

**The Schools We Need Now**  
*Study Guide*

Dear Educators,

We are so excited to share this book and study guide with all of you! Given the continued state of mental health challenges our students and educators are facing, schools can play a critical role in supporting mental health and wellness while also continuing to deepen student learning of content and skills that prepare them for success in college, career, and life. *The Schools We Need Now* is meant to be a blueprint that educators can use to rethink their schools and re-center them towards greater mental health and wellness. Doing so will not only improve the health of students and staff but also super-charge academic learning and cognitive growth.

This shift begins with understanding our own views about education, schools, learning, and mental health. As you read the first few chapters, we invite you to do a critical self-evaluation of your own mental models and those of the school or district you work in. What is your definition of mental health? What does it look like to be mentally healthy? What role can schools play in promoting positive health and wellness? What structures are in place that get in the way of being healthy?

At the heart of the Mental Health Action Plan is a multi-tiered systems approach to supporting all students and educators. This begins with what the school does for EVERYONE! The more we can strengthen our Tier 1 instruction and support to focus on mental health, the easier it will be to help them when they reach a crisis point. In those moments, our Tier 2 supports should be designed to potentially help each individual in the school since we all need additional support at one time or another. Finally, we must ensure that our Tier 3 support systems are the best possible to help individuals who are in most need. This three tier approach means we are always ready to support and promote health lives for every individual in our school.

This guide will help walk you through the book, although we wrote the book with lots and lots of reflective questions and opportunities to pause. This makes it a great book for both individual reading and group discussion. In the guide, we have also included some additional thoughts by the authors, as well as some new information and tools to deepen your thinking about how we create happy and healthy schools for every student and adult!

**Tim Dohrer and Tom Golebiewski**

# **The Schools We Need Now: A Guide to Designing a Mentally Healthy School**

Week 1 Reading Guide

Chapters 1 and 2 (pages 1-35)

## **Chapter 1: The Need for Mentally Health Schools**

### **Key Topics**

- The importance of mental health in schools
- Personal and school-wide definitions of mental health
- Major health and wellness challenges
- School mission and alignment with mental health goals

### **Questions to Consider**

1. What has been your past experience with mental health?
2. What are the major health and wellness challenges in your school and community?
3. What is your personal mission as an educator? How does it align with your school's mission?
4. How does your school currently support mental health? What structures hinder this support?

### **Author's Insights and Additional Notes**

Before diving in, we feel it is essential to reflect on our identities and past experiences with mental health, as individuals, schools, and communities. This helps us surface biases and start to identify areas of strength and improvement.

We are big fans of Parker Palmer and his book *The Courage to Teach*. In it, he offers one of our favorite quotes about why we do what we do:

“Small wonder, then, that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart – and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able. So that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that living and learning require.” (1998, p.11)

The mental health crisis has continued to grow in 2025. According to the 2023 Centers for Disease Control Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 40% of young people experienced feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the previous year. That’s up from 36% in 2019. Similar trends continue for suicidal ideation and depression. Yet only 40% of adolescents are receiving proper treatment. Educators have been identified as experiencing the most job-related stress than any other comparable profession, driving too many out of education or discouraging new teachers.

Stress, anxiety, crisis, and trauma continue to be the main focus of our work in schools because these are the forces that impact students, staff, and families on a daily basis. These forces are

normal! All of us experience some stress every day. The question is how well can we cope with these forces. And how do we build resilience? Taking stock of the ways we experience stress, anxiety, and trauma is a good first step. We must also think about how we take care of ourselves and find ways, every day, to re-fill our buckets!

## Chapter 2: Mental Health and Mental Models

### Questions to Consider

What is your school's definition of mental health?

