

# A Guide to School-Based Mental Health Services and Professionals in Colorado



## Exceptional Student Services Unit (ESSU) / Office of Special Education Technical Assistance

### Introduction

School-Based Mental Health Professionals play a crucial role in schools and districts by providing comprehensive social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health support. They use their unique skills, training, and expertise in a collaborative, team-based approach to address the diverse needs of students and staff. Their efforts align with multi-tiered systems of support, focusing on evidence-based interventions, comprehensive screening and assessment, team-driven shared leadership, data-driven problem-solving practices, facilitating connections between families, schools, and community resources, and ensuring equitable access to support and intervention to achieve positive outcomes.

According to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Sec. 4102, a school-based mental health services provider is defined as a State-licensed or State-certified school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker, or other State-licensed or certified mental health professional qualified under State law to offer mental and behavioral health services to children and adolescents (birth to 21). In addition, Colorado passed SB23-004 which enables Eligible School-Based Therapists to provide support within the school setting, adhering to their scope of practice and contributing to the continuum of services in schools. Together, School-based mental health service providers collaborate and provide a layered continuum of supports, spanning from universal, preventative strategies at the school-wide level to targeted and intensive individual interventions. Additionally, these school-based mental and behavioral health service providers play a vital role not only in making referrals but also in providing resources and establishing collaborations when students have needs that go beyond the scope of school intervention. Each school district or administrative unit determines how to employ these professionals to meet the needs of their unique communities and students. This collaborative approach ensures the delivery of wraparound support to address the comprehensive well-being of the students.

It is important to note that this guide does not offer legal interpretation or advice. Local school district policies will often provide additional clarification on the issues discussed. The guide's purpose is to address common questions surrounding school-based mental and behavioral health services and provide insights into the collaborative efforts needed for effective implementation.



## Who are Colorado School-Based Mental Health Professionals

### [School Counselor - 7.09 \(PDF\)](#)

School counselors support all students across the three domains of academic, career, and social/emotional development. School counselors are vital members of the education team that lead, advocate, and collaborate to promote equity and access for all students. They develop data-driven programs that respond to student and school needs, deliver targeted interventions and activities that may span from universal to intensive supports, and continually assess programming and student outcomes. Colorado school counselors should have training and knowledge that aligns with the [American School Counselor Association \(ASCA\) National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs](#).

School Counselors should receive training that support the demonstration of the following competencies according to 1 CCR 301-101:

- Mastery of and expertise in the domain for which the counselor is responsible.
- Establishes safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environments for a diverse population of students.
- Plans, delivers, and monitors services, or specially designed instruction and creates environments that facilitate learning for students.
- Reflects on personal practice.
- Collaboration, advocacy, and leadership.

Colorado school counselors provide planning, support, and direct and indirect services to all students to support academic, social/emotional, and career development. School counselors review and analyze data to deliver school-wide programming, interventions, and services that target improving student outcomes in the areas of attendance, achievement, behavior, and discipline.

Direct student services encompass schoolwide instruction, including classroom, small-group, and individual interventions, as well as appraisal and advisement activities that aid in exploring interests, planning, and goal-setting. They also involve short-term school-based counseling and crisis preparedness, response, and recovery. On the other hand, indirect student services involve referrals to community partners for long-term support, consultation and collaboration with families, teachers, administrators, community members, and stakeholders, advocacy and leadership for students at student-focused meetings and school-wide planning, data analysis to identify student needs and opportunities, and collaboration with teams on school plans including Unified Improvement Plans.

[Rubric for Evaluating Colorado Special Services Providers: School Counselors](#)  
[The School Counselor and School Counseling Programs](#)  
[Who are School Counselors?](#)



## School Psychologist - [7.06 \(PDF\)](#)

School psychologists are uniquely qualified members of school teams, supporting students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach. They apply expertise in mental health, learning, and behavior to help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. Working with families, teachers, school administrators, other professionals, and community partners, they create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community. These professionals also help children and youth overcome barriers to success in school, at home, and in life. Using various strategies, they address individual needs and enhance systems supporting students at school and district levels. In Colorado, school psychologists collaborate with various stakeholders to improve academic achievement, promote positive behavior, increase access to mental health support, and support and advocate for diverse learners. They contribute to creating safe schools through multi-tiered support systems and improving school climate, as well as strengthening the partnership between home and school. School psychologists rely on data and assessments to monitor student progress and work with teachers on best-practice interventions to improve academics and behavior.

