

STRENGTHENING SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS: A LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE FOR PHILIPPINE PRINCIPALS

by:

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Mental health is now recognized as a major educational concern in the Philippines. With the implementation of the Basic Education Mental Health and Well-Being Promotion Act (RA 12080), school principals must ensure that mental health services are systematic, preventive, and learner-centered. A school's mental health program should not only respond to crises but also cultivate a supportive environment where students feel safe, respected, and emotionally secure.

A school-wide mental health system begins with a comprehensive assessment of needs. Principals should gather data on absenteeism, bullying cases, academic difficulties, student behavior referrals, and teacher stress. These indicators help identify patterns and guide program planning. A baseline inventory of existing school resources—such as guidance personnel, child protection committees, and community partners—also helps determine where improvements are needed.

Teacher training is central to effective mental health support. Research shows that teachers are often the first adults to notice early signs of distress in learners (WHO, 2021). Principals should ensure that all teachers receive basic training in mental health literacy, classroom-based psychosocial support, and referral procedures. Teachers trained as “gatekeepers” can help identify learners who need immediate assistance and ensure they are referred to guidance counselors or health professionals.

Establishing safe and confidential counseling systems is another key responsibility. Students must have access to private spaces where they can talk without fear of judgment or exposure. Principals should help guidance personnel establish protocols for intake interviews, case documentation, confidentiality, and parental communication. For students exhibiting moderate to severe concerns, schools should maintain referral networks with barangay health units, psychologists, social workers, or local hospitals

Preventive programs help reduce stigma and promote wellbeing. Homeroom guidance sessions, social-emotional learning (SEL) activities, mindfulness exercises, anti-bullying campaigns, and well-being days are effective in supporting positive school climate. Teachers benefit from these initiatives as well; studies show that teacher wellbeing strongly influences classroom relationships and student outcomes (OECD, 2020). Principals should promote programs that protect teacher mental health, such as peer support circles, appreciation programs, and manageable workloads.

Family and community collaboration enhances support for learners. Parent education workshops, community forums, and partnerships with local organizations strengthen continuity of care. When families understand mental health and feel included in school decisions, they are more likely to support their children's well-being.

Strong leadership in mental health is not optional – it is essential. Principals who invest in a schoolwide approach help students become resilient, emotionally aware, and academically motivated. A mentally healthy school is a thriving school.

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