

Mental Health Education in Schools



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Overview

This document serves to provide guidance to districts, schools, and charter schools in complying with Minnesota’s Mental Health Education Statute, and offers suggested mental health education curricula to meet the requirements of [Minnesota Statutes 2024, section 120B.21](#). The requirements of this statute are as follows:

120B.21 Mental Health Education.

(a) School districts and charter schools are encouraged to provide mental health instruction for students in grades 4 through 12 aligned with local health standards and integrated into existing programs, curriculum, or the general school environment of a district or charter school. The commissioner, in consultation with the commissioner of human services, commissioner of health, and mental health organizations, must, by July 1, 2020, and July 1 of each even-numbered year thereafter, provide districts and charter schools with resources gathered by Minnesota mental health advocates, including:

(1) age-appropriate model learning activities for grades 4 through 12 that encompass the mental health components of the National Health Education Standards and the benchmarks developed by the department's quality teaching network in health and best practices in mental health education; and

(2) a directory of resources for planning and implementing age-appropriate mental health curriculum and instruction in grades 4 through 12 that includes resources on suicide and self-harm prevention. A district or charter school providing instruction or presentations on preventing suicide or self-harm must use either the resources provided by the commissioner or other evidence-based instruction.

(b) Starting in the 2026-2027 school year, school districts and charter schools must provide mental health instruction in accordance with paragraph (a).

Additionally, when selecting a mental health education curriculum, NAMI Minnesota supports adhering to the [2024 National Health Education Standards](#) and using evidence-based mental health curriculum in all schools. Minnesota is in the process of creating statewide [Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Health](#). When these are finalized, this document will be updated to include guidance specific to these statewide standards.

Mental Health Education vs. Social-Emotional Learning

Districts, schools, and charters should be aware that SEL instruction likely does not fully meet the requirements of the Mental Health Education statute.

Social Emotional Learning, or SEL, is “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions,” (Reference: [CASEL](#)). CASEL (Collaborative for Academic and Social-Emotional Learning) is the framework (five competencies) that most state education departments look to when considering policies that mandate SEL. They have a [comprehensive tool](#) that reviews SEL curriculums for schools and districts to determine the best fit.

Mental Health Education or Mental Health Literacy (MHL) includes four core components: 1. Understanding how to foster and maintain positive mental health; 2. Understanding common mental health disorders, signs and symptoms, and treatments; 3. Understanding how to seek and offer help effectively; 4. Understanding stigma and strategies for stigma reduction (Reference: [The Mental Health Literacy Collaborative](#)).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Framework	Mental Health Literacy (MHL) Framework
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop healthy identities (self-awareness) • Manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals (self-management) • Feel and show empathy for others (social awareness) • Establish and maintain healthy, supportive relationships (relationship skills) • Make responsible and caring decisions (responsible decision-making) <p>Reference: The CASEL 5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand how to foster and maintain positive mental health • Understand common mental health disorders and treatments • Understand effective help-seeking strategies for self and others • Understand stigma and strategies for stigma reduction <p>Reference: The Mental Health Literacy Collaborative</p>

Mental Health Education and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) are interrelated, particularly in that both have the shared goal of promoting emotional and mental well-being. However, there are differences. SEL develops social and emotional skills like empathy, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills while MHL emphasizes understanding mental health, recognizing symptoms of mental health issues, and knowing when and how to seek help. Because of these differences, SEL curriculum or instruction likely would not fully meet the requirements of Minnesota’s Mental Health Education Statute.

Mental Health Education Curriculum At-a-Glance

Curriculum Name	Which Mental Health Literacy Components are addressed?				Is suicide prevention addressed?	Grade(s) / Grade Level(s)	Free?
	Decreasing Stigma	Understanding how to foster and maintain positive mental health	Understanding how to seek help effectively	Understanding mental health disorders and their treatments			
COPE2Thrive		X	X		No	Elem, Middle, High	No
Ending the Silence	X	X	X	X	Yes	Middle, High	Yes, free
Erika's Lighthouse	X	X	X	X	Yes	Elem, Middle, High	Yes, free
Hazelden Lifelines	X		X		Yes	Grades 5-12	No
Mental Health Essentials	X	X	X	X	Yes	Grades 7-12	No
Pathways to Empower	X	X	X	X	Yes	Elem, Middle, High	No
Reach Out	X	X	X	X	No	Grades 7-12	Yes, free
Sharpen Minds	X	X	X	X	Yes	High	No
tMHFA	X	X	X		Yes	High	No

Suggested Curricula/Programs

The following is a list of mental health education curricula that districts, schools, and charters can consider in meeting the requirements for providing mental health education to students.