School psychologists have training and knowledge which aligns with the [National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\) Model of Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services](#), also known as the Practice Model.

School Psychologists are prepared with specialized knowledge and skills including but not limited to:

- Promote student motivation and engagement
- Conduct psychological and academic assessments
- Individualize instruction and interventions
- Manage student and classroom behavior
- Monitor student progress
- Collect and interpret student and classroom data
- Reduce inappropriate referrals to special education
- Provide culturally responsive services to students and families from diverse backgrounds
- Plan appropriate Individualized Education Programs for students with disabilities
- Modify and adapt curricula and instruction
- Adjust classroom facilities and routines to improve student engagement and learning
- Monitor and effectively communicate with parents about student progress
- Prevent bullying and other forms of violence
- Support social-emotional learning
- Assist in navigating special education processes
- Support and intervene with crisis preparedness, response, and recovery

[Rubric for Evaluating Colorado Special Services Providers: School Psychologists](#)

[Who are School Psychologists?](#)



## **School Social Worker - [7.07 \(PDF\)](#)**

School Social Workers are Colorado Licensed Social Workers specializing in school services. School Social Workers are trained mental and behavioral health professionals providing support for students' social and emotional behavioral health. They are uniquely trained to serve as a link between home, school, and community through direct and indirect services.

School social workers have training and knowledge that aligns with the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Standards for School Social Work and is used in conjunction with the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) Practice Model.

School Social Workers are prepared with specialized knowledge and skills including but not limited to:

- Core competencies of social work practice and ethical standards
- Historical and current perspectives of public education policies
- Strengths-based perspective that honors diversity, culture, and empowerment
- Ecological systems perspective
- Evidence-based education, behavioral, and mental health services.
- Prevention and intervention services
- Effects of oppression, poverty, discrimination, and marginalization
- Assessments for individuals, families, communities, and systems
- Data review and decision-making
- Interdisciplinary collaboration and leadership
- Crisis preparedness, response, and recovery
- Trauma-informed care principles

School social workers provide a range of services including:

- Assessment of students for special education services
- Individual and/or group service provision
- Data-based decision making
- Consultation and collaboration with staff, teachers, students, families, community
- Provide social, emotional, behavioral and mental health services and interventions
- School Systems Analysis
- School-wide practices to promote learning
- Services to promote safe and supportive schools
- Equitable practices for diverse student populations
- Research and evidence-based practices
- Legal, ethical, and professional practice
- Crisis preparedness, response, and recovery

[Rubric for Evaluating Colorado Special Services Providers: School Social Workers](#)  
[Who are School Social Workers?](#)



## Eligible School-Based Therapists (SB23-004)

Eligible School-Based Therapists include Licensed Psychologists, Licensed Social Workers, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, Licensed Professional Counselors, and Licensed Addiction Counselors. School districts and Administrative Units may choose to hire Eligible School-Based Therapists to work in coordination with CDE Licensed Special Service Providers and other CDE Licensed Professionals to provide supplemental support to students' social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health (Employment of School Mental Health Professionals, 2023). Each Administrative Unit will determine how Eligible School-Based Therapists may or may not fit within their current models of practice. Questions to consider may be related to existing employee agreements and resource needs within each district.

Eligible School-Based Therapists are a group of professionals who are licensed through the Department of Regulatory Agencies (DORA) in Colorado. These professionals are not allowed to be classified under the Special Service Provider Job Codes (School Psychologists, School Counselors, or School Social Work) unless they are duly licensed with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and the Department of Regulatory Agencies (DORA). To learn more about these professionals, see the [Employment of School Mental Health Professionals in School Guidance Document \(SB23-004\)](#).

## School Nurses - [7.05 \(PDF\)](#)

School nurses support student success by providing health care through assessment, intervention, and follow-up for all children within the school setting. The school nurse addresses the physical, mental, emotional, and social health needs of students and supports their achievement in the learning process. These professionals not only provide for the safety and care of students and staff but also address the need for integrating health solutions into the education setting.

