

Safe and Supportive Schools Commission:
Principles of Effective Practice for Integrating Student Supports
December 2017

This document lays out the principles of how a Safe and Supportive School (SaSS) effectively integrates services that appropriately support individual students. All students need safe and supportive school environments in order to learn at their highest levels. Neuroscience and developmental science affirm that school environments can influence child development, including social-emotional and academic learning. A school culture that promotes a sense of safety and belonging, nourishes relationships, fosters students' ability to regulate emotions and behaviors, supports health and well-being, and enhances academic development is a necessary foundation for educational success.

The Commonwealth prioritized creating such school environments by enacting the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework statute.¹ This law defines a Safe and Supportive School as a school that fosters a safe, positive, healthy and inclusive whole school learning environment; supports students holistically in key areas of development; and integrates services and aligns the many student support initiatives that aim to address particular areas of need in our schools. To support schools as they create these learning environments, the law calls for a statewide infrastructure of support – a safe and supportive schools framework (SaSS framework), a SaSS self-assessment tool, technical assistance from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department), and, importantly, a process to guide educators to implement whole school change.

A critically important component of the SaSS Framework and Self-Assessment Tool is ensuring that when they need them, students and families have access to culturally, linguistically, clinically, age, and developmentally appropriate services that are integrated into a welcoming school culture. Effectively integrating services and supports into a school requires a school infrastructure where school-based student support staff and community providers can work collaboratively, confidentially, and in a coordinated way. The changes that allow all of this to happen often require culture change both within the school and in how the community links with and connects to the school.

The legislature directed the Commission² to “make recommendations to the [Board of Elementary and Secondary Education] regarding ways to include in the self-assessment tool and framework principles of effective practice for integrating student supports.” In considering this charge, the Commission contemplated key questions such as:

1. What basic principles can effectively help schools across the Commonwealth to (a) address the needs of each student, while (b) creating and maintaining inclusive school-wide cultures that seamlessly welcome and address students' individual differences?
2. How can students and their families be assured that adults work collaboratively, coherently, and confidentially to support their success?

From preliminary interviews and a literature review (see Appendix A), and discussions at Commission meetings, the Commission has culled an initial set of eight principles, discussed

¹ G.L. c. 69, § 1P: Safe and Supportive Schools Framework Law:
<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter69/Section1P>.

² This requirement was included in the 2018 state budget line item [7061-9612](#).

below: **Whole School, Whole Child, Mindset, Confidentiality, Collaboration, Coordination, Access to Services, and Partnering with Families.**

A. Whole School

Creating safe and supportive school cultures is integral to students' academic performance, preparation for post-secondary education, employment, and civic engagement. A school-wide safe and supportive culture that welcomes and integrates services in an inclusive way is essential for several reasons.

A school-wide safe and supportive learning environment provides a consistent approach to students by helping to ensure that the values and norms that permeate all the operations of the school are also infused into the services that are provided to students. Upon investigating the areas of social emotional learning (SEL), positive discipline, trauma sensitivity, equity, bullying prevention, and substance abuse prevention, the Commission identified several “pillars” (values and norms) that serve as a foundation for how a safe and supportive school is run. These pillars are helping all students: (1) feel safe physically, emotionally, socially, and academically; (2) feel competent and successful in academic and non-academic areas while striving to meet high standards; (3) be connected as respected and engaged members of the school community; (4) have positive relationships with adults and peers; (5) manage and self-regulate their emotions and behaviors; and (6) have full access to opportunities that enable them to achieve positive outcomes. Sharing consistent values and a clear set of goals for each student enables educators, families, and service providers to help students practice the skills they are developing both in the classroom and with service providers throughout the day and in the community.

Creating a consistent safe and supportive learning environment that integrates services in an inclusive way requires a strong infrastructure. This means that all elements of school operations - leadership, professional learning opportunities, access to services, policies and procedures, academic and non-academic strategies, and engagement with families - must support the teamwork necessary to carry out these goals. This infrastructure must provide the time for reflection and problem solving so that educators and providers are supported to integrate these services in a way that promotes school success for all students. The school must prevent barriers from getting in the way of success, and intervene with more intensive services and supports when necessary and appropriate. Importantly, a strong whole school infrastructure allows both school staff and community providers to ensure that available comprehensive services can address the full range of student and family needs that may arise at any given time, including the critically important basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter.