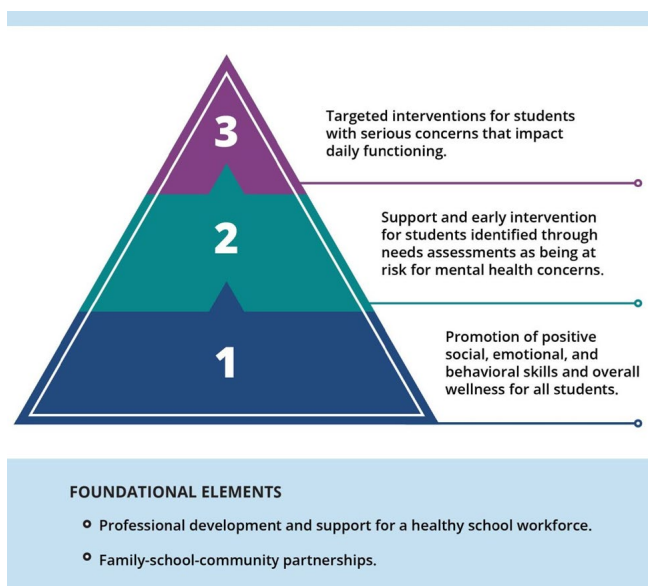
How open is your school community to talking about mental health?

How would you describe your school's culture? What are the explicit examples of that culture?

What is more implicit? What is not being asked about school culture?

What evidence exists that shows you or your school cares for students? Staff? Families?

What is the status of your current approach to MTSS?



### Author's Insights and Additional Notes

Most educators have never engaged in a conversation with their colleagues about mental health, let alone write their own definition of mental health. We suggest that schools consider using the definition of mental health from the World Health Organization, which reads: "Mental Health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."

The concept of “The Whole Child” is over a hundred years old now but is another mental model that we feel is essential to discuss within the school community. If someone believes that the purpose of school is completely about cognitive learning, then they may not have a belief in a whole child approach that also works towards developing the social, emotional, and physical dimensions of a student. More and more research points to the need to support students emotionally before they can access their prefrontal cortex, memory, and learning centers of the brain. A whole child approach is essential to mentally healthy students, staff, and schools!

One of the most important parts of a survey of school climate is whether a student feels connected to a school or to their peers or to their teachers. This connection is often what encourages or discourages whether a student gets up in the morning and goes to school! It also has a huge impact on their minute-by-minute experience in their classrooms. We suggest the term “caring” for a school culture that recognizes the identity or identities of every individual, looks for opportunities to build connections and relationships, and actively supports the development of both students and staff. Would you consider your school a “caring school”? What specific strategies or systems are used to care for individuals?

### **Suggested Activities**

- Reflect on your own mental health experiences and biases.
- Discuss with colleagues the current state of mental health support in your school.
- Identify areas for improvement in aligning your school's mission with mental health goals.

## **The Schools We Need Now: A Guide to Designing a Mentally Healthy School**

Week 2 Reading Guide

Chapter 3 (pages 37-65)

### **Chapter 3: Tier 1 Mental Health: Universal Supports for All**

#### **Key Topics**

- Universal supports for mental health (Tier 1)
- Prevention vs. intervention
- Physical and psychological safety
- Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

#### **Questions to Consider**

How oriented is your school towards a universal approach to support and problem-solving?

How much of your school's energy is focused on prevention? (versus intervention or crisis response) What problems might be solved with a greater focus on prevention?

Do all of your students feel physically safe at school? Psychologically safe? What about your staff? Visitors to the school?

How does the staff connect with individual students? How do they build a community within each school and classroom where students feel connected, know each other, and feel that they belong?

Where do you teach students about neuroscience and learning in your curriculum?

Is there a "common language" across your school about SEL? Do you have an SEL curriculum?

Where in your curriculum do you explicitly teach students about physical wellness, such as healthy eating, sleep, exercise, and mindfulness?

In what ways is the instruction in your school focused on the teacher or focused on student learning? Who is doing "the work" of learning: your teachers or your students?

In what ways do we incorporate restorative practices into our classroom and school culture and systems?

What is your school doing to build connections and community with families and community members? Do parents feel welcomed into your school? Do community members attend events even though they don't have children there?

### **Author's Insights and Additional Notes**

Most educators have never engaged in a conversation with their colleagues about mental health, let alone write their own definition of mental health. We suggest that schools consider using the definition of mental health from the World Health Organization, which reads: "Mental Health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."



## Maslow's hierarchy of needs

So many things are needed to be ready to learn! Some of these are quite basic but too many of our young people come to school without their basic needs being met, feeling unsafe, or not experiencing belonging or connection. How can a student possibly think deeply about algebra or the water cycle or writing when they are stressed, anxious, or traumatized?

