

## **Webinar 1: What it Means to Fully Support Mental Health in Schools**

Hello, everyone, I'm Leslie Boggs, National PTA President.

Thank you for joining us here tonight to learn more about how your PTA can support students' mental health.

I am so inspired by your commitment to the communities you serve, and I'm excited to be here with you today, as we learn more about the important topic of mental health.

As you all know, National PTA has a long history of taking a stand for all children, working to live out our mission and ensure every child's potential becomes a reality.

Mental health challenges have been on the rise over the years, and we know they've been made worse during this time of COVID-19. The impact of these challenges on our children and youth is devastating.

We know that for children to reach their full potential and to truly live out our PTA mission, schools must be safe and healthy environments that promote all students' mental health both in and out of school. The overall school climate, and the current stress, that families experience, all play a role in de-stigmatizing conversations around mental health.

It is often said that health is not the absence of disease, but the presence of wellness, and mental health is an important part of our students wellness.

At the National PTA, our approach looks at the importance of supporting the mental health of all children. Well before challenges arise, we believe that mental health is an everyday priority, meaning that all children should have access to basic supports, while also ensuring that the needs of students requiring more intensive services are met.

National PTA takes the whole child approach, which aligns the mental health, physical health, and safety of every child and youth, while also encouraging family engagement and community involvement.

We encourage you as PTA leaders to think mental health much like we think of our physical health. We don't just think about our family's physical health when we're sick, right? We take preventative measures and make sure our children have access to physical activity, healthy foods, health education, and a school nurse. Let's begin looking at our students' mental health and much the same way.

Additionally, mental health, as with everything we do, must be viewed through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI.

We must acknowledge that the impact of systemic racism and oppression on the mental health of children in our community and address this in our approach to mental health. We thank you for joining us tonight as we dive into these important conversations.

Before I hand it over to our speaker today, I want to thank our sponsor, GoGuardian, who has helped National PTA be able to drive this important mental health work forward. GoGuardian's commitment to children's mental health and to PTAs makes trainings like this one possible and we are very appreciative.

Tonight, we are grateful to be joined by Ben Fernandez who serves on the National Association of School Psychologists School Safety and Crisis Response Committee and is a school psychologist in Northern Virginia. Ben is going to share what we, as PTA leaders, need to know

and do to fully support mental health in schools. And, here's a hint for you... it begins well before a crisis happens.

Thank you very much, Leslie. I'm very excited to be a part of the conversation tonight about mental health and youth in our schools today. So, I look forward to this conversation, and we'll go ahead and get started. You can advance the slide.

So, starting with, you know, every day at school, students will start their day in a variety of ways, and in this day and age, some students are starting the school day online. Other students are coming to school. Other students are doing both online and school in a hybrid model.

So, we have students connecting with schools every single day. They come through our doors virtually or physically and we have to educate them all. And for educators, it's easy to see when they need to make adjustments for a student who may have broken, you know, their arms and have a cast in a sling and so, you know, we make adjustments. We support them in a variety of different ways.

However, when it comes to mental health and for students, it's not necessarily as evident, and it may not necessarily be as easy simply because it's not as clear as a student with a cast on their arm or a sling.

And again, as I said, regardless of the students who come through our doors in our schools, we are charged to educate our students.

So, to start this conversation, I want to begin with understanding, you know, school-aged youth and mental health.

And as it relates to schools, say, go ahead and advance the slide, starting with the definition of mental health. I'm going to use the World Health Organization definition, I'm just going to go ahead and read that.

Mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

So let's think about that a little bit. To cope with normal stresses in everyday life to work productively and fruitfully or successfully and happily and make a contribution to his or her community. Kind of take that definition and imagine it for our students!

Now I'm going to talk a little bit about public education and the role of public education, and I did some research trying to understand the role of education in that students prepare – or the role of education is to prepare students to be responsible citizens, to work productively and effectively. And when we look at those two definitions, that mental health and the rural public education, note that they're very, very similar. So I would argue that mental health and education are really two sides of the same coin, and really aiming for the same goal.