Creating Opportunities for Personal Empowerment: COPE2Thrive Programs

COPE2Thrive offers evidence-based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy-based (CBT) programs designed to help children, teens, young adults and adults to deal with anxiety, stress and depression by teaching them how to develop the skills needed to stop negative or unhelpful thoughts and start thinking and behaving in more positive ways. Through a series of brief, easy-to-follow sessions, complete with skills-building activities, the evidence-based COPE 7-Session manual and online program as well as the 15-Session COPE Healthy Lifestyle TEEN [Thinking, Emotions, Exercise and Nutrition] program conveys that there is hope for change, and that both depression and anxiety are treatable.

The manual-based 7-session and 15-session programs are designed to be "taught from the manual", so they can be delivered by counselors, teachers, school nurses, etc. to students one-on-one or in a small group or classroom session. Below is a guide as to which program should be ordered.

Grade Schools, Middle Schools, and High Schools

- Children (ages 7-11)
 - 7-Session Manual-based Instructor-delivered Program
- Teens (ages 11-18)
 - 7-Session Manual-based Instructor-delivered Program
 - 15-Session Healthy Lifestyles Manual-based Instructor-delivered Health and Wellness Program
 - 7-Session Online Self-Delivered Program

Instructor training is available to access online.

Materials can be purchased at [COPE2Thrive](https://www.cope2thrive.com/cope-in-the-classroom) (https://www.cope2thrive.com/cope-in-the-classroom)

Ending the Silence

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) has developed a program called “Ending the Silence.”

Ending the Silence is an education program for middle and high schools that has shown efficacy in helping students ask for and find mental health assistance. Students learn about mental illnesses and the signs and symptoms. Students also hear from someone who has experienced and recovered from a mental illness.

Through Ending the Silence, a presenter from NAMI Minnesota will come to the school. Through this program students will learn:

- Identifying symptoms of mental illness
- Differences between major classifications of mental illness
- Resources
- Education
- Public awareness
- Information about 988 and suicide prevention

All information for the Ending the Silence program can be found at [NAMI](https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Mental-Health-Education/NAMI-Ending-the-Silence) (https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Mental-Health-Education/NAMI-Ending-the-Silence)

You can request an [Ending the Silence class through NAMI Minnesota](https://namimn.org/education-and-public-awareness/request-a-nami-presentation/) at (https://namimn.org/education-and-public-awareness/request-a-nami-presentation/)

Erika's Lighthouse

Erika's Lighthouse is already in use by many Minnesota educators. They provide many different free curriculums and resources for depression education and suicide prevention programs.

You can find their classroom education programs, broken down by grade level, here: [Erika's Lighthouse Classroom Education](https://erikaslighthouse.org/school-depression-awareness-classroom-programs) (<https://erikaslighthouse.org/school-depression-awareness-classroom-programs>).

Training Objectives:

- Level I: Understanding Mental Health (Grades 4-6)
 - Identify that mental health is as important as physical health
 - Explore activities that are emotionally/mentally healthy
 - Distinguish between everyday feelings and overwhelming feelings
- Level II: Depression Awareness (Grades 5-9)
 - Increase knowledge of depression.
 - Decrease negative attitudes of depression and its treatment.
 - Increase self-advocacy and peer to peer intervention.
 - Increase student engagement in activities which promote mental health.
- Level III: Depression Education and Suicide Awareness (Grades 8-12)
 - Define depression as a common mood disorder with specific changes in moods, thoughts, and behaviors.
 - Explain that depression can happen to anyone, anywhere.
 - Explain that there's not one reason someone has depression.
 - Recognize that depression can get better, and you can find support.
 - Access information on depression.

You must register for access to their curriculum, but registration is free. Erika's Lighthouse also includes resources for creating and running afterschool mental health clubs in elementary, middle, and high schools and other resources to improve mental health in schools. Register for free access here: [Erika's Lighthouse](https://erikaslighthouse.org/) (<https://erikaslighthouse.org/>)

Hazelden Lifelines Prevention

This is a suicide prevention curriculum that believes in a Competent Communities approach. This means that suicide prevention should be more than a class taught to students; everyone in the community needs to play a role in suicide prevention. The curriculum consists of four main parts: The Administrative Perspective, Faculty and Staff Training, Parent/Guardian Workshop, and Student Curriculum. The Administrative Perspective helps administrators prepare the school community for a suicide prevention curriculum, including creating suicide intervention and postvention policies. Faculty and Staff Training teaches staff how to be “trusted adults.” This is a 30-minute training that can be tacked on to a regular teacher in-service and can be taught by any member of the school without having to hire out a trainer from Hazelden. The Parent/Guardian Workshop is a one-hour training that teaches parents the warning signs of suicide and how to help their child if their child or someone they know is showing these warning signs.