The school nurse is the bridge between health and education in the school setting, promoting positive behavioral health and using assessment skills to identify children at risk for behavioral health needs. School nurses, in collaboration with the interdisciplinary education team, provide critical links to prevention, early identification, intervention, and referral for behavioral/mental health concerns.

The school nurse is especially qualified to assess a student's health status and how it might impact mental health and ability to learn in the classroom. Some physical health conditions mimic the signs and symptoms of mental health conditions. Families and medical providers may ask school nurses to monitor responses to pharmacotherapy.

[Rubric for Evaluating Colorado Special Services Providers: School Nurses](#)  
[Student Health and Nursing Services Fact Sheet](#)  
[Essential School Health Services](#)



## How Are School-Based Mental Health Professionals Licensed?

School Counselors, School Nurses, School Social Workers, and School Psychologists are licensed by the Colorado Department of Education as Special Service Providers. There are multiple license types and pathways including, [Special Service Provider License Initial](#), [Special Service License Professional](#), [Temporary Educator Eligibility Authorization \(TEE\)](#), and [Special Service Provider Intern Authorization](#). The type of credential determines the scope of practice for the professional. Professionals with a [Temporary Educator Eligibility Authorization \(TEE\)](#), and [Special Service Provider Intern Authorization](#) require additional supervision and support until they obtain an initial or professional license. It's essential for professionals to limit their practice to areas in which they are fully trained. Please see the appropriate link for more information regarding licensing requirements. If you have questions, please contact the [CDE Educator Talent and Licensing Office](#). Eligible School-Based Therapists are licensed by the [Department of Regulatory Agencies \(DORA\)](#).

All professionals must be licensed in order to provide psychotherapy and counseling services within the state of Colorado in accordance with the [Colorado Mental Health Practice Act](#). Additionally, they must practice within the scope of their professional training, experience, or competence. School mental health professionals are trained according to stringent professional criteria, and must abide by their own professional and ethical standards that guide the provision of services to students and their families.

## What other education professionals might support social, emotional, behavioral, and wellness in schools?

In addition to the previously mentioned professionals, all educators contribute to supporting students' social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health in schools. Various professionals bring their expertise to form a comprehensive team approach, including Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs), special education teachers, para-professionals, administrators, teachers, speech-language pathologists, and others. This collaborative effort enhances the effectiveness of school-based mental health services, ensuring sustained and holistic student development. It's crucial to note that each of these professionals supports students' mental, social-emotional, and behavioral needs within their scope of practice and training, fostering a continuum of services and care. A team approach provides a more comprehensive and sustainable approach for long-term student growth.

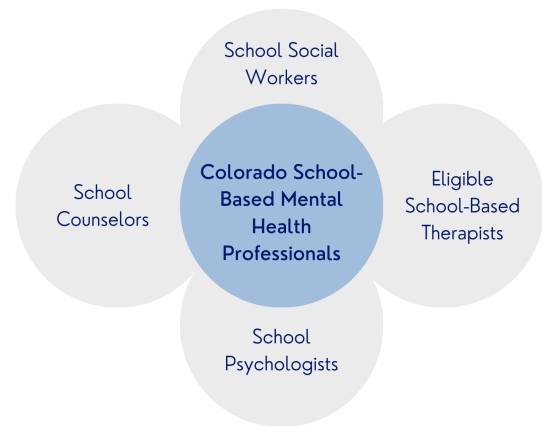
Schools and districts typically implement this work through a tiered support model. [Colorado Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(COMTSS\)](#) is a prevention-based framework using team-driven leadership and data-based problem-solving to improve the outcomes of every student through family, school, and community partnerships, comprehensive assessment, and a layered continuum of supports. Implementation science and universal design for learning are employed to create one integrated system that focuses on increasing academic and behavioral outcomes to equitably support the varying needs of all students.

## How Do These Professionals Collaborate to Provide a Continuum of School-Based Mental Health Services?

School districts employ a range of professionals, including school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, eligible school-based therapists, and other education specialists, to deliver comprehensive support across the continuum. These professionals advocate for evidence-based practices to enhance students' growth and well-being. While each professional has their area of expertise, collectively, they offer social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health support.