So, let's take a look at how prevalent mental health challenges are in schools. So looking at the, some of the surveillance data out there that exists, it suggests that one in five students in the United States can experience a mental disorder in a given year. And so that's pretty, pretty striking. Advance the slide.

And so looking at, you know, what some of our students are experiencing in schools. There's a whole variety of mental health challenges from ADHD to depression, to anxiety, to behavioral difficulties. There's just a number of different clinical disorders that children are experiencing. And then, when we see, look at the data, that trend seems to be experiencing

over time. And in my 24 years as a psychologist, I've seen all sorts of, you know, diagnoses of students, you know, from bipolar mood disorder to body image issues, to eating disorders, and a number of other conditions that are impacting our students in our schools. Advance the slide.

But, I also want to talk about other things that challenge mental wellness for students. You know, the clinical disorders we just talked about, aren't the only thing that is out there, impacting students. But, if you look at the slide, there's Adverse Childhood Experiences. And this is not a comprehensive list, but you can see there's a number of different things that students can potentially experience in our schools every day. And sometimes teachers may be aware of it, and educators may be aware of it, and sometimes they're not.

But all these experiences can have a significant impact on students. It has the potential to create and have a traumatic impact on our students. And not only our students, but if you look at that list, it can potentially also impact and potentially traumatize their families as well.

When students come into school who've experienced these challenges, we generally see the reactions that appear to be, you know, either that fight or flight or sometimes freeze reactions as it relates to the trauma they experienced. Again, it may be evident with some students and some of their behavioral reactions, but it also may not be as evident; they may be more withdrawn, quiet. You know, trying to stay out of the spotlight.

So, you know, it presents itself in a variety of different ways across the age levels, from preschool to high school, it potentially could look differently. But a common thread we'll see is that many times these children are physically in a building, in a school building. But emotionally, and sometimes behaviorally, they're just not available to learn. They're there, but there's something that's getting in the way of them being successful in school.

And the other issue, as it relates to adverse childhood experiences, is some of these experiences bring along with it stigma, which then further impacts the student as well as a family, which tends to be associated with guilt and other things, which make it much more complicated and sometimes difficult to talk about in order for them to get some assistance. So, I'll go ahead and advance the slide.

And so one of the things I wanted to do, to kind of illustrate, you know, what it means to have a school to have solid mental health is, just talk through it as a case study. So we're going to talk about Colin and Colin is going to pop up a couple times through the rest of our talk.

Colin is a freshman in high school. He plays volleyball. He's pretty good, you know, he's made the volleyball team and he plays outside of school as well. Academically, his grades are mainly Bs, there's a couple of C's here and there, and a couple of A's here and there. He's got a good friend group and close family. Overall teachers report that he's just a great student to have and just gets along with everyone.

But when you dig a little bit, you know, there's a history of anxiety, and depression. Struggled with a little bit of depression when he was in middle school, sixth seventh grade, but then prior to to him, coming to high school, his sister died in a very tragic car accident. Now this, this event, in this family's life had a significant impact on the family, significant impact on the mother and the father, and specifically impacted Colin, as he was particularly close to her.

So just kinda start how this process goes in a school that has mental health... The school was very aware of the situation, and they had a crisis team available for students. At the high school, his sister at the time, was a sophomore going to be a senior that year. And so, they had a crisis team available for students and staff to address their grieving needs at that time.

Over the summer, the school, you know, reached out, continued to offer support to family and mom brought calling in to school prior to school opening, just to make sure that there's ways to help support the needs of her son. She was concerned about his ability to cope with what happened and wasn't sure how the school year would look. But of course, Colin being, you know, a high school male, you know, everything was fine. Nothing bothers them at this time. So that's kind of the beginning of our case study with column.