Hazelden Lifelines Prevention Curriculum requires that the first three parts be completed before teaching the Student Curriculum. The Student Curriculum was originally designed for 7th-10th grade students. Hazelden then added a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for 5th and 6th graders, and then an extra curriculum on life after high school for 11th-12th grade students. 7th-10th grade curriculum is a four-day unit where students learn about their misconceptions on suicide, the warning signs that someone needs help, how to talk to a friend that is showing these warning signs, and how to go to a trusted adult for help. The 5th-6th grade curriculum takes a similar approach, except it has students simply tell an adult if they think something is wrong instead of having students directly ask peers if they are thinking about suicide (5th-6th grade students rarely ask this question directly). Both curriculums emphasize the importance of seeking help and not keeping the warning signs a secret. Each curriculum shows videos of students using the skills taught by this curriculum

Hazelden Lifelines Prevention curriculum incorporates a variety of learning styles through visuals, whole group discussion, small-group work, and videos. Lifelines is designated as a “Program with Evidence of Effectiveness” by Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC). The National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) study on this curriculum showed in students a significant increase in knowledge of suicide, a “significantly greater improvement in attitudes about suicide and suicide intervention,” and “significantly greater improvement in attitudes about seeking adult help.”

Hazelden Lifelines Prevention curriculum is not designed for schools with a recent death from suicide. Schools should wait for at least a semester before implementing the Prevention curriculum. Hazelden Lifelines also has a Postvention curriculum that can be utilized to help schools process recent suicide loss. There is also an Intervention curriculum for students that are most at-risk.

To purchase [Hazelden Lifelines Prevention curriculum](https://www.hazelden.org/store/item/503138?Hazelden-Lifelines-Prevention&src_url=itemquest),
(https://www.hazelden.org/store/item/503138?Hazelden-Lifelines-Prevention&src_url=itemquest)

Mental Health Essentials Student Curriculum

This course has been designed for educators working with students in grades 7 to 12. This is an online curriculum that consists of 6 modules designed to be taught sequentially in 6-12 hours of classroom time. Modules include all course materials including learning objectives, lesson plans and all materials needed to deliver the curriculum in perpetuity. All student-facing materials are also translated into Spanish and Portuguese. Also includes one year of data collection and analysis via Osprey Research Group (pre/post surveys). After analysis, lifetime access to curriculum updates and quarterly Community of Practice Meeting access.

Mental health literacy is the foundation for mental health promotion, prevention, and care and can be developed through classroom-based curriculum implementation that has been scientifically shown to improve mental health related outcomes for students and for their teachers. Curriculum aligns with National Health Education Standards and CASEL competencies.

In this course, educators will learn how to apply this classroom-ready, web-based, modular mental health curriculum resource as well as develop their own mental health literacy. Educators can then use this resource designed to be delivered to regular classrooms to successfully address mental health-related curriculum outcomes designed to be delivered by classroom teachers to students in grades 7 to 12.

Learn more about this course, including program background and learning objectives, at [Mental Health Collaborative](#).

Pathways to Empower

Pathways to Empower offers comprehensive brain-based mental health literacy resources for elementary, middle school, high school, and college communities. Includes:

- Elementary School Teacher Grade-Level Sequential Lesson Plans and Student Workbooks.
- Middle School, High School, and College-level student workbooks that include four core modules.
- Educator Professional Learning Fostering Wellness in Children and Teens (family learning)

Coming Soon: A Pathways to Empower YouTube channel with animated musical content for preschool-aged children and their families.

Pathways to Empower is an understanding of neuroscience combined with simple, real-life applications that are unique, impactful and engaging for students. The curriculum's core surrounds brain science and the Resilient Mindset Model, an approach that proactively helps students build healthy and resilient brain pathways. Their response to challenges is guided through the four S framework: self, situation, support and strategies.

At each level, students engage with age-appropriate content and get to meet the four characters of the brain, a group of illustrated insects that represent the key brain functions involved in decision-making.

For more information, visit [Pathways to Empower](https://k12.kendallhunt.com/content/31503/prog-feature): (<https://k12.kendallhunt.com/content/31503/prog-feature>).

Reachout.com Mental Health Resources

This is a webpage with a variety of mental health related lesson plans for middle and high school students. It provides lessons about different mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. It also includes lessons on managing stress and anxiety and seeking out professional help.

Each lesson is an hour long and includes a variety of learning modalities including games, reading, small group work, large group work, writing, and drawing. Classes about specific mental illnesses discuss warning signs of the mental illness, risk factors, where to get help, and how to support a friend living with a mental illness. All lessons invite students to reflect on what they have learned and how they will apply it to life outside the classroom. One thing to note is that this program is based in Australia, so when discussing resources teachers may need to research their own local resources.