Social and Emotional Learning skills, or life-skills, are foundational for both individual and collective mental health and wellness. We need to be constantly improving our skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship-building, and decision-making. Yet another recent research study (Cipriano et al., 2024) showed that systematically teaching these skills will improve learning, grades, test scores, attendance, and school climate. Every school must have an SEL curriculum of some kind and it must be taught at the same time as academic skills and content. This kind of integration leads to better learning but also better relationships and better self-care.

**Suggested Activities:**

- Evaluate your school's current approach to SEL and identify gaps.
- Discuss strategies to improve physical and psychological safety for everyone in the school.
- Plan ways to incorporate neuroscience and learning into the curriculum.



## **The Schools We Need Now: A Guide to Designing a Mentally Healthy School**

Week 3 Reading Guide

Chapter 4 (pages 67-103)

### **Chapter 4: Tier 2 Issues and Interventions**

#### **Key Topics:**

- Early identification of mental health issues
- Mind/body/brain connection
- Mindfulness and trauma-informed practices
- Tier 2 support systems

#### **Questions to Consider**

1. How do you know a student is struggling in or out of school? How do you screen for early identification of potential problems and student concerns?
2. Where in your school or curriculum do students learn about the mind/body/brain connection? How is neuroscience woven into the work of students and staff?
3. Do a scan of your school culture. Where are the places that might cause students and staff stress or anxiety?
4. What mindfulness activities are being used in your school right now?
5. What is your school's definition and approach to being trauma informed?
6. What is your school's wellness plan for students, staff, and families?

#### **Author's Insights and Additional Notes**

We began our work on mental health in schools by thinking about the major forces that impact student and staff well-being. That led us to dive deeply into neuroscience and the mind/body/brain connection. Stress, anxiety, and trauma are all natural parts of our lives. Our brains and bodies respond without thinking to these forces thanks to the natural "stress response system" inside us. While some stress can be useful, the majority of the stress, anxiety, and trauma we experience on a daily or weekly or monthly basis takes a toll. We must first recognize the impact of these forces on ourselves and understand them if we are going to live more healthy lives.

Have you heard of the "handy model of the brain"? It is the invention of noted neuroscientist Dr. Dan Siegel. Dr. Siegel is one of our favorite researchers and has devoted himself to connecting students and teachers to neuroscience. To help us understand the brain better, he has created an easy way for us all to carry a model of the brain with us all the time. Take a look at this quick YouTube video where he explains the handy model of the brain: <https://youtu.be/f-m2YcdMdFw?si=Zhk67rPf3-ptnQqp>

More and more schools are becoming familiar with trauma informed practices and developing deeper, more sophisticated approaches to trauma. Every educator should know about the

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) study. Your school should also have a clear definition and approach to being: Trauma Sensitive, Trauma Responsive, Healing Centered. These concepts are grounded in neuroscience and development, and can not only improve trauma response but also build resilience for managing stress and anxiety.

When we build response systems at Tier 2, it has been normal for us to imagine the single individual who needs support, so we've focused on systems that help some of the people some of the time. However, EVERY person will probably need some additional Tier 2 support at some point in their years in our school. Therefore, we must design Tier 2 support systems for EVERYONE, much like we have done for Tier 1. While Tier 1 support is constant, Tier 2 support systems are present and waiting when each of us needs them. One example is designating a room in the school as a "Peace Room" or "Calm Room" that any student or staff can visit when they need a moment of calm or some immediate help becoming regulated. Another example is a Math Resource Room, that is always staffed with students, teachers, and staff who can help a student "just-in-time" with a math question.

**Suggested Activities:**

- Conduct a school culture scan to identify stress points.
- Develop or enhance mindfulness activities and trauma-informed practices.
- Create a plan for a "Peace Room" or similar support space in your school.

## **The Schools We Need Now: A Guide to Designing a Mentally Healthy School**

Week 4 Reading Guide

Chapters 5 and 6 (pages 105-165)

### **Key Topics:**

- Tier 3 interventions for serious mental health challenges
- Overcoming resource limitations and stigma
- Integrating the Mental Health Action Plan
- Aligning school traditions and programs with mental health goals

### **Chapter 5: Tier 3: Supporting Students and Staff with the Greatest Needs**

#### **Questions to Consider**

1. What has been your school's experience working with serious mental illness challenges of students, staff, and families? What is the biggest challenge facing you right now?
2. What individualized or specialized interventions are offered or used?
3. What is the school's approach to educating about depression, self-harm, and suicide?

