



Leading a Mentally Healthy System through the COVID-19 Pandemic

5 Small Ways Directors of Education and Senior Staff Can Make a Big Difference

- 1. Take care of yourself so that you can take care of others:** During times of crisis, your leadership sets the tone for the organization. In addition to managing operations and overall strategic response to the pandemic, your school communities rely on you to model a calm and caring approach so that they can feel reassured and confident about their work and role. Taking care of yourself during this demanding time will yield personal and professional benefits as you lead your organization forward through the pandemic. You might want to review these [personal resiliency tips](#) – they apply to you too!
- 2. Work as a Team:** No one person or group can take sole responsibility for the COVID-19 response in your board. Teamwork and distributed leadership, across and within layers of the organization, is essential. Leverage the trusting relationships you have built, and count on the professionalism and expertise of your colleagues. Continue to nurture an atmosphere of mutual support built on optimism, trust, and proactivity. In terms of mental health, while the superintendent with responsibility for this area has a primary role, student well-being is a shared responsibility across the senior team. Consider also inviting your mental health leader and other school mental health professionals to join in planning conversations related to delivering mental health services during school closures, and afterwards.
- 3. Acknowledge Staff Efforts:** These are difficult days and it is best to presume that everyone is trying their best. Some staff members may be carrying more than you know, with personal health or mental health concerns triggered by the anxiety of these uncertain times. Be affirming and let your staff community know that their efforts matter and that you recognize that they are doing the best that they can. Clearly articulate messages and updates about processes and decisions in a timely and open way with staff and stakeholders so that they know what to expect, and what is expected of them.
- 4. Prioritize Student Mental Health:** This is a vulnerable time when it comes to student mental health. There are increasing risks (e.g., heightened anxiety, isolation) and decreasing protective factors (e.g., routines, access to support). As system leaders, it is important to have a plan for supporting the mental health of students that works alongside the district plan for academic learning, during the school closures and upon return to school. Recognizing the importance of student mental health through aligned plans and clear, caring messaging demonstrates your commitment to all students, and especially to those who may be experiencing mental health problems at this time.
- 5. Ask for Help:** You don't need to have all the answers in leading a mentally healthy system through the COVID-19 pandemic. Lean on your professional associations and networks for help and reach out to trusted partners to hear perspectives that might inspire solutions to challenges. As questions or needs about student mental health arise, contact your mental health leader and/or other school mental health professionals in your board. You may also wish to contact your School Mental Health Ontario Implementation Coach, or tap into resources and information on the [website](#) (and follow us @SMHO_SMSO). You will find specific resources that can help with communication to parents, students, educators, and the media.

No one has walked through the moments we are experiencing right now – the best way forward is together.