In addition to hour long lesson plans, Reachout.com also provides “Wellbeing 5’s.” These are 5-minute lesson plans that teach students skills for maintaining mental wellbeing, such as coping skills or how to support a friend living with a mental illness. These quick lessons can be used as a way to introduce one of the longer lesson plans, as review, or can be stand-alone mini-lessons.

To access [Reachout.com mental health lesson plans and resources](https://schools.au.reachout.com/mental-health), (<https://schools.au.reachout.com/mental-health>).

Sharpen Minds

The Sharpen Mental Health Literacy program is an evidence-based, 5-hour training program for high school students. The course enables students to engage with over 75 peer-based documentary films incorporated into comprehensive, strength-based modules covering a range of topics including: humanistic mental health literacy, stigma reduction, suicide prevention, disordered eating prevention, strategies for finding support, and “5 minute mindfulness” techniques for improving personal resilience. The asynchronous program was created by Resiliency Technologies, a public health prevention company whose founder worked for nearly 20 years leading mental health literacy and resiliency trainings in schools. The content assembled into SMHL was built in collaboration with over 25 researchers and has been created utilizing best practices (Semchuck et al, 2023) requiring assessment, community listening and stakeholder input (Gruber et al, 2023).

Resource materials include: Full program guide, manual and resource book, self-report checklist, pre/post knowledge assessments and youth-focused videos.

For more information, please visit [Sharpen Minds](https://www.sharpenminds.com/smhl) (https://www.sharpenminds.com/smhl)

Teen Mental Health First Aid (tMHFA)

This program comes from the National Council of Behavioral Health who created Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and Youth Mental Health First Aid. These MHFA programs are designed to teach adults to help others experiencing mental health problems. However, adolescents often do not go to adults when they are in distress; they go to other youth. With Teen Mental Health First Aid, youth ages 14-18 or in grades 9-12 learn how to help each other when experiencing mental health problems, and how to direct their peers to a trusted adult.

There are three ways to teach and learn tMHFA:

- In-person – Lessons are conducted in six 45-minute sessions or three 90-minute sessions.
- Blended – Teens complete a self-paced online lesson, then participate in six live, Instructor-led sessions. These Instructor-led sessions can be:
 - Video conferences
 - In-person classes

tMHFA teaches students about their own mental health as well as what mental illnesses are. The program then goes on to teach a five-step action plan for when a peer needs help as well as teaching suicide prevention. It gives students practice in handling crisis and non-crisis situations. Throughout the program there is a heavy emphasis on going to a trusted adult for help.

To learn how to [bring tMHFA to your school, schedule a call to begin the application process](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/become-an-instructor/tmhfa-info/tmhfa-apply/) (<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/become-an-instructor/tmhfa-info/tmhfa-apply/>)

Other Resources to Consider

- The Minnesota Department of Education supports schools using a [Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems Framework](#) and has developed [guidance and resources](#) to help schools strengthen their supports for student mental health. [The SHAPE System](#) also has free online tools to help improve quality of Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems.
- As mental health education is delivered to students, it is important for a school to have defined their referral pathway, or process in which students can be connected to needed resources and support. Consider the following tools when examining your school or district's mental health referral pathway :
 - [SAMHSA's School Mental Health Referral Pathways Toolkit](#)
 - [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction School Mental Health Referral Pathways](#)
- [Minnesota Statutes 2024, section 121A.35](#) requires schools issuing identification cards to students in grades 6-12 to include 988 information as well as in the school's student handbook and in the student planner if a student planner is distributed by the school. [988 logos and resources](#) are available in multiple languages. The Minnesota Department of Health has additional [988 information and resources](#).
- [Suicide Prevention Resource Center \(SPRC\)](#) is a federally supported repository of resources for suicide prevention and is supported by the surgeon general. Their goal is to provide resources and training to practitioners and others who are in positions of likelihood of facing people at higher risk of suicide. The SPRC includes information and a [resource page for teachers](#).
- [Mental Health Minnesota](#) is a non-profit and non-partisan organization, and an affiliate of Mental Health America. They work to help people in their journey toward mental health recovery and wellness through direct service, public policy, education and outreach. To contact them, call (651) 493-6634 or visit their website at <http://www.mentalhealthmn.org/>.
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\) Minnesota](#) also provides classes on early warning signs for teachers and many of the evidence-based suicide prevention classes. Classes and support groups are available for parents and family members. NAMI Minnesota also provides a helpline along with printed fact sheets and booklets.