So next, I want to talk about the intersection and relationship between student mental health and academics. There's a very, very real connection there, and when we talk about this connection, what we can start with, you know, the impact of mental health on learning and academics.

If a student is not emotionally available for learning, they're going to struggle with paying attention in class. They're gonna miss important information, which will impact their ability to recall information. They'll have problems actually doing the work and problem solving, organizing information, and just general processing information which then will impact their ability to acquire the things that they need in class to do well academically, which will then also impact their standardized test scores, their general performance academically, as well as their grades. There'll be impacted socially. Sometimes there's withdrawal, sometimes there's behavioral issues that come up. But it can also impact attendance.

Many times students, if they're struggling significantly with emotion, will not come to school, you know, they may develop some additional physical difficulties which prevent them from coming to school or they might be school avoidant in general, which then, you know, will impact their ability to successfully make it through school. If they're not attending, they're not achieving and they're not getting the credits that they need to graduate, which then puts them in jeopardy for graduating on time.

But it doesn't stop there. Unaddressed mental health or under treated mental health can impact even beyond that. It can impact the workplace, being able to maintain jobs, hold down jobs, and also be able to be successful in the college realm, as well as if they decide to just go right into the workplace, it potentially will impact them as well. You can advance the slide.

And so going back to Colin, initially everything was fine. The first month of school things were quiet from the classroom, from his teachers. But then things started changing a little bit. There was a report here, or there, that work wasn't being done or turned in. But then we started seeing grades drop, and then very rapidly drop.

And so Mom called me as the School Psychologist. And we talked a little bit about what's going on, and she said he was going to stop by my office.

And so, when he stopped by my office the next day, you know, he was talking about how he is really struggling to stay focused. He doesn't understand what's going on. He talked about in the past, how he was able to go to class and do well. He described how he would, you know, be in the hallway and go to class. And when class is over and not remember what's going on. And so, as we talked, I started to learn about the grief that he was experiencing.

Again, we're going to tie this back to the adverse experience that he and his family experienced, the death of the sister. The grief was preventing him from sleeping, preventing him from eating well, doing things that he used to enjoy. And so he would come to school exhausted. And then, he would describe, many times, just thinking about his sister, and how much, how he described how his heart hurt for her. And so, he would miss entire classes because he was just kinda consumed by his grief.

At that point, we then needed to start forming a plan. So, I'm going to go ahead and advance the slide. Now, we're going to talk a little bit about how schools can come together to establish mental health supports in the classroom. And it really starts with a safe and supportive school environment.

To maintain and establish that safe and supportive school environment, it starts with a framework that involves collaboration, and that's collaboration between the administration, between teachers and the instruction, as well as mental health staff, as well as the community partners like the PTA, local mental health providers, things like that. Coordinating all the kinds of supports that are available to help students succeed – that is part of making us school safe and supportive.

It also involves establishing tiered supports to address the needs of students, providing access to mental health, as well as making sure there's a balance with physical and psychological safety, as well as effective discipline practices. So, specifically, looking at multi-tiered systems of support or MTSS, these tiered supports provide that framework to deliver a variety of different types of supports for students. What you want is a tiered system that addresses the academic, the behavioral, as well as a social emotional needs.

And the goal here is not to always be pushing intervention. The focus here is also providing prevention, making sure that all students are learning how to be well, whether it's physically or mentally well.

And making sure that we're keeping students in him in a place where they can be successful. And that it also involves making sure we're tracking the needs and the progress of students. So, at tier one, that's where the universal supports all students can get these kinds of supports, academically, behavioral, and social emotionally – that's where a lot of the prevention work is happening. For students who are struggling a little bit more, there are more specific kind of supports at Tier two, and then at Tier three, there's is a much smaller percentage of students who are really significantly struggling and there are specific supports that can help them there, as well.