#### **Author's Insights and Additional Notes**

The two greatest challenges we have in Tier 3 today are resources and stigma. Many schools and communities do not have enough trained staff who can respond to Tier 3 challenges. It is essential that educators and school leaders reach out to local organizations and institutions to see what resources are available. A community-wide system of support is a great way to get more resources to kids, families, and staff. There are also new, wonderful resources that individuals can access remotely, like the 988 support hotline for mental health or telehealth sessions with a therapist.

The other challenge is stigma. Many of us don't get the help we need because we are embarrassed. Studies have shown that knowing help exists and feeling comfortable accessing it increase the chances of getting support. Schools should engage in regular social marketing campaigns to raise awareness about support systems being offered within the school and in the community. They should also look for opportunities to "normalize" getting help. In one school, a group of students developed short skits or plays about Tier 3 resources that were performed live and video-recorded for students to see. These were often accompanied by question and answer sessions so students could learn more and become comfortable with the resources and the idea of using them. The result: an increase in students using the resources.

Many of the ideas in the Mental Health Action Plan are preventative. Our goal is to identify "Upstream solutions to downstream problems." The more we can do that, the fewer Tier 2 and

Tier 3 problems we will need to solve. However, we also know that with a crisis, it isn't a matter of IF, but of WHEN. Therefore, every school must have well-thought out intervention and response plans for a wide variety of crises. We must be good at both prevention and response.

## **Chapter 6: Integrating the Mental Health Action Plan in your School**

### **Questions to Consider**

1. What are long-standing traditions or programs or systems in your school that WORK, that you want to keep as you develop your Mental Health Action Plan?
2. What are some long-standing traditions or programs or systems in your school that do NOT work and need to be ended?
3. What are some long-standing traditions or programs or systems in your school that work, but need some updating or minor changes to be even better? (This part may take some time to discuss!)

### **Author's Insights and Additional Notes**

To be blunt: the first priority of a school should NOT be academics. It should be wellness. Belonging. Relationships. Given what we know about neuroscience, it makes no sense to do anything different. A dysregulated student cannot access their prefrontal cortex or hippocampus easily, or maybe at all. We also know that when students feel safe, supported, and connected that they learn more, do better in school academically, have better relationships, and attend school more regularly.

Unfortunately, almost all of the schools in America have been designed with other priorities in mind, whether academics, workforce readiness, or behavior management. This means we need to re-think every aspect of our schools from what they are to what they need to be. This chapter suggests some of the fundamental structures of a school that must be changed, starting with the very organization of the school to the actual bricks and mortar of the building. The most critical place we need change is in the classroom, where students spend most of their time. This means digging into deep-seated beliefs and experiences with curriculum, instruction, and assessment. It means teachers need to rethink their role in spite of decades of prior experience themselves as students, how they were trained, and how they have operated as professionals. It is not a whole-sale change but rather a greater emphasis on what they have always done: develop trusting relationships with kids, create safe classroom environments for all learners, meet students where they are, design engaging lessons that are student-centered, find curriculum materials that speak to student interest and needs, assess and evaluate progress in learning.

For many students, they learn as much after school as they do during school. Mental health and wellness needs to be a purposeful, conscious part of school-sponsored clubs, sports, performing arts, and social service activities. For profit and not-for-profit community groups must also address mental health in what they do as many kids spend hours before and after school,

on the weekend, and during breaks working directly with kids. Is the football team a safe place for students? Does the YMCA teach SEL skills? Are tutoring centers teaching students how to cope with stress? It takes a village to raise a child. Schools and other student-support organizations must come together to align to a comprehensive mental health action plan!

**Suggested Activities:**

- Identify local resources and partnerships to support Tier 3 interventions.
- Plan social marketing campaigns to raise awareness about mental health resources.
- Review and update school traditions and programs to better support mental health.

**Final Reflection:**

- Reflect on the changes needed in your school to prioritize wellness, belonging, and relationships.
- Develop a comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan tailored to your school's needs.
- Engage with colleagues, students, and the community to implement and sustain these changes.

This study guide aims to help educators systematically address mental health in their schools, fostering a supportive and healthy environment for all.