



Understanding the Behavioral Health Needs, Strengths, and Gaps of Your School District

Understanding the needs and strengths of students and those who support them is critical to creating a behavioral health system that promotes social-emotional and academic success. A well-designed assessment helps identify priorities not only for direct services, but also for the infrastructure needed at the school and district levels. And a well-implemented assessment is a powerful strategy for engaging key stakeholders in using and supporting the behavioral health system, namely teachers, students, families, administrators, and service providers.

The Behavioral Health System Framework

The behavioral health assessment is built around our School Based Behavioral Health System framework. This framework provides a common reference point for the school districts and behavioral health providers, and guides our technical assistance and continuous improvement efforts. The framework defines school-based behavioral health as:

The infrastructure and programs within a school system that promote the healthy social-emotional development of all students and address behavioral health-related barriers to learning.

The framework defines six core components of school-based behavioral health system, supported by a set of foundational elements. The assessment examines strengths and gaps in all of those areas.

School Based Behavioral Health System Framework

Core Components	Foundational Elements
Assessment and Resourcing	Transformative Leadership
Coordination and Infrastructure	Capacity Building
Cultural Responsiveness	Dynamic Partnerships
District Coordination	Equity Lens
School-Wide Participation	Quality Practice
Three-tiered Continuum of Support	Results Focus
	Smart Financing

Purpose of a Behavioral Health Needs Assessment

The overarching purpose of the assessment is to identify and prioritize the assets and unmet behavioral health needs of students, families, and the overall system in a school district, while building critical relationships and buy-in with key stakeholders.

Goals of a Behavioral Health Needs Assessment

1. Provide a comprehensive assessment of the behavioral health systems and supports for a school district
2. Identify assets and unmet service, resource, and infrastructure needs that inform district priorities
3. Engage district administration and key stakeholder groups in a process that builds their interest and involvement in developing behavioral health services and systems
4. Establish a process for ongoing assessment and continuous improvement of the district behavioral health system

Guiding Questions

Guiding questions are used to frame the overall assessment and to ensure that the process looks at assets and gaps across the whole behavioral health (BH) system. The questions are not meant to be asked as is, nor do they need be kept separate by component or element. The team leading the assessment can determine specific areas of interest or emphasis. There are multiple ways to gather this information, e.g. surveys, focus groups, interviews, youth-led projects, etc. Each assessment instrument should be tailored to the identified priorities and stakeholder group.

Core Component of BH System	Guiding Questions
Assessment and Resourcing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the existing resources to support behavioral health programming? • How are existing resources leveraged? • What additional resources might be available to support the behavioral health system? • How are service gaps assessed and monitored? • What are the greatest gaps in the service system?
Coordination and Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are students referred for services? Is there a system in place to follow up on referrals? • How do students and families learn about existing services? • How does staff learn about services and the referral process? • How are the services aligned and coordinated across the district?
Cultural Responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do providers and schools identify and overcome cultural barriers to outreach and service delivery? • Are supports culturally responsive and aligned with student and family priorities? • Is negative perception about behavioral health services a barrier? • Is lack of knowledge about how to access BH services a barrier for students of color and lower-income students? • Are practices trauma informed?
District Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the district vision around health and wellness and what are the current district initiatives in place to support this vision?

Core Component of BH System	Guiding Questions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the district priorities around behavioral health?
School-Wide Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the school administrator vision for social-emotional learning and BH? Is it aligned with the district’s vision and understood by staff? • How involved is school staff in decision making about BH supports? • How knowledgeable are school administration and staff about the BH needs of students? • How knowledgeable is staff about how to utilize existing BH resources? • How do teachers and administrators collaborate with onsite providers to support the BH needs of students?
Three-Tiered Continuum of Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who provides what services to whom? • What are the most pressing /common BH needs facing students? How are these needs being addressed? • What programs and initiatives are in place around school climate and prevention at the school and district levels? • To what extent is social-emotional learning integrated into instruction? • What confidential space is available for provision of direct BH services? • What are the crisis response protocols and are they implemented consistently across the district? • How are services integrated across the 3 tiers?

Foundational Elements	Guiding Questions
Transformative Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How aligned is district and site based leadership around BH vision? District and county or city leadership?
Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do providers and staff have the tools they need to respond effectively to the BH needs of students and families? What support is needed? • What BH competencies do providers and staff need to strengthen?
Dynamic Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the key district partners? • What new or existing partnerships need to be fostered?
Equity Lens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the data indicate about BH needs of students across ethnic, gender, immigration and socioeconomic status? • What are the specific barriers for underserved populations, e.g. Spanish-speaking, undocumented, boys and men of color?
Quality Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are practices research-based and reflective of current approaches to BH service delivery in schools? • What resources/infrastructure is needed to ensure quality practice across the continuum? What is already in place?
Results Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are services and programs monitored and evaluated? • What are lessons learned from existing programs/services?
Smart Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are the BH initiatives and services financed?

- What is the plan for fund development and ongoing sustainability of programs and services?
- What partnerships can be leveraged to support ongoing sustainability?

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