

**ECHO IDAHO**

K12 Youth Well-being & Upstream  
Prevention

# Overcoming Real and Perceived Barriers to Youth Well-being

February 13, 2026

Janelle Stauffer, LCSW, The Resiliency Center of Idaho  
Hannah Crumrine, MHS, Idaho Department of Education

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# Learning Objectives

**Identify and clearly name real and perceived barriers** that prevent effective implementation of upstream prevention efforts in schools.

**Understand a range of practical approaches** for addressing common implementation barriers without increasing burden on schools.

**Feel confident and empowered to take next steps** toward implementing upstream prevention that is targeted, feasible, and aligned with existing school priorities.

# An Important Acknowledgement

Many of the policies and conditions that shape our work are set outside of our direct control and influence what supports are available.

Even within these frameworks, schools can meaningfully support students, respond to their needs, and drive positive change.

# Stigma Around Mental Health & Help Seeking

- Cultural norms of **self-reliance, toughness, and privacy**
- Fear of being labeled, disciplined, or “sent somewhere”
- Youth often associate mental health support with **crisis**, not care

# Stigma, Cont

- Stigma is **reinforced by systems**, not just beliefs
- Referral-only models = “something must be wrong with you”
- Crisis-driven responses teach students to wait until things fall apart
- When mental health is built into programming, students don't feel like something is wrong with them for needing support.

# Shift 1: Replace Referral -Only Models with Consultation Models

## Plain language for schools:

- Teachers don't "send kids away"
- Teachers **partner with counselors**
- Support happens *in context*, not behind closed doors

## Make it doable for overworked teachers:

- 10–15 minute consults
- Focus on *what to try next*, not diagnosis
- Shared responsibility instead of hand-offs

# Shift 2: Shared Mental Health Language Across Staff

Simple, consistent language:

- “Regulated / dysregulated”
- “Connection before correction”
- “Skill gaps, not character flaws”

Reduces personality-driven responses

Makes support predictable for students

Even when stigma is reduced, students still face barriers that have nothing to do with willingness — and everything to do with access.

# Expectations of Teachers — Access & Time

## What We Often Expect (Unspoken)

- Notice every student who is struggling
- Differentiate between behavior, trauma, anxiety, depression
- Manage emotions *and* curriculum
- Know when to refer — and how
- Do this with **limited time and training**

# Why this matters for mental health

This bridges perfectly from stigma.

- When access to support depends on **teacher capacity alone**, students are missed
- Quiet, compliant, or marginalized students are least likely to be noticed
- Teachers may delay action because:
  - “I don’t have time”
  - “I’m not sure this is serious enough”
  - “I don’t want to overreact”

# What systems can do instead

## Shift Expectations from Individual to Structural

- Teachers are **first observers**, not sole responders
- Systems create **clear, easy access points** for support
- Mental health help does not require perfection or crisis

# What Systems Can Do Instead

## Concrete System Supports

- Scheduled consultation time built into the week
- Clear pathways: *Who do I talk to? When? About what?*
- Simple shared language (regulated/dysregulated, connection before correction)
- Support embedded in classrooms, not added on top

# Overlooking the Quiet or Marginalized Students

## Who Is Most Often Missed

- Students of the global majority who:
  - Are quiet, compliant, or “doing fine” academically
  - Experience racism, microaggressions, or cultural isolation
  - Carry family stress, immigration stress, or community trauma
  - Have learned that visibility can bring risk

## Many school systems are designed to respond to:

- Disruption
- Behavior referrals
- Adult -raised concerns

## Distress that looks like:

- Withdrawal
- Perfectionism
- Emotional shutdown

**often goes unnoticed**

When distress doesn't disrupt the classroom, it often doesn't disrupt the system.

# Additional Barriers for Students of the Global Majority

- Cultural norms that discourage expressing distress to authority figures
- Fear of being misunderstood, stereotyped, or punished
- Language differences that limit emotional expression
- Prior experiences of harm when asking for help

# System -Level Consequences

Emotional needs go unaddressed

Support comes late — often during crisis

Students internalize:

- “Help isn’t meant for me”
- “I need to handle this on my own”

Racial and equity gaps widen over time

**Systems that rely on visibility unintentionally reinforce inequity.**

# Solutions

1. Build Universal Supports That Don't Require Self-Advocacy
2. Create Multiple Pathways to Signal Need (Not Just Referrals)
3. Invest in Relationship-Based Access, Not Crisis Thresholds
4. Normalize Support Before Students Have to Ask

