

School Mental Health Collaborative Center

Research & Practice Update

Fall 2026



Advancing Well-Being in Education

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School Mental Health
Collaborative
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From Our Director, David Wheeler, PhD.



Welcome to the Fall edition of the Research & Practice Update! The School Mental Health Collaborative Center is pleased to bring you our Fall Research & Practice Update — a look at the work of our Center as well as the latest research, tools, and strategies shaping school-based mental health work.

In this edition, we highlight emerging findings from the field, practical resources you can bring into your schools, and updates on best practices for supporting student well-being. Our goal remains the same as always: to bridge the gap between research and everyday practice, so that educators and mental health providers alike have what they need to support students where they are.

Thank you for the work you do every day for student well-being and safety. We hope this update offers useful insights, practical tools, and a few reminders that you're not doing this work alone. If we can be of any assistance through mental health-related professional learning, technical assistance around implementation of evidence-based practices, or interest in a research-practice partnership, please contact us at smhc@usf.edu.



Our Executive Leadership Team

Drs. Dart, Wheeler, Suldo, & von der Embse

New Center Facilities



We are excited to announce our new Office Suite in the College of Education EDU 158. This suite accommodates our growing team and graduate assistants. For the first time since 2023, our entire team is in one location. We are enjoying the collegiality and collaboration that this change brings, and the opportunity to host our school and community partners. Once renovations have been completed (hopefully by the end of the year), we invite you to visit us!



Our new conference room



Our office suite lobby

New Faces



The College of Education and our Center welcome Deja Thompson, LCSW.

Deja is excited to partner with the College of Education and the University Counseling Center to support the well-being of students by providing accessible mental health services and collaborating with College of Education faculty and staff to help students navigate personal, emotional, and academic challenges. The services she provides include individual counseling, outreach consultation for faculty and staff regarding student concerns, and workshops and wellness presentations. Deja's office is located in the School Mental Health Collaborative Center suite (158Q) and sees students by appointment on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 8am – 5pm.

USF's Counseling Center is offering students individual therapy sessions by appointment on-site at the College of Education and virtually.

Sessions are free and confidential for COEDU students enrolled in fall. Appointments are available on-site (and virtually) Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays 8am-5pm in EDU 158Q with clinician, Deja Thompson, LCSW. Same day brief urgent