The other thing is making sure there's access to mental health professionals at school. These folks are trained to work within the school, and they include school psychologists, social workers, school counselors, and can include school nurses. They understand the nature of school, the culture of school, the functioning of the schools. And they can provide that bridge to mental and behavioral health, as well as to the academic part of what's going on with students. And it's not just students that they can support; they can provide ongoing consultation and education for teachers and other staff as well as being part of teams of school to improve what's going on, the school, school safety and general school improvement.

Another element of the safe and supportive school is having a balance with physical and psychological safety. You know, there's a lot of talk about school safety in general, but you have to have it balanced. If you're too much on the physical side, a school can feel very prison like. If you're too much on the psychological safety side, then things have a tendency to potentially be overlooked or missed. You really want a nice balance between physical and psychological safety. And this table here is just some examples of the of that balance within your schools.

And, again, having teams that are supporting this framework that involves safety teams – and the safety teams are constantly reviewing data, looking at the needs of the school, and then really focusing on prevention programs. Is there a concern for bullying? Is there a concern for anxiety? And then, what kinds of things can we put into place to prevent that? They collect and analyze a lot of data from climate surveys and a variety of other resources, but then there's also

another team that are crisis teams, these are generally trained, multi-disciplinary teams of psychologists, social workers, and other necessary staff that can help support students in these crisis situation. And in Colin's situation, his sister died, and his sister had connections in school. And once her friends and her teachers learned of the tragedy, there were impacts, so these crisis teams can come in and provide the emotional support for students in school. Many times, you'll see these teams referred to as grief counselors in the news.

And the last thing we want to talk about it is positive discipline. Zero tolerance is not effective at all when it comes to discipline in the schools. It has a tendency to have quite the opposite effect, and it has a tendency to exacerbate problems that are already there, particularly when it comes to students with disabilities and mental health issues. We want positive discipline practices to help children learn from their mistakes, help them to learn from their situation so they hopefully won't make them again. At the same time, we're also teaching students about positive behaviors as a replacement to some of the negative behaviors that they would be doing, including restorative justice in a peer mediation practices when needed. So these are, these are some things to help kind of change the course of behavior problems into a more positive and effective solution to just, you know, kicking a kid out of school for behavior issues. All these elements have to be in place to help make a safe and supportive school environment. And it takes time. It's not an overnight thing, but it's something that can be built upon and enhanced and grown by a school system to help their students feel safe, welcome, and emotionally supported.

And so, kind of wrapping this all together with the mental health supports... So, Colin was at a point where he was struggling significantly.

At that time, the school psychologist, myself, the school counselor, school social worker, a building administrator, one of his assistant principals, and his teachers, with permission from the family, got together. And we talked to the – teachers generally knew what, what happened – but we were able to share with them specifically what was going on with Colin.

Because on the surface, if you really didn't take a second and step back and say – *What is happening here with Colin? What is the function behind the behavior we're seeing?* – it would look like a kid just falling asleep in class, or a kid not doing his homework. But there is a function behind behavior. And so taking the time to explain that to the teachers, as a team, we started brainstorming and problem solving. What are ways that teachers could support Colin in the classroom? What are ways that myself and the school counselors could support Colin on an emotional level, and making a plan with what everybody involved to say, OK, if Colin is able to stay in class, this is what we're going to do. If he needs to come out for a variety of reasons, he can come see myself, or a school counselor. For Colin, this was a very long process. This was a situation of complicated and complex grief that lasted all year. It took time to revise the plan and get him connected with outside mental health counseling as well.

And so we were working, as a team, the outside provider, myself, the school counselor, as well as his teachers and administrator, to help him be as successful as he can in school. We also helped the parents with some of the challenges. They were happy. You know, they needed some support, as well, getting them connected to their own counseling resources. Because the mother was grieving in a particular way, the father was grieving in a particular way. And it was very challenging for the family during this time. But as Colin started working through his grief, things started to improve. It was slow. He still, some of the issues with depression from the past kinda rose to the surface again. And we continue to support him in a variety of ways.

