

EARLY INTERVENTION: The Missing Piece in the **Student Mental Health Crisis**

School Counselors Highlight the Need for Tier 2 Resources to Support Students Earlier, Before Symptoms Escalate



Executive Summary

Students are struggling with social, behavioral and mental health challenges at such a rate that schools are unable to keep up. Now, counselors are sounding the alarm on missed opportunities to help these children.

Nearly all school counselors (96%) worry that too many students are being pushed towards crisis-level care when they would be better served through earlier identification and intervention.

To better understand the unique challenges school counselors are facing, Catapult Learning partnered with [Wakefield Research](#) to survey 500 U.S. K-12 school counselors and with Russell Research to conduct focus groups with K-12 administrators and mental health leaders in public schools.

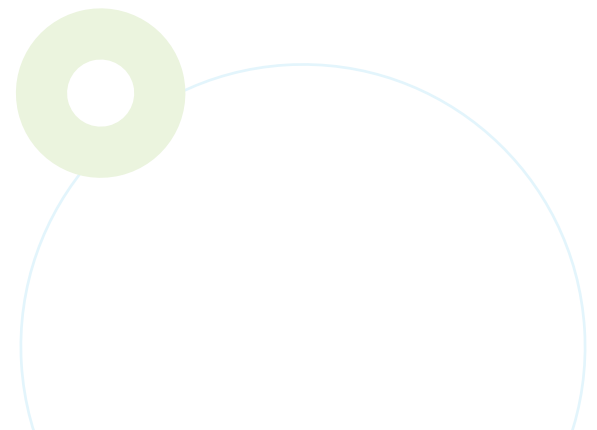
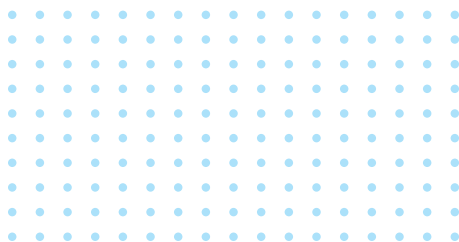
What we found are school support professionals who care deeply about the children they serve yet lack the resources and time to provide the early support their students need. As a result, too many children are being overlooked until the opportunity for early intervention has already passed.

Counselors are calling for a shift in focus—adding to reactive approaches focused on supporting students already in crisis to include more proactive interventions that help students before their struggles escalate.

To make this a reality will require a recognition among school leadership of the power of early intervention as well as supplying school counselors with the resources to support these efforts. These measures can go a long way toward helping to solve the mental health crisis among children.

“We often speak about the mistake of waiting downstream to pull drowning kids from the river until someone finally suggests moving upstream to understand and address how they are falling into the river in the first place.”

Dr. Sharon Hoover
Co-Director of the National Center for School Mental Health



Key Findings



A Call to Action

94%

believe we can't "treat" our way out of the growing mental health crisis among children, and that we must do more to help at-risk students



The Toll It's Taking

90%

say their personal well-being has been negatively impacted by concerns about their ability to support their students' social, emotional, and mental health

