize the use of an RTI model for mental health intervention within our schools. Just as in education, a mental health RTI is a tiered system best conceptualized as a pyramid, with the intensity of support increasing from one level to the next, from prevention-oriented to more intensive interventions based on need and severity.

Within a school-based mental health RTI, Tier 1 would include prevention-oriented, awareness, and skill building services for the entire community of students, staff and families. It might include the adoption of a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum (e.g. the *Choose Love* curriculum) to build emotion-regulation and social skills in students. Tier 1 could also include staff training in identifying behavioral health symptoms and resources, in promoting a Nurtured Heart or Trauma-Informed school culture, and in fostering a positive school climate with zero-tolerance for bullying.

Tier 2 of a mental health RTI would include a constellation of services to respond quickly to students in crisis. This should include a screening process to identify students in need of immediate referral to an ER for risk assessment, as well as a re-entry protocol to support the student once he or she has been cleared by an ER or mental health professional for return to school. It might include "on-demand" or "drop-in" services by an onsite counselor or even within a tele-health format.

Tier 3 would include comprehensive services for the students with the most intense mental health needs, offering in-district individual and family therapy, daily groups, and parent support within the school environment. This tier represents the typical ESS programs currently in operation across various districts.

While a mental health RTI would clearly be a school-wide initiative, there are still ways that individual educators can create the building blocks for such an initiative:

- Use *Insights* and other mental health resources to identify mental health education content for your classrooms.
- Familiarize yourself with common mental health symptoms and use district protocols to refer students for help.
- Familiarize yourself with tiered mental health options that already exist within your district.
- Participate in professional development activities that address school culture and the fostering of social-emotional learning in students.
- Incorporate SEL strategies into your daily classroom routine, e.g. mindfulness practices.

RESOURCES:

<https://www.jesselewischooselove.org> (entire curriculum is free and can be accessed at this site)

<https://www.jesselewischooselove.org/choose-love-calendar/>

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