So it is definitely possible to have schools come together to address the mental wellness needs in school. It's going to take work, it's going to take effort, and it will definitely take time. But with

collaborative teams working together – the school, outside partners like the National PTA and local PTAs, we can make some great progress in serving the needs of our of our students.

[LESLIE]

Thank you, Ben. So I know a number of you submitted questions for Ben prior to the webinar. We'll address a few of the most common questions here today. And you can certainly check out the website for more information after this webinar. So let's kick these questions off.

So, what happens when your school community hasn't bought into prioritizing mental health?

[BEN]

That's, that's a good question. I think there are a number of different reasons why schools haven't bought into or prioritized, mental health. Some of it involves budget. You know, many times, when there's a budget crunch, the first things to get cut are kinda the things outside the classroom work that tends to be mental health program, mental health staff. Another reason could be not fully understanding the role of mental health and education, and that, you know, how I described mental wellness and education as two sides of the same coin, not really understanding that relationship. And then there's stigma. I think there's been some really good advances in people understanding that mental health is it's not just someone being weak, it is something that can be treated, something that, that can be addressed. There still is an issue of stigma. And because of that, that jeopardizes that safe and supportive school environment where schools may not be as welcoming or perceived as welcoming and that balance of physical and psychological safety is not there. You know, I've talked about how sometimes if it's too heavy on the physical side or too heavy on the discipline side, schools feel prison like. And that does the opposite of what we want. If schools feel prison like, the behavior doesn't improve; researchers found it actually gets worse. And the other challenging issue is if schools haven't prioritized mental health, schools may not be perceived as supportive or places to seek assistance. I think, when we have students come to school, they spend the majority of their time in schools. And it's an ideal place to provide mental health supports. But if students don't feel welcome, they don't feel schools are supportive, they're not going to seek that help out. We're always encouraging students, if there's an issue, whether it be struggling with math, or if you're anxious and stressed out, or depression, or having thoughts of suicide, or bullying, or whatever the issue is, seek out that trusted adult, and if that atmosphere is not encouraging that, where do those kids go? Where do those students go? They might be struggling with these issues silently, which can lead to further issues. And then additionally without prioritizing a mental health, the battle against youth suicide is going to be a very difficult one because there's a lot of evidence to suggest that providing prevention programming can have a significant impact on suicidal behaviors with students. But it's also being able to teach them prosocial behaviors like identifying their strengths so they know how to address challenges in their lives, teaching them to be resilient, teaching them to have good coping strategies. And then, without the prioritizing of mental health, schools potentially will lack the access to mental health staff, which will also further impact students' ability. There's already a shortage with a lot of mental health staff nationally, but if you're not prioritizing it, it makes that situation even worse. And then lastly, like I said, the psychological or the mental wellness and the education piece are tied together, so we'll potentially see impacts to academics as well. Like I said earlier, students will physically be in a classroom, but they may not emotionally be present to take in that instruction.

[LESLIE]

I think it's interesting that you mentioned earlier in your presentation, that one in five students are dealing with some sort of mental health issue. And if you think about the size of our class sizes in schools, that means that every class that a child is in, there's probably, I would say, a

minimum of four children that are struggling with mental health issues, so we really need to start prioritizing mental health.

[BEN]

Absolutely. And, that's just the clinical kind of issues. There could be a number of other students who may be struggling with food security or wondering, where am I going to go home to sleep tonight? And they may not be standing out, they might be flying under the radar. So, absolutely, prioritizing the mental health aspect of school is very important.

[LESLIE]

The next question that we have is, How can our PTA support parents and caregivers in helping kids navigate the uncertainty caused by COVID-19 disruptions to school and normal life?