B. Whole Child

All services (no matter where they are delivered or who delivers them) should be focused on supporting the whole child, so as to “enable students to develop positive relationships with adults and peers, regulate their emotions and behavior, achieve academic and non-academic success in school, and maintain physical and psychological health and well-being.”³ As each student presents with a unique set of strengths and needs within these four core domains, providing individually tailored services and supports is essential. Moreover, the use of these four domains can not only help to address the holistic needs of students, but also can serve as a shared

³ From G.L. c. 69, § 1P; the quote is an excerpt from the definition of safe and supportive schools.

vocabulary that unifies the work of all educators, school-based student support staff, and community-based providers, enhancing the collaboration and coordination between the school and community-based service providers, as their respective efforts are more easily integrated through this common focus. To ensure efficacy, educators need to continuously collect and analyze data, providing feedback they can use to help students progress toward identified goals.

C. Mindset

To effectively integrate services in a safe and supportive school, educators and families may need new ways of thinking, at both the school level and among community-based providers. While these mindsets may not be new for everyone, the following mindsets need to be encouraged, strengthened, or adopted throughout the school to help create the school-wide culture that facilitates effective service integration.

- Emphasize a strengths-based focus on skill-building, asking “what can we as a school community, in collaboration with community-based providers, do to support this student in developing skills?” vs. focusing exclusively or primarily on student deficits.
- Consider *all* staff as a team to have responsibility for *all* students in the school vs. each student being one professional’s responsibility.
- Students and adults work together to ensure classrooms, school-wide activities, and services develop students’ sense of agency and self-advocacy to support both students’ successful school experiences, and positive transitions to post-secondary experiences and adulthood.
- Safe and supportive schools foster the development of student voice and student leadership, providing authentic opportunities for students to share power with adults.
- All staff and providers are explicit and intentional about connecting students to the school community, providing multiple opportunities and support as they practice new and developing skills in all locations and activities throughout the school, and helping their peers utilize their developing social skills to welcome and include them.
- School personnel welcome the involvement of community-based service providers and support the providers’ understanding of the school structure and culture to foster seamless integration of services. Central to creating safe and supportive schools is use of the public health tiered approach, which provides universal supports that are available to all students to foster social, emotional, and academic skills, and then more specialized tiered interventions when additional support is needed for any student at any time. These individual supports must be tailored to meet in a holistic way the unique needs of each student.
- School-based and community-based service providers include the goal of school success in their work with any individual student. For community-based service providers, this also includes understanding the context of the “child in school,” understanding, respecting, and, where possible, working within the structure and culture of the school;
- Safe and supportive schools and communities recognize that any student or any family might need services at any given time. This understanding helps remove the stigma associated with receiving services, so that families are more likely to engage with community-based services. For example, any family can walk into the [Family Resource Centers](#)⁴ (FRCs) at any time and get help.

⁴ Massachusetts FRCs are a statewide network of community-based providers offering multi-cultural parenting programs, support groups, early childhood services, information and referral resources and education for families whose children range in age from birth to 18 years of age. For more information see <https://www.frma.org/>.

- Safe and supportive schools and communities ensure that supports and services are family-driven, by engaging families as active partners in supports and services and recognizing that they have expertise about their students and their needs that may be different from but equally valid as the professional expertise of the service providers.
- School-based student support staff participate in and enhance classroom and school-wide activities that promote skill building and well-being, and increase student connection with the school community, as well as supporting the individual student.⁵

D. Confidentiality

To build trusting relationships among school, community, and family partners, and thus better support student needs, partnerships with local community-based providers and child-serving state agencies should be carefully structured and consistent with privacy laws. Schools must establish and maintain clear protocols around confidentiality, providing regular training to all staff to ensure consistency across the school. Families and students rely on confidentiality policies when they disclose information to schools and allow schools to share information with community-based providers, because these protections enable them to trust that their information will be kept confidential, e.g., only shared with or by staff identified on a Release of Information form.⁶ Without such assurances, many families are reluctant to share personal and family information for fear that the private details of their lives will be indiscriminately disclosed to all school staff and possibly other families. A betrayal of confidence could result in a loss of trust in the school on the part of both the student and family, a corresponding disengagement with community-based services, and disconnection from the school community. Moreover, unauthorized disclosures of personal information violate federal and state law.