**We don't fix inequity by teaching students to ask louder  
we fix it by designing systems that listen better.**

# Lack of Strategic Alignment

Without alignment, upstream prevention efforts stall or fail to launch

Competing priorities, unclear ownership, and initiative fatigue block progress

Strategic alignment removes these barriers and creates conditions for successful prevention

# How Lack of Alignment Shows Up

No shared definition of “prevention” or success

Prevention seen as an added initiative rather than a core strategy

Unclear roles across district, school, and community partners

Limited time and capacity at the school level

# Getting on the Same Page

## Reframe Prevention as Infrastructure, Not an Initiative

Position upstream prevention as foundational to academic success and school climate

Explicitly connect prevention to existing frameworks (MTSS, SEL, PBIS)

## Create a Shared Problem Statement

Use district data to agree on the core challenges prevention is meant to address

Focus on current system strain (crisis response, staff burnout, lost instructional time)

# Getting on the Same Page

## Clarify Ownership and Decision Rights

Define who sets priorities, who supports implementation, and who monitors outcomes

Avoid broad committees; assign clear leads with authority

## Differentiate Buy -In by Role

District leaders: alignment reduces risk and wasted investment

Principals: alignment simplifies expectations and reduces competing demands

Staff: alignment means fewer surprises and clearer support

# Problem Clarity and Actionable Data

Upstream prevention fails when districts act on assumptions instead of evidence

Without clear data, resources are misdirected and true needs remain unaddressed

Problem clarity is a prerequisite for selecting effective prevention strategies

# How Lack of Clarity or Data Shows Up

Decisions based on anecdotes or isolated incidents

Over-reliance on discipline or referral data alone

No shared understanding of root causes

Limited student and staff voice in defining the issue

# Using Data to Get Clarity

## Shift From “What’s Happening?” to “Why Is It Happening?”

Pair outcome data (attendance, behavior) with perception data (student, staff, family surveys)

Focus on patterns and drivers rather than single indicators

## Use Low-Burden Data Collection Tools

Short, validated surveys embedded into existing processes

Leverage data already being collected but not analyzed together

# Using Data to Get Clarity

## Center Student Voice

Ensure prevention priorities reflect lived experience

Use representative samples rather than full participation requirements

## Establish a Shared Data Review Process

Cross-functional review of data to build a common understanding

Agree on what data will guide decisions before selecting interventions

# Written Parent/Guardian Consent

Upstream prevention data collection is blocked or weakened when schools struggle to get active written parental consent.

## Why It Matters :

Without consent, student input is incomplete, skewed, or unavailable making it difficult to understand needs, target prevention, or evaluate impact.

# How Lack of Consent Shows Up

Low return rates on consent forms

Parent uncertainty or mistrust about survey purpose

Administrative burden for schools

Language, access, and communication gaps

# Getting Parents/Guardians Onboard

## Communicate Early, Clearly, and Frequently

Share the purpose, benefits, and protections of the survey with parents well before consent forms are sent.

Use multiple channels (mail, email, text, school apps, newsletters).

Frame the survey as a tool for improving student well-being and school supports, not as research for its own sake.

Include FAQs and assurances about confidentiality and how data will be used.

# Getting Parents/Guardians Onboard

## Embed Consent in Routine Touchpoints

Include consent forms in standard school processes like school registration packets, back-to-school materials, or existing electronic portals.

If possible, offer the ability to consent digitally to reduce friction and make it easier for families to respond.

# Getting Parents/Guardians Onboard

## Follow Up with Parents Systematically

Plan multiple reminders after the initial distribution of consent forms (e.g., at least 2 –3 reminders).

Use personalized follow -ups via phone calls, text reminders, or school staff outreach to families who haven't yet responded.

# Getting Parents/Guardians Onboard

## Engage Parents as Partners and Champions

Invite parents to preview the survey content so they understand what will be asked and why.

Host informational sessions (virtual or in person) where families can ask questions about the survey.

Recruit a few well -connected parents to champion the effort — parents may be most responsive to messages coming from other parents.

# Keeping the Lift Low for Schools

Centralize form creation and tracking at the district level

Provide ready -to -use templates and message scripts

Use digital platforms whenever possible

Pair consent outreach with other school communications (less extra work, wider reach)

# References

- Reference 1
- Reference 2
- Reference 3