

NINA MOINI: What do you do when you're worried about a friend's mental health? How do you ask for help when you're struggling emotionally yourself? And how do you find the words to start those conversations?

Those are some of the questions Minnesota students may begin exploring in the classroom this year. Beginning this fall, the state requires Minnesota schools to provide mental health instruction for students starting in fourth grade all the way through senior year. The Minnesota Department of Education and NAMI Minnesota have co-developed guidance to help schools put that new requirement into practice.

Marcus Schmit is the executive director of NAMI Minnesota, and he's with me now to talk about what this new approach to mental health education could look like. Marcus, thanks for being with us again.

MARCUS SCHMIT: Well, it's great to be with you, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Marcus, before we get into what schools will be teaching, let's start with the big picture of why it's important for children and teens to learn about mental health in school. I mean, some of those questions I was asking off the top a lot of adults are still struggling with.

MARCUS SCHMIT: That's right. And our kids have really been dealing with a lot when we think about social media, we think about immigration enforcement in our communities in Minnesota over the last several months, and just the challenges of being a young person. We don't wait until somebody has a serious physical health problem before we talk about physical health and resources that are available, and we should do the same with mental health. It deserves the same kind of attention.

NINA MOINI: And we hear from folks like yourself at NAMI, we hear from educators what a crisis this is and how much more awareness there is, but also the greater demand that comes with being able to maybe put your feelings more into words and understand more of what's going on. So NAMI worked with the Department of Education to develop this guidance for schools. So what were some of the biggest things that you wanted to touch on or to accomplish?

MARCUS SCHMIT: Yeah, really proud of the partnership that NAMI Minnesota and our staff had with the Minnesota Department of Education. And this is a long time coming. There are a few points of emphasis with these new requirements. One is to make sure that we're fostering a positive approach to mental health.

We're understanding and making sure that kids understand what those common mental health challenges and disorders are and what treatments might be available, equipping them with those help-seeking strategies, too. So if you're feeling a certain way or your friend is feeling a certain way, you know how to respond in those situations. And then, of course, always we're fighting against stigma and doing everything that we can to reduce stigma and make sure that we're treating mental health as health.

NINA MOINI: Some parents or folks might say, you know what, I'll cover that at home. Does this take away from other health, physical education? Or can you talk a little bit about the considerations of where this instruction will fit into the day and what it will look like?

MARCUS SCHMIT: So school districts will be required to provide evidence-based support in the classroom, in person, as well as virtual, depending on the age. So there's a difference in how this is provided for middle schoolers versus high schoolers, for example.

And one of the examples is a program that we offer here at NAMI Minnesota. It's a free program. It's called Ending the Silence. And what that does is provide basic education around symptoms of mental illness, point people towards resources, make sure that we're providing the education around 988, and then focusing on stigma. And I've experienced one of these classes. I've watched one of my colleagues deliver it, and it's evidence-based and excellent.

NINA MOINI: So in most cases, is it something that goes on through a semester or a quarter, or is it a one-time? I'm trying to just get a feel for what it looks like.

MARCUS SCHMIT: Yeah, that's a good question. I think there's some flexibility for school districts to implement it, because that there are already a lot of pressures that our educators are navigating throughout the year. But there are a handful of programs that are available, and their responsibility is to integrate them into the school year to make sure that students are accessing those resources and they're readily available.

NINA MOINI: Can you share a little bit about how it'll be made different, like you were saying, just for different developmental stages for students at middle school versus maybe high school?

MARCUS SCHMIT: Sure. Some of it is just the intensity of the delivery of the programming. So what we know-- certain messages work differently with younger people as opposed to those older kids, and the programming reflects that as well. So there is more exposure to these requirements for high school students as opposed to middle school students.

And we know right now is there's such a demand. The Minnesota Department of Health issued preliminary findings from 2025, and we know that we have a crisis. Our kids are telling us something right now, and we need to make sure that we're listening. And this is one way that the state is stepping up.

NINA MOINI: And part of the mental health crisis is things like social media and just what is being experienced, sometimes maybe during school hours, but also just the wave of other things that young people are experiencing nowadays and that they're exposed to. What role or what part of the conversation of mental health literacy and education do you think-- where is there space for talking about social media in school as it relates to this?

MARCUS SCHMIT: I think a great first step, as we're seeing in school districts across the state, is really limiting or preventing utilization of phones in school settings and making sure that those phones aren't finding their ways into classrooms. We really need to make sure that we're having an open conversation with kids about the negative impacts of social media use. And we're learning more and more about that.

We need our elected officials and regulators, I think, to really catch up with some of the toxicity that exists in those spaces on the internet, through some of the apps, and just make sure that we're responding with positive resources for kids in those spaces. So we know kids are going to continue to surf the net and connect with their friends through social media and other ways through their phones. What are we doing to provide resources to those kids so that they're getting the information that they need to navigate some of those mental health challenges? Let's use the technology for good, too.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, we had three principals we were lucky to have yesterday from across the state who were telling us a little bit about implementing some requirements to have a way to deal with cell phones in schools, too. They talked a lot about how AI is now becoming an issue and how everything seems to be moving really fast, that by the time schools or parents are thinking about how to regulate social media, AI has already come into the picture and made things take off in that way.

So I'm wondering, too-- when you're talking about the basics that everyone needs to know, understanding that it might be different in different areas and different age groups, what would you describe as the main purpose of what you're trying to get across in this type of instruction? Is it basics like know how to ask for help or know these specific conditions? Can you give me a little bit more about what are the core basics?

MARCUS SCHMIT: Yeah, let's start with it's OK not to be OK. And we want to make sure that students who are feeling some of the challenges with their own mental health and their friends are able to recognize what those signs and symptoms are and then to be able to do something about it. We want people to be actionable.

And for our adults and kids and their friends, just starting that conversation. We want to make sure that everybody has the words to describe how they or somebody in their life might be feeling, so recognizing those symptoms, understanding that mental health conditions are real and treatable, knowing how to support friends through some of that, and understanding when and how to seek that help.

So 988 is always a resource. We always want to promote that. And what I think is really heartening right now is that we're going to be putting some of this mental health literacy and programming into the classrooms so that kids are connecting with it directly and that adults also in their lives are being exposed to it. Teachers, coaches, school administrators, they all have a role to play. Everybody is so busy. So what we can do right now to make these resources accessible and bake them into the school day so that students are being exposed to it, I think, is going to really help us make some progress.

NINA MOINI: And Marcus, lastly, I understand this hasn't been a requirement in schools before, but is there evidence out there? Or what do you see or learn about how it impacts young people throughout the rest of their life? What is the return on learning that, the return on investment on learning that younger, later, maybe, in college or further into adulthood?

MARCUS SCHMIT: It's huge. Somebody who's living with a mental illness-- myself, I wish that I would have had these tools and the language to talk about it when I was in high school experiencing symptoms. It took me 20 years to really identify that and get connected to those resources. So I put myself in the shoes of a 17 or 18-year-old today. And being able to connect with those resources, I think, can really be life-changing.

NINA MOINI: Marcus, thank you for stopping by Minnesota Now and telling us more about this. We hope to connect with you again and see how all of this is going as the year progresses. Thank you.

MARCUS SCHMIT: Thanks so much, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Marcus Schmit is the executive director of NAMI Minnesota. Again, if you or someone you know is struggling with their mental health, you can call or text 988 for help.