[BEN]

That's a great question. I think, one of the big issues that we're experiencing in schools because of COVID-19 is that physical distancing – I should say schools and communities as well. I'm seeing a lot of kids who feel very isolated, very disconnected. I'm actually seeing staff that feel very isolated and disconnected as well, and so, I think, the PTA can really take a stand of helping to establish community and connection and almost being that bridge between the families and the school and helping the schools establish that connection and community as well. I think hosting joint events is a great thing and teaching parents how to cope themselves, because if the adults are struggling, particularly the younger students are going to take the lead of what they see with the adults around them and respond in a very similar manner. So, providing opportunities for mental wellness, education, and also taking a look at the school and the school community and again, partnering with school and other community groups to address what other community mental health supports could be available to our families and schools. How can they address, food security and technology issues if the school is in distance learning and potentially other resources in the community, I think would be very important during this. And I think addressing mental health at this time is very, very important, but I always take a look at crisis situations and see them, I ask myself, OK, what am I learning from this that I can take to make things better after you know things improve? So I think that's really important to take a look at what's going on in our school communities, as it relates to COVID-19 and the pandemic and say, What are the needs of our community? What are the mental health needs of our community? And how can we enhance our ability to deliver those needs in partnership with the schools, in partnership with other agencies once the pandemic kind of goes away and we're in some degree of normalcy? Because mental health is here to stay. And how can we make sure that mental health practices, mental health supports, continue to be in our school, not just during a pandemic but after the pandemic and beyond? I think those would be kind of my initial thoughts with that.

[LESLIE]

Thank you. And I will tell you as a mother of a child that had some mental health issues. It's important for parents to have a place to talk to other parents and understand that they're not the only ones dealing with issues with their children and during this crisis, this pandemic, several parents have come up to me and go, I think I'm the only one struggling, and I keep telling them, no, you're not. You're not the only one. This is a different environment for all of us and it's a struggle for everyone to be together. And so giving those group activities just a place to talk to other parents, and I think PTA's can do that best, and they do it very, very well, so we encourage you all to do that together.

[BEN]

I absolutely agree that connection and that community sense, I think is the biggest challenge for everyone during this crazy time. It's more than we ever anticipated.

[LESLIE]

So, our next question is, how do we ensure we are supporting the mental health of all students, particularly students of color?

[BEN]

The PTAs are in an excellent position to reach out to their entire school community and establish that bridge between the community and the schools. You know, over the years I've learned that there are many families that don't feel heard at school, for a number of different reasons. There are some families that are afraid to come to school. For example, I remember from my previous high school I worked with there were a number of families that couldn't speak English very well, and they were too embarrassed to come to school to ask for help or know how to ask for help or who to ask for help from. And then there's some parts of the community that don't necessarily feel always welcomed at school. And I think the PTA's can provide that common ground for those families and create that bridge between the school and the community. And engaging in the conversation of what's happening because sometimes the schools may not realize they're doing something that may be alienating a community group or they may not be realizing that they're not reaching out to certain family. So, I think establishing these collaborative relationships, and beginning that dialog to say, what are the needs of all of our students, whether it's students of color, sexual orientation, whatever it is. How do we establish that common ground where we can begin to have that dialog, and plan and build supports for all students in the schools? I remember, in one of my schools, we had a night where families would come in and we'd have this get to know your staff member. And every year, we would have to get to know the school psychologist. And it was fascinating to hear. From my perspective, I thought, well, everyone understands what a school psychologist is. Well, I learned that families have different understandings and misperceptions of what a school psychologist is. Or a psychologist in general. And I remember that night we got to sit with families, sit with other members of the community and say, this is what we do, and this is how we can provide help to your students. And so, I found those moments that having that bridge to be very, very beneficial to building that relationship, that trust between the school community and the school itself.

[LESLIE]

I couldn't agree more. I think that's one thing that we have to do better, is making sure we get the message out that we want to be inclusive of everyone and represent the diversity of all of our students. And the more that we can say that, and that everyone is welcome to be a part of who we are, and that we are certainly concerned for all students, and anything that they happen to have going on within their family or the dynamics steps and today. So, I think we just have to start that conversation, whatever that looks like. And I know that can be a little scary, not knowing what you might get as a question back or an ask back. But you can certainly take that first step to say, hey, we're here to help, just tell us what you need. We want to hear from you. And I think that's important questions to ask.