E. Collaboration

Effective integration of comprehensive services to meet the individual needs of students and their families can be aided by institutional collaboration. Institutional collaboration refers to the institutional-level partnerships between the school/district and community-based organizations. School-family-community partnerships are essential to supporting students' success at school. Relationships between schools and community providers need to be supported by protocols and, where appropriate, by contracts that guide regular and ongoing communication; clarify expectations and bridge differing institutional structures and cultures; share information about resource availability; establish effective and timely referral and intake systems; explore opportunities to share expertise among educators, school-based student support staff, and community-based providers; and structure the joint responsibilities of partnerships between school/district and community agencies through memoranda of understanding when appropriate.

Community based organization/school partnerships

- Community-based organizations/school partnerships can move fragmented, siloed entities into a cohesive, integrated system that can support students and families more effectively. For example, a Trauma Advisory Board, convened by one district, , as well as the Trauma-Informed Leadership Teams, convened by the Department of Children and Families in many communities, are examples of approaches in which schools and community-based providers

⁵ (Adelman and Taylor, 2012)

⁶ 2011 report of the BHPS Task Force, Page 20, Appendix A.

share information about available resources with each other and with families, plan for community outreach to families, structure joint training opportunities, and plan community-based projects to address urgent or emerging needs in the community. The Systems of Care meetings, convened by the Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative’s (CBHI) Community Service Agencies (CSA), are also designed to foster collaboration between agencies and schools at the local level.

- Moreover, as school leaders and community partners collaborate at the institutional level, they are setting the context and culture for the coordination and teamwork that is required at the student/family level (see section on coordination below), respecting the expertise that each brings, articulating the common goals they share, and modeling their openness to learning together and their willingness to approach each barrier encountered with “open and flexible thinking,” as one interviewee described.

School/State Partnerships

- In addition to community/school partnerships the Commission recommends that the state investigate ways to address the ongoing, persistent challenge of building relationships between schools – which are locally controlled and town-based – and state agencies – which are centrally controlled and regionally based. Effective structures will set conditions for leaders of respective institutions and agencies to establish the context and culture for their staff as described above. (Please see Appendix B for a visual representation of the concentric circles of support that institutional structures from the local to the state level need to provide to support students, families, and schools. This diagram was included in the 2011 report of the BHPS Task Force, page 22, Section III.)

F. Coordination

Coordination refers to the *student-specific* partnerships *within the school* and *between school-based and community-based providers*. The goal of coordination is to enable effective and ongoing communication at the school level so that all services and supports to an individual student/family are cohesive, comprehensive, mutually reinforcing, individually tailored to specific needs, and organized around common goals that support the student’s success at school. These services may include effective crisis prevention and intervention, and successful re-entry back to school after hospitalization, placement, etc. when needed. To enhance coordination, safe and supportive schools make it a priority to provide a regular structure, process, and time for communication, which enables educators, school-based student support staff, and community-based providers to calibrate strategies and track student progress toward the common goals of school success. Most importantly, these discussions enable the team to reflect on and ensure that all possible opportunities for strengthening the student’s connection with the school community are in place. Engaging every teacher who is involved with the student is critical to developing the most effective plan.⁷

Safe and supportive schools establish structures that enable them to coordinate and sustain the seamless integration of services into the school. One such key structure is identifying a point person at the school and a point person at the community-based organization who serve as

⁷ See Journal of Teaching and Teacher

Education: https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/lsoe_sites/coss/student-support-teacher-impact.pdf.

