

## Research in Brief: Effectiveness of School-Based Mental Health Services for Elementary School Children

### Background

A significant proportion of youth develop a mental disorder by adolescence, but most do not receive care. Left untreated, mental disorders can progress into significant problems throughout adolescence and adulthood, including substance abuse, criminal behavior, and an overall lower quality of life. Children of racial and ethnic minorities are especially vulnerable, as they receive fewer and lower quality services.

School-based mental health interventions, where school staff assume frontline provider roles, represent a potential option to reduce these disparities. These interventions can span from universal programs provided to all students, to selective interventions for at-risk student populations, to targeted interventions aimed at students already identified as having mental health problems.

Teachers and counselors deliver the majority of school-based mental health services. However, most research only examines the impact of school interventions provided by highly-trained staff instead of professionals under natural school conditions. This has resulted in little understanding of the effectiveness of school-based mental health services when delivered by educators and regular school personnel. To address this knowledge gap, researchers performed a systematic review and meta-analysis.

### What is a systematic review and meta-analysis?

A systematic review is a type of study that exhaustively summarizes the literature on a specific research question. The purpose of a systematic review is to draw a collective conclusion



### Why does this matter?

- ⇒ Mental health problems are prevalent among youth, yet there remains large unmet need.
- ⇒ Untreated child mental disorders can result in negative consequences, such as substance abuse, criminal behavioral, and suicidality throughout adolescence and adulthood.
- ⇒ School-based mental health interventions delivered by school staff like educators and counselors may present a solution to barriers of mental health care access.
- ⇒ Evaluating the effectiveness of school-based mental health interventions delivered by school staff may have important policy and practice implications.

The Knowledge Network for Student Well-Being is a project of the **Knowledge Network for Applied Educational Research** ([www.knaer-recrae.ca](http://www.knaer-recrae.ca))

Communities of practice in the KNSWB include: **Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition, PREVNet, School Mental Health ASSIST, and the Social Planning Network of Ontario**

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that provides stronger evidence than any single study. This research method involves: 1) framing a specific research question; 2) running a comprehensive search in the literature; 3) screening the retrieved articles for relevance; 4) assessing the research quality of the relevant articles; 5) abstracting results from the relevant articles; and 6) synthesizing the results of the relevant articles to draw a conclusion. A meta-analysis then combines the statistical results of the relevant articles to provide a pooled estimate of effects.

## **What did the researchers do?**

The researchers performed a systematic review and meta-analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of school-based mental health interventions delivered by school staff for elementary school students (K-5). Peer-reviewed studies were retrieved through electronic databases, including PubMed and PsycINFO.

Eligible studies compared the outcomes of students receiving interventions delivered by school staff to the outcomes of a control group of students either receiving no interventions or receiving interventions from psychologists.

Primary outcomes assessed were externalizing behaviour problems (e.g. aggression and hyperactivity) and internalizing behaviour problems (e.g. anxiety and depressive symptoms).

## **What did they learn?**

From 1975 total articles retrieved, 43 studies were eligible for inclusion in the systematic review. The researchers found that the mental health services delivered by school personnel collectively produced a small to moderate decrease in child mental health problems.

The observed school-based mental health interventions represented a range of characteristics. Main areas of emphasis were skill development (social skills, coping skills, and problem-solving) and contingency management (provision of positive consequences for positive behaviour, and negative consequences or removal of privileges for negative behaviour).

Programs duration varied from one week to over one academic year, and frequencies ranged from less than once per week to daily. While some interventions were

integrated into existing academic instruction, others were implemented on top of the normal academic curriculum.

Targeted interventions, followed by selective interventions were substantially more effective compared to universal interventions. Although universal prevention programs demonstrated weaker effects compared to more targeted programs, they may still be important for building awareness and decreasing mental health stigma in the school community at-large.

Particular effectiveness was also observed for:

- Interventions integrated into students' existing academic instruction;
- programs focused on externalizing problems; programs incorporating contingency management; and
- interventions implemented multiple times per week.

Furthermore, relatively brief intervention durations yielded similar effects as programs of longer duration. This may indicate that program intensity is a more important factor than program duration.

Overall, the results of this study highlight the promising potential of school-based mental health interventions delivered by school staff. However, these findings are not representative of all school-based mental health programs, as they reflect an aggregate assessment.

Further research is needed to disentangle the individual components of effective school-based interventions in addition to evaluating long-term outcomes and sustainability.

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