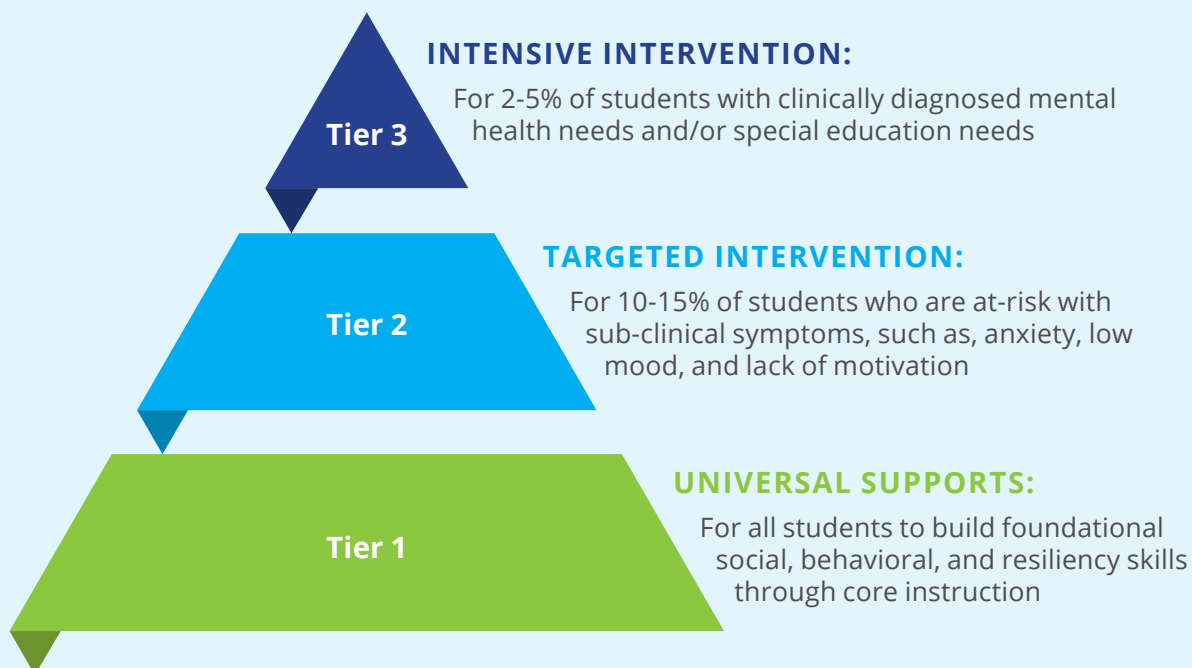


What Counselors Need

63%

lack the time and resources needed to effectively support students' mental health

MTSS Framework: School-based Mental Health



Expanding Early Intervention

As schools struggle to get a handle on the mental health crisis, there is a key opportunity that is being overlooked. Too many students are not receiving the support needed via Tier 2 interventions. Instead, they are pushed toward Tier 3 solutions in a one-size-fits-all model that's a disservice to the most at-risk students, leaving them to compete for resources that are spread increasingly thin.

School support professionals are calling for a shift in student support—moving toward a system that prioritizes proactive interventions to help student before their struggles escalate into crises.

An emphasis on prevention could yield tangible results. A majority of counselors (51%) see students who could have benefited from early intervention often, or even all the time, only receive support once they reach crisis-mode.

Through targeted interventions for struggling students, school counselors and other support professionals can relieve pressure from their colleagues who provide Tier 3 level interventions for youth in crisis. Nearly all (94%) believe that we can't "treat" our way out of the growing mental health crisis among children and that we must do more to help students before they require Tier 3-level support.

Currently, preventing students from reaching the point where they need crisis-level support is not commonly being used as a success metric. Just 37% typically work toward preventing the need for higher-level interventions or a diagnosis as a key success metric of their targeted motivational counseling or emotional support.

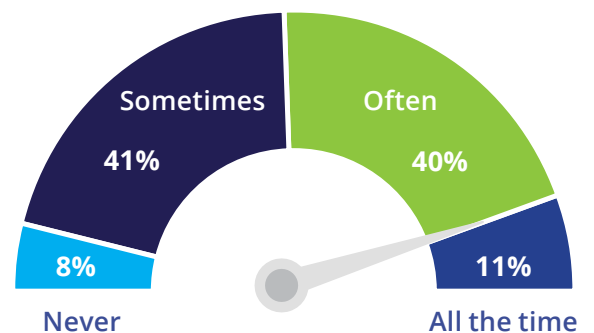
SURVEY QUESTION:

"I worry that the current culture of requiring a diagnosis before providing solutions means we miss early intervention opportunities that could address mental health challenges before they escalate."



SURVEY QUESTION:

How often do students at your school who could have benefited from early intervention not receive support until they have received an official diagnosis?



The Personal Toll

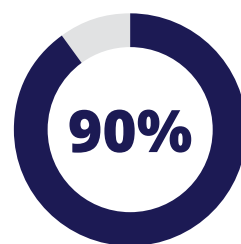
The stress counselors are under is taking a personal toll. The role of a counselor is one of compassion and resilience, yet many find the unrelenting demands of addressing student needs are impacting their own well-being in significant ways.

Counselors are concerned about their ability to support their students' social, behavioral, and mental health, with 90% saying the weight of their responsibilities has an adverse effect on them.

Their mood is impacted, reflecting how professional pressures are spilling outside of the school setting and into their personal lives. This stress permeates the counselors' relationships with family and friends: 35% attribute increased tension with loved ones to the strain they feel at work.

The toll is not only emotional, but also physical. More than a third of counselors experience physical manifestations of stress, as around a third struggle with sleep disturbances (35%) or appetite changes (35%). Chronic stress in the workplace is a known risk factor for long-term health issues, and counselors are already showing signs of these risks.

Beyond physical symptoms, many counselors are grappling with feelings of inadequacy and remorse: 34% frequently feel guilty about not being able to do more for their students. The impact this could have on the retention



of school counselors say their personal well-being is negatively impacted

of school counselors is a concern. Yet the personal toll on counselors is not only a workforce issue but also a student success issue. When counselors are overwhelmed, their capacity to provide the level of care students need diminishes, creating a ripple effect across schools.