School mental health or psychological services encompass a variety of supports aimed at enhancing social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health and well-being. These services span from school-wide prevention efforts to individualized, intensive interventions.

Prevention activities, such as classroom meetings and small group instruction, focus on developing students' standards and skills like problem-solving, emotional regulation, and social skills. For instance, teaching appropriate responses to bullying is considered mental and behavioral health support. Students with more severe or prolonged social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs may require more intensive services, involving individual or small group sessions with a school counselor, school social worker, or school psychologist.



During a school-wide crisis, such as the loss of a student or teacher, school mental health professionals offer crisis response counseling and support to students, school staff, and the educational community. This continuum of services, which includes prevention, early intervention, and assistance for social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs, leads to positive outcomes. These outcomes include improved academic performance, increased attendance, greater engagement in academic activities, and fewer disruptions in the learning environment.

Social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health services in schools encompass a wide range of activities, including consultation with educators and families regarding child development and academic performance, assessment of social, emotional, behavioral development and learning needs, training in problem-solving, emotional regulation, and social skills, individual and group counseling, affective education in the classroom, Positive Behavioral Interventions

and Supports (PBIS), Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs), Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), crisis prevention and intervention, safety plans, and family collaboration. This collaboration extends to providing education and coaching related to their child's disability, assisting families in understanding their child's special needs, offering information about child development and parenting skills, helping families acquire necessary skills to support their child's Section 504 Plan, Individualized Education Program (IEP), or Individual and Family Support Plan (IFSP), and coordinating community services and resources. When students receive services from a school mental health professional as a necessary support to enable them to receive benefit and to access their education, the service is provided as part of their educational program and there is no fee.

## How do School-Based Mental Health Providers Support the Colorado Multi-Tiered System of Supports (COMTSS) in Schools?

School-Based Mental Health Providers play a crucial role in supporting the [Colorado Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(COMTSS\)](#) by offering social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health expertise, consulting on and providing interventions, and assisting and supporting staff, students, families across all tiers of the framework, from universal to targeted and intensive. They collaborate with educators to use data for tailoring school-wide systems and preventive strategies that aim to enhance outcomes for all students. Their work could include designing and delivering evidence-based interventions, conducting comprehensive screening and assessment, participating in team-driven shared leadership, using data-driven problem-solving practices, facilitating connections between families, schools, and community resources, and ensuring equitable access to supports and interventions for positive student outcomes.



## How do School-Based Mental Health Providers Support Special Education?

School-based mental health providers are integral members of the special education teams. School counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses are qualified special service providers that can support students in special education. Each provider can provide related services within their scope of their training and role. Districts and administrative units may have policies and procedures to specify roles and duties related to special education services, evaluations, and other aspects of support.





Additionally, the school-based mental health providers may assist and participate as a team member of the Individual Education Program (IEP) team based on the needs of each student. This team also includes the parents, the student when appropriate, at least one general education teacher of the child, at least one special education teacher of the child, a school administrator, an individual who can apply evaluation results to instruction, and relevant personnel which may include special service providers. Parents can also invite additional people to support the team and the student. Together, this team determines whether the student meets specific state eligibility guidelines for special education services.

If it is determined that the student meets the criteria, has educational impact, and requires specially designed instruction, the team will develop an Individual Education Program (IEP) to meet the unique needs of the student. If mental and behavioral health services are needed for the student to benefit from special education, they should be included on the IEP as a “related service.”

## **Are school-based mental health professionals able to be case managers for special education?**

No, school-based mental health professionals are not able to be case managers. The only staff that are able to be case managers are special education teachers (Job Code 202) or Speech-Language Pathologists (Job Code 238). School-based mental health professionals are able to provide the most amount of service but are not able to be the only service provider on an IEP.

## **What other plans or supports are available to students with areas of need in social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health development?**

If a student is not eligible for special education services, they may be eligible for a formalized plan to support their needs and learning. Districts may use 504 Plans, Health Care Action Plans, intervention plans, Advanced Learning Plans (ALPs), crisis plans, Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), or other support plans to create a formalized plan of support for students. Each plan differs in intensity, requirements, and eligibility which would need to be determined by the school and family collaboratively. It is common for school-based mental and behavioral health professionals to collaborate closely with the student, the family, and any caregivers and community partners as needed.