“connectors.” They each ensure that all representatives of their respective organizations know the established protocols for effective coordination (see above); address “stuck” referrals, as needed; provide ongoing feedback, and problem-solve “glitches” as they occur. The most effective point person for the community-based providers is the supervisor, who due to a longer-term relationship with school staff may have critical information to share about the context of the school that can inform the providers’ work with individual students. Knowledge about the curriculum and approaches that are in place in the school to build students’ social, emotional, and behavioral management skills enables providers to better integrate their work with students and the school around a common language and approach to ensure school success. While providers will coordinate their work with the student’s team at the school, having this background information about the school’s context is critical to enhance effective coordination. The point persons further can model the focus on strong positive relationships, a strengths-based approach, and the “open and flexible thinking” their respective organizations have adopted as collaborative partners.

G. Access to Services

Schools must ensure that all students, including those with a range of disabilities, have equitable access to clinically, culturally, linguistically, age and developmentally appropriate services. Ensuring access to services does not require the co-location of services in schools; rather, it recognizes that schools are uniquely situated to know each of their students and families, and to facilitate students’ connections to a tailored set of school - and community-based services and opportunities that support students’ readiness to learn.

Community-based organizations should be trauma-informed, i.e., aware of the impact of trauma on clients’ responsiveness to services, and understand that a client may need enhanced individualized support to fully access services. All school-based and community-based providers need to have a keen awareness/sensitivity to the barriers that students may experience in feeling safe, trusting and respected, which may prevent them from engaging in services. The providers’ ability to communicate to students, in both explicit and subtle ways, that they have empathic understanding for the student is a critical element of access to effective services. All school-based and community-based providers need to have awareness of/sensitivity to the specific needs of every student. Schools and community-based providers also need the capacity to deliver the full range of services and supports in all languages required to serve students and families whose first language is not English, including providing interpreters for meetings, translating documents, and accessing evaluations.

The Commission plans to conduct information-gathering sessions across the Commonwealth during 2018 to identify barriers to accessing clinically, culturally, linguistically and developmentally appropriate services, in accordance with the mandate set forth in G.L., c. 69, § 1P.

H. Partnering with Families

Safe and supportive schools are flexible and creative in their efforts to fully engage all families as essential partners, providing a range of opportunities for authentic and meaningful involvement. Families are empowered to participate as partners in every facet of the education and development of their students. This includes the school’s efforts to evaluate what problems might need to be addressed to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for all students

and the services that are available to support individual students. The school serves as a resource for individual families regarding information and referrals on community support resources (e.g., behavioral health and medical services, public assistance, housing, etc.). Families are encouraged to share feedback about the quality and responsiveness of school-based and community-based resources and services. Safe and supportive schools recognize that ensuring that the school is experienced as a safe, welcoming, and inclusive community is as important for families as it is for students.

APPENDIX A

This preliminary draft was informed by interviews with five leaders in the field who have unique perspectives on integrating services, and a review of the literature, including the 2011 Final Report of the Massachusetts Behavioral Health and Public Schools Task Force.

Interviews were held with the following people during October and November 2017. We extend our sincere appreciation to them for sharing their professional wisdom and experience with us, and look forward to more interviews and focus groups to further inform this process. We also are grateful to the team from Massachusetts Advocates for Children and the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, Anne Eisner, Michael Gregory, and Marisa del Rosario, who worked with the Commission Co-Chairs to conduct the interviews.

- Joanne Camillo, current Principal (Barrett Russell School) and former School Adjustment Counselor, Brockton Public Schools
- Glenn Daly, Director, Office of Youth Development, Office of Children, Youth and Families, EOHHS, about the Family Resource Centers (FRC)
- Patrice DiNatale, Director of New Practice, City Connects; Center for Optimized Student Support (COSS), Boston College (BC) Lynch School of Education
- Jack Simons, Director, Children’s Behavioral Health Initiatives (CBHI), Mass Health
- Joan Wasser Gish, Director of Strategic Initiatives, COSS, BC Lynch School of Education

The **literature review** included:

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- Wasser Gish, J. and Walsh, M. (2017). *Tipping the Scales: How integrating school and community resources can improve student outcomes and the Commonwealth’s future*. *Center for Optimized Student Support, Boston College*.

APPENDIX B

Multiple levels of support, from 2011 report of the BHPS Task Force, Page 22, Section III