SURVEY QUESTION:

Compared to a year ago, are you more or less worried about your ability to support the mental health of your students with the tools and time available to you?



What Counselors Need: Scalable Resources

Counselors encounter many social, behavioral and mental health challenges in students who are struggling, including poor impulse control or an inability to self-regulate (36%), lack of social confidence and skills (33%), lack of academic engagement (33%), and self-doubt or critical thoughts (32%).

As they work to assist students with these challenges, they find a hodgepodge of support across their districts rather than a comprehensive, well-worn plan of action. On any given day, it's hard to anticipate how many students might need support, so when an issue pops up, counselors find themselves in search of a quick fix.

Under these conditions, time is the enemy: 63% of counselors are not able to provide adequate mental health support within their current schedule – they need more hours. Nearly a third (31%) require more than 1 full additional workday each week to provide even an adequate level of support to the students in their current caseload.



63%

of school counselors say they are not able to provide adequate mental health support within their current schedule

SURVEY QUESTION:

How many additional hours per week would you need to provide adequate direct Tier 2 support for the students in your current caseload who are struggling with social, emotional, and mental health needs?



1 out of 3

require more than 1 full additional work day



Among their top three biggest gaps in the resources and tools available to support the social, behavioral, and mental health needs, 63% cite targeted interventions for students with Tier 2 needs. Only 37% are very satisfied with the resources and tools available to support students who are struggling with Tier 2 mental health needs.

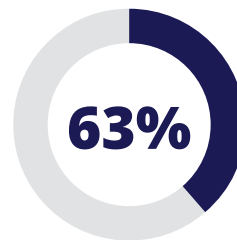
Yet it's not just the tools to conduct the interventions that are needed. Nearly two-thirds (64%) identify the need for more reliable ways to measure the impact of the programs and interventions they are conducting. In addition, over half (56%) want more resources to identify at-risk students.

School counselors turn to a variety of metrics for clues that interventions are working. Around half of counselors (51%) cite improved attendance as one of the most important success metrics they work toward when delivering targeted Tier 2 motivational counseling or emotional supports to students who are struggling. Nearly the same proportion (47%) look to increased engagement as a measure of success.

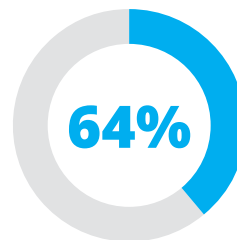
Amid a scarcity of time, tools, and staff, support professionals have another concern: potential budget cuts. Nearly all (96%) worry that their school could see budget cuts in the next 2 years that exacerbate the youth mental health crisis. Already, a number of districts and schools are scraping by with minimal staff due to hiring freezes.

SURVEY QUESTION:

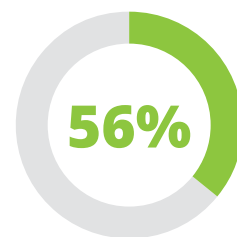
Where are the biggest gaps in the resources and tools available to support the social, emotional, and mental health needs of the students you work with?



Targeted Tier 2 interventions



Data-driven tools to measure impact



Tools to identify at-risk students early

Conclusion

The growing youth mental health crisis is littered with missed opportunities for early interventions. Students are not receiving the necessary support at Tier 2, leading to an escalation of struggles that spill over into academics and personal relationships.

An allocation of funding and resources toward scalable, evidence-based Tier 2 supports—coupled with more robust staff training—could go a long way toward improving the situation. Simultaneously, data must be gathered to evaluate the success of Tier 2 interventions and adjust strategies as needed.

Nearly all school counselors feel that the stress of trying to meet their students’ needs is taking

an outsized toll on their own well-being. They find themselves feeling guilty, struggling to sleep, and ultimately leaving the field. The stress placed on counselors is both detrimental to counselor retention and is impeding student progress, as overwhelmed counselors are unable to provide optimal support.


Addressing these challenges means investing in tools, time, and resources to support counselors in their critical work—and to protect their own well-being as they strive to care for others. Arming counselors with tools to tackle a mounting workload and to support students earlier in their struggles is critical as the country’s youth mental health crisis continues to spin out of control.

Methodology

The Catapult Learning survey was conducted by Wakefield Research among 500 U.S. School Counselors, K-12, between December 2nd and 9th, 2024, using an online survey.

Russell Research conducted four 90-minute online focus groups with K-12 administrators and mental health leaders in public school districts in MA, CA, FL, GA, OH, MN, MS and TX in December 2024.


Action Schools Can Take



Prioritize Educator Well-Being



Identify At-Risk Students Early



Focus on Tier 2 Interventions



Measure Impact



Advocate for Funding