

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS

CRISIS RESPONSE AND RECOVERY TEAM

In order to better meet the needs of school districts across the State of Oklahoma, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) developed a Crisis Response and Recovery Team (CRRT) funded through a Department of Justice (DOJ) grant. Currently, the team has 31 active members trained in the PREPaRE Crisis Response and Recovery curriculum, an evidence-based, nationally recognized, comprehensive program developed by educators for educators. An additional 10 staff members will be trained in October 2021, bringing the total number of OSDE-trained staff to 41. Once an individual completes training, they are placed on a national registry of trained members.

Moreover, in early November, eight members of the Crisis Team will be trained as trainers to teach the PREPaRE curriculum to districts statewide. Another eight members will be part of a second cohort of trained trainers for PREPaRE in early spring.

The Crisis Team is able to respond with resources, technical support, in-person crisis management, in-person psychological first aid, grief circles, follow-up support and guidance in recovering from crises. OSDE data indicate a recent increase in crises reporting to the OSDE Crisis Team. In 2019, the first year of responses, the team responded to an average of 4.5 crises per month. Since January 26, 2021, the team has responded on average to 7.14 crises per month. In a one-month period – from July 21 to August 21, 2021 – the Crisis Team responded to 17 crises. This marks a 142% increase in responses. For much of this time, school was not in session.

Since January 26, 2021, the team has responded to 50 crises. Here is a breakdown of responses since August 16, 2021:

Total Responses	50
Call or Resources Only	23
Team Initiated	28
Students Involved	41
Psychological First Aid Provided	77
Crisis Team Members Utilized on Site	40
Homicides	9
Completed Suicides	9
Elementary School Involved	16
Middle School Involved	8
High School Involved	15
Someplace Else Other	2
Staff Deaths	14
COVID Related Deaths	3
Districts Responded to	32

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This trend reflects the need for additional mental health preparedness and response in districts across the state. Additionally, as more and more districts become aware of available OSDE supports, the team is likely to be called on more and more.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, school counselors have increasingly been called on to meet the diverse needs of students, families, educators and the school. School counselors' extensive training and expertise in mental health and education make them uniquely qualified to provide needed support and resources in response to the pandemic. School counselors provide direct services such as classroom and small group instruction on academics, college and career development, and social and emotional learning. Additionally, school counselors provide short-term counseling to students in need. When students need long-term counseling support or families need resources, school counselors collaborate with community agencies to make referrals for students and families. School counselors are also integral to creating a safe and inclusive school environment. School crises did not slow down during the pandemic. In fact, statistics show there was a rise in mental health issues during the pandemic, in addition to routine occurrences of losses and crises. School counselors are the go-to crisis experts in their schools, which means they have been busier than ever.

SCHOOL COUNSELING

While school counselors are fundamental in meeting student, family and school needs, school counselors have also needed support through the pandemic. **School counselors need support in advocating for their appropriate role, relevant professional development, and personal self-care support.**

THE APPROPRIATE ROLE OF A SCHOOL COUNSELOR

Often school leaders and administration do not understand the appropriate role of the school counselor. This results in school counselors being asked to do secretarial duties, coordinate state testing, cover classes, or do lunch, recess, and other duties. Throughout the pandemic, school counselors have also been tasked with inappropriate roles such as contact tracing and temperature checking. *When school counselors are asked to do inappropriate and non-school counseling duties, they are not able to support students' social and emotional, academic, long-term planning and mental health needs.* In response, the OSDE has created the **Oklahoma Comprehensive School Counseling Framework** – a new resource to support school counselors and appropriately define their role as a vital member of the educational team equipped with knowledge on mental health and education to support all students.

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RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

While teachers and other educators receive regular training on research-based best practices, school counselors rarely receive relevant professional development on their role and about how to better serve their students. Knowing this, the OSDE has created multiple free opportunities for asynchronous and synchronous professional development. School counselors are also able to seek coaching and technical assistance from the OSDE team. Additionally, Oklahoma is piloting a professional development program for emergency and alternatively certified school counselors.

PERSONAL SELF-CARE SUPPORT

Through the pandemic, school counselors have been asked to shoulder so much and need opportunities to gather with others for conversation and companionship. In response, the OSDE is offering monthly “Coffee with Counselors,” an informal time for school counselors to come together for an hour of self-care to support each other.



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