So our next question is, what resources and programs exist that our PTA can take and share with parents? So Ben, are there particular programs that you can recommend for PTA leaders to go out and find and replicate?

[BEN]

Sure. I mean, there's a number of different programs out there, and I think a number of schools are using a lot of these particularly as it relates to establishing that safe and supportive school environment. PBIS (positive behavior intervention supports).org. PBIS.org is a great framework for schools. There's a lot of great resources for parents and teachers to understand how that will function. And there's the collaborative – I always get this wrong – it's CASEL.org is basically focusing on social emotional learning And I apologize, I cannot remember the acronym now, but I think the programming they have within CASEL can be tremendously supportive and helpful during the pandemic. They've recently put out a number of great resources that not only address kind of the issues around the pandemic, but also some of the issues related to race and relationship building in schools. So, I would encourage you to check that out as well. I think it's very important for schools to be taking a look at suicide prevention programs. These can be a little expensive, but they are excellent evidence based programs. Sources of Strength is a tremendous program that is focused on what they call upstream prevention. It's teaching students about hope, help and strength, way before we have to intervene with students. So giving them the skills, the resiliency and coping strategies for students way ahead of things hopefully happening, so they can manage it on their own. But what's great about it is it's a peer led program. We've implemented it in my high school and I'm just floored by the work that the students do, the vision that they have, and how they desire to help their peers. It can do great things with improving school climate, reducing mental health issues, and it really is a great launching pad for all sorts of mental wellness activity. So, it's SourcesofStrength.org, I believe. And then Signs of Suicide is another evidence-based program that teaches kids about what are the warning signs of a student who may be thinking about harming themselves, as well as reaching out to a trusted adult. It teaches the acronym ACT – Acknowledge, Care, and Tell. Acknowledge that your friend is struggling. Care by letting them know you care about them and that you want to help them to get help by Telling a trusted adult. But, there's a number of different programs. I would check out the websites of the National Association of School Psychologists, Association of School Counselors, and the School Social Workers website, as well. There's just a number of great resources out there to begin that conversation to begin building that framework for schools time.

[LESLIE]

And since you mentioned different websites, we at National PTA also have just launched a new mental health webpage just last week. That shows a number of great resources and organizations in this space. So, take a look, everyone, including some of the resources mentioned by Ben and through the National Association of School Psychologists. So, our last question that I have for tonight is, how can parents support students' mental wellness? What's the best way PTA leaders can support that? So there's two in one.

[BEN]

I think you know, being a parent is hard. I don't think anyone's going to argue about that. You know, I am a father of two girls, and, you know, I've even though I'm a school psychologist, I understand these things. I felt like I had to learn a lot as well, and I think it really starts with building that relationship with your child. You know, understanding your child, knowing when to listen to your child, recognizing some of the signs, and then taking that moment to step back sometimes and say, OK, wait a minute, they're demonstrating this behavior. What is the function behind that behavior? Why are they giving attitude at this moment, or are they frustrated about something? Did they have a bad day? And really start establishing that relationship. I know from my oldest, one of the signs I missed frequently is, I would be working at night on some paperwork, and she would always sit down on the other side of the dining room table. It took me a couple of times to realize that she wanted to talk to me. And so, at that moment, the moment she sat down, regardless how busy I was, that laptop closed, and we would have that

conversation. And so kind of recognizing those moments. Because those are important moments. In the times that Meredith and I had these conversations, she was really struggling with, you know, I have a friend doing this, what do I do? Or, I'm feeling this, how do I do navigate that challenge? And so we have these great conversations. It's also important that parents kind of reflect upon themselves to say OK, what kinds of wellness behaviors do I want to model for my child? Because your child, regardless of their age, is going to be watching you. They're going to be watching how you respond to things and act. And so learning how can I model good coping strategies if I'm angry, or how can I model positive friendships, or how can I model healthy activities. And it also is learning about the supports that are available in your schools and communities, reaching out to your school mental health staff and asking, hey, I'm seeing this at home. I'm not sure how to handle it. But what do you think? What do you recommend? They're always available for consultation as well.