## **Who Should Families Contact if They Feel Their Child May Need Support from a School-Based Mental Health Professional?**

Families can initiate contact with their primary point of connection at the school, such as their teacher, principal, or school counselor, to arrange a discussion addressing their child's specific needs related to



access, engagement, and participation in education. Other school leaders, including the [Director of Special Education Services](#) for the district or BOCES, can also be reached out for support.

Schools play a crucial role in fostering students' development, especially when facing social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health challenges affecting their educational engagement. It's important to recognize that schools operate under [federal and state regulations](#), such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), Exceptional Children's Educational Act (ECEA), and Section 504/Americans with Disabilities Act, which outline [eligibility criteria](#) to qualify for a formalized support plan. Ongoing communication between families and schools regarding students' educational needs is a mutual objective. Collaborative efforts between families and schools are essential to ensuring comprehensive support for the well-being and academic success of students.

## As Students Prepare To Leave the School System, How Can Their Mental Health Needs Be Met?

As students prepare to transition from school to adult settings, best practice is for the school team to collaborate on the student's [Individual and Career Academic Plan \(ICAP\)](#) and provide families with pertinent post-secondary options that might benefit students after graduation. This may include information about post-secondary education, employment, independent living, and mental health services. The school-based mental health professional can participate in these team discussions, and help coach the student and family through the transition process. It is the process of preparing students for adult life after they leave high school and can be thought of as a bridge between school programs and the opportunities of adult life, including higher education or training, employment, independent living, and community participation. Teams must complete the specific [transition requirements](#) with individualized support and planning for students who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Overall, transition planning provides opportunities for students to achieve positive post-school outcomes.

## How is diversity, equity, and inclusion involved in a school-based mental health provider's role?

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are crucial elements in the role of school-based mental health providers. These professionals must be culturally and linguistically responsive and trauma-informed, meaning they have an awareness of and respect for the cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values of the students and families they serve. By understanding and valuing diversity, school-based mental health providers can better address the unique needs of all students and support their social, emotional, behavioral, mental health, and overall well-being.

In addition, school-based mental health providers must also address issues of equity and inclusion. They must be aware of and address any personal biases and systemic barriers that may prevent



students from accessing services or achieving success in school. They must also work to create a safe, predictable, and inclusive environment where all students feel valued and supported. This includes addressing issues of bullying, discrimination, and prejudice. A commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion is critical to the success of school-based mental health services. By fostering a culture of acceptance and respect, school-based mental health providers can create a positive and supportive environment that enables all students to thrive.

## Are school-based mental health providers billable providers for Medicaid?

School-based mental health providers may be qualified providers as part of the School Health Services Program. For qualification requirements, please reference the [provider qualifications quick reference – direct services](#) as part of the [school health services program](#).

## Who supports school-based mental health professionals at the state level?

- [Colorado Department of Education](#)
  - [Office of Health and Wellness](#)
  - [Office of Learning Supports](#)
  - [Exceptional Student Services Unit](#)
  - [Office of Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness](#)
  - [Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-Engagement](#)
- [Colorado Behavioral Health Administration](#)
- [Colorado Department of Human Services](#)
- [Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment \(CDPHE\)](#)
- [Colorado Department of Early Childhood](#)
- [Colorado Office of School Safety](#)

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Colorado Department of Education, Exceptional Student Services Unit  
(303) 866-6694 / [www.cde.state.co.us/offices/exceptionalstudentservicesunit](http://www.cde.state.co.us/offices/exceptionalstudentservicesunit)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) fully inform Administrative Units of Part B requirements and monitor the implementation of these requirements, with an emphasis on ensuring that all IDEA-eligible children in Colorado receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Pursuant to its responsibility for general supervision, the CDE provides this guidance to support Administrative Units in satisfying their obligations under the IDEA. Administrative Units are encouraged to review their policies and procedures for alignment with this guidance and make changes, as needed. This guidance is not binding and should not be construed as legal advice. For legal advice, Administrative Units should consult their legal counsel.

The contents of this handout were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, the content does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.