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## CaIMHSA Program Partner Spotlight

### The California Department of Education

### Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade Student Mental Health Program

One in five<sup>1</sup> young people experiences a mental health issue each year, a fact that strains schools working to educate students in a complex environment, and at the same time means educators are in a unique and powerful position to transform California’s mental health on a statewide scale and with a generational impact.

The California Mental Health Services Authority (CaIMHSA)’s partnership with the California Department of Education (CDE) helps schools address both the challenges that come when unidentified and untreated mental health issues present themselves in the classroom, and empowers the teachers and school staff, who reach 6.2 million students in California, to connect students with life-changing resources. CDE’s two projects, the Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup (SMHPW) and Training Educators Through Recognition and Identifications Strategies (TETRIS) address student mental health through policy and training.

#### Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup Mission:

The SMHPW will develop into a diverse coalition of expert and active local, state, and national representatives who will lead and inform student mental health programs in California. This group will grow and become the leading statewide body dedicated to bringing effective long-term changes in the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable K–12 students in California, and we anticipate that the SMHPW will continue its work beyond the three-year CaIMHSA contract period.

#### Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup

With support and funding from CaIMHSA, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction (SSPI) Tom Torlakson convened the Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup to build the capacity of the California student mental health system in kindergarten through grade twelve (K–12) education and related fields. The SMHPW makes annual policy recommendations to the SSPI and the California State Legislature that will favorably impact student mental health and build capacity among K-12 schools, mental health providers, mental health organizations, youth development agencies and others to appropriately refer and provide services to students with mental health needs.

The SMHPW is distinctly composed of 40 educators, mental health experts, and other professionals representing the ethnic and geographic diversity of the state. Though they come from diverse backgrounds, the members share a common interest in improving student mental health. Top priorities identified by the group include promoting collaborative models that

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<sup>1</sup>National Institute of Health. *Information about Mental Illness and the Brain*. Retrieved June 21, 2013, from <http://science.education.nih.gov/supplements/nih5/mental/guide/info-mental-a.htm>.



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reduce mental health stigma and discrimination and supporting the overall improvement of student mental health programs and services.

### **SMHPW First Recommendation**

California’s educators report their lack of preparedness in addressing student mental health challenges as a major barrier to instruction. Credentialed school staff must be better equipped to recognize key signs of mental health conditions and to understand possible actions available to them in addressing student and family needs.

Accordingly, the first recommendation of the SMHPW is to incorporate into educational credentialing programs a curriculum which would enable educators to identify, reach, and teach students affected by mental health conditions and promote school environments and strategies that improve school climate and positive discipline.

If adopted by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), the SMHPW recommendation for all appropriate credentialing programs to include mental health and wellness curricula, with information about mental health conditions and how they manifest at school – will represent a monumental step forward for improving student’s mental health. These new credentialing standards will enable educators (including administrators) to enhance collaborative partnerships and school-level and district-level teams to link students to appropriate services. Educators will also be skilled to provide all students and their families with greater access to mental health services. Such a curriculum will also ensure educators are trained for California’s multicultural population, and school-based family-oriented services will be emphasized in order to reduce stigma and increase follow-through with referrals to improve student mental health.

With a brief window of opportunity to shape credential standards during the CTC’s one-in-a-decade review, the SMHPW has asked Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson to make the proposed credential standards a part of his recommendation to the CTC this August.

A full description of the SMHPW’s recommendation is available [here](#).

### **TETRIS**

The CDE’s statewide K-12 Mental Health Program promotes school and student wellness and academic achievement by increasing capacity for all school and administrative staff to identify students who are experiencing mental health issues early on. To accomplish this goal, the CDE has subcontracted with the Placer County Office of Education to deliver 11 Training Educators through Recognition and Identification Strategies (TETRIS) Eliminating Barriers to Learning (EBL) workshops annually.

Certain negative student behaviors may be symptoms of deeper underlying mental health issues. These behaviors may include school attendance issues, including school avoidance and truancy, bullying, as target or perpetrator, sudden drops in academic achievement, and socialization and other behavioral concerns. TETRIS provides urgently needed, high-quality professional development for school and district-level staff in order to train and support California’s schools in recognizing children’s mental health disorders and related barriers to school success. By understanding and addressing the deeper causes of these issues, school staff will be better equipped to support students and have greater sustained outcomes in improved behavior and school achievement.



TETRIS participant Mike Lombardo with Monica Nepomuceno from CDE and Holly Davison from NAMI CA.

Since September 2012, 11 TETRIS EBL workshops have been conducted in various regions throughout the state, with

**What Participants Are Saying About TETRIS:**

“The entire training was great, loved all the resources that are given in the manual.”

“It was helpful to learn the model and have the opportunity to work as a team and practice what we learned.”

“The training provided a wealth of online resources, speakers, personal stories. It was excellent!”

“I appreciate that it promotes the importance of mental health in schools and helps to reduce the stigma of mental health issues in education”

a goal that participants gain the knowledge and skills to return to their campuses and deliver the training skills to a larger audience, creating a greater statewide impact. Each staff member trained will have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with student mental health issues, as well as their own mental health, and be able to support and make accommodations for those students facing challenges.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson has said, “Schools cannot succeed alone.” And this is certainly true when it comes to identifying mental health issues and providing mental health services to students. Schools must work together with community partners to link students and families to the resources they need. In order to accomplish this, the CDE has embarked on a first time partnership with several local, state, and national organizations to create a comprehensive and robust training for school staff. The curriculum used for the TETRIS EBL workshops is one developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).



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Collaboration has been established with the National Alliance of Mental Illness, California (NAMI) to engage youth with lived experience in mental health to participate in delivering TETRIS trainings. Kognito Interactive Online Simulation Program is also used as an outside source to help support school staff in initiating difficult conversations with students around the subject of mental health and suicidal ideation.

Through their partnership with CaIMHSA, the CDE is working to strengthen student mental health through training and education policy that will increase the likelihood that students will graduate from high school and become successful in their communities.

For more information on the California Department of Education's mental health programs, visit [www.cde.ca.gov](http://www.cde.ca.gov), or contact Monica Nepomuceno at [MNepomuceno@cde.ca.gov](mailto:MNepomuceno@cde.ca.gov) or David Kopperud at [DKopperud@cde.ca.gov](mailto:DKopperud@cde.ca.gov).