Now for PTA leaders, I think this is very exciting personally, because I think of leadership as that take charge and kind of storm the whole thing at times. But I think leadership really can be influence. And so, how people can influence mental wellness with children is by guiding people through challenges. Sometimes walking with them and connecting them with other families that may be having a challenge. It's a kind of like what you said earlier, Leslie, you're not alone. You know, we have other people who are struggling with this, they may have some ideas to help you. And connecting them with community resources, connecting them with school resources. Because, like I said earlier, sometimes families don't always know how to connect with a school, or they're embarrassed to reach out to a school. Or they've just had bad history reaching out to a school. And, again, the PTA leaders can really kind of be in the gap there and helping connect families to the resources in the school and educating families on all the great things that are out there. And they can really be that positive influence in children's lives. I think there's so many, a lot of exciting things that PTA leaders can do.

[LESLIE]

I agree, it's an exciting time for PTA leaders. I think there's so much opportunity to partner with other associations and have a panel of experts come in and talk to your parents. And you never know whose hearts you're going to touch and who's experienced what within your school until you have that ability to put a panel together. And you'll be surprised at how many people you touch and how many people you've made a difference in. And so, I challenge each of you to think about how you can do that, and you'd be surprised at how big a difference you can make in your school atmosphere and helping everyone come together as a community.

And thank you for your story about Colin. It's pretty similar to what my family's going through, so it was interesting to hear the steps that Colin went through and knowing that the school was there and supportive makes a huge difference. And watching the children and how they're able to cope with grief. So it's important, and I think we really need as PTA really need to make sure everyone's aware of how much support that needs.

[BEN]

Well, thank you very much for having me, Leslie. I really appreciate the opportunity to have a conversation about how to serve our students, because that is the most important thing, making sure our students are well and successful.

[LESLIE]

I couldn't agree more. So now that you all have a stronger foundation and full understanding of the mental health, not full probably but partial at least, let's begin discussing how we can turn that knowledge into action.

So join us next Wednesday at the same time for the webinar in our series titled Taking Action to Improve Mental Health. Sam Brinton and Keygan Miller from the Trevor Project will be sharing some key steps to PTAs that PTAs can take to advocate for and inspire change in your school communities. If you haven't registered, you can visit our website at [PTA.org/mental health](https://www.pta.org/mental-health) to do so. I encourage you to do that today while it's on your mind.

Also, check out our website at [PTA.org/mentalhealth](https://www.pta.org/mentalhealth) for more mental health resources, including a couple from the National Association of School Psychologists. This site will also have a recording of this webinar in the next few days, so be sure to refer back to it and share it with your fellow PTA members. The recording will be accompanied by transcripts in English, Spanish, and Mandarin.

So, thank you, again, for joining us tonight, as we kick off this webinar series, looking at mental health and how we approach it holistically and effectively. As we learned today, we must prioritize mental health before a crisis happens, it's very important to do it before a crisis happens. Let's work together to put the best systems and supports in place so we can be proactive and equipped when mental health crises, as we're seeing right now, arise.

And thank you again to Ben and the National Association of School Psychologists, for sharing so much beneficial insight into what the term mental health really encompasses and how we may consider approaching mental health with our children and in our schools.

If you have any questions for National PTA or for Ben and the National Association of School Psychologists, please reach out to us using the e-mails below. Thanks again for your participation and your commitment to bettering the mental health of children and families. We appreciate you and hope to see you next week. Thanks so much.