

# Using Implementation Science to Optimize School Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic



## Highlights

- School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) is an intermediary organization, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, to help Ontario's 72 school districts in their effort to support student mental health and well-being.
- SMH-ON utilizes a broad implementation approach that considers three key elements:
  1. Infrastructure (system conditions with dedicated roles and structures within the host environment)
  2. Intervention (evidence-informed practices across the multi-tiered continuum of support)
  3. Implementation (effective processes, engagement, training/coaching, feedback loops, monitoring, etc.)
- During the pandemic SMH-ON provided responsive support as a provincial mobilizing system by leveraging implementation strategies such as:
  1. Co-creating resources
  2. Partnering with research teams, school and community-based mental health professionals, provincial education stakeholder groups, and relevant government ministries
  3. Providing coaching support to create consistency in strategy work across Ontario's school boards
  4. Utilizing feedback loops to facilitate rapid communication of practice insights and context shared via board mental health leadership teams to inform both policy and research through SMH-ON

## What is this article about?

Studies suggest that child and youth mental health problems represented a significant public health concern even prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Schools are often the first point of contact for mental health service provision to children and youth and provide an ideal setting for tailored prevention and early intervention services. School closures during the pandemic led to an increased focus on the importance of school mental health as a protective and stabilizing influence and highlighted the need for a coordinated and urgent response.

This article describes how strategic investments in infrastructure, scalable evidence-informed interventions, and embedded implementation supports contributed to rapid mobilization and response in school mental health service provision in Ontario schools during COVID-19.

## Building the foundations for effective and sustainable school mental health

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) is an intermediary organization, established to help school boards across the province promote student mental health and well-being. Drawing on implementation science principles and strategies, SMH-ON has explicitly addressed challenge areas that limit uptake and created the conditions to support and sustain evidence-informed mental health interventions across a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) in Ontario. SMH-ON adopted a broad implementation approach which considers three key elements: (1) *infrastructure*, (2) *intervention*, and (3) *implementation*.

### Infrastructure

In Ontario, the infrastructure built for school mental health implementation consists of 3 key structures: (1) SMH-ON as an intermediary organization to provide provincial leadership and implementation support in school mental health, (2) funding for school boards to create mental health leadership teams with responsibility for overseeing the development and implementation of a mental health and addictions

strategy, and (3) the development of the Innovation and Scale Up Lab in partnership with Western University (ISU Lab) as well as a measurement and monitoring team in collaboration with the Offord Centre at McMaster University. This three-pronged implementation system bridges policy and practice, to bring evidence-informed, culturally-responsive mental health promotion and prevention programming to students.

### Intervention

SMH-ON recognizes the importance of carefully selecting interventions that are not only evidence-informed but also implementation-sensitive, culturally responsive and identity-affirming. To maximize the potential for scalability and sustained uptake, and culturally responsive delivery, SMH-ON explores ways to ready high-quality interventions for the field and encourage uptake across schools in Ontario. Since there is still much work to be done in this area, SMH-ON is working alongside the ISU Lab to deepen the study of evidence-informed, implementation-sensitive protocols and identify lessons learned in scalability and sustainability in an Ontario context. SMH-ON has also partnered with several global leaders, such as the SMART Center at the University of Washington, to expand work in this area.

### Implementation

Given the complexity of the real-world uptake of evidence-informed practices, SMH-ON has devoted considerable attention to effective implementation processes. The following strategies within the nine categories in the school-focused *School Implementation Strategies, Translating ERIC Resources (SISTER) project* have been instrumental in building the foundations for effective uptake of evidence-informed, culturally-responsive mental health practices in school boards across Ontario: (1) Use evaluative and iterative strategies, (2) Provide interactive assistance, (3) Adapt and tailor to context, (4) Develop stakeholder relationships, (5) Train and educate stakeholders, (6) Support educators/clinicians, (7) Engage consumers, (8) Include financial strategies, and (9) Change infrastructure.

## Implications for evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health

Having foundational infrastructure, interventions, and implementation support in place contributed

to the rapid mobilization and response in school mental health service provision in Ontario schools during COVID-19 pandemic. Other jurisdictions considering the potential of school mental health within the context of the pandemic could benefit from some of the strategic approaches and lessons outlined in this article and potentially adapt or optimize their use.

## About this snapshot

### Original research article

This summary was prepared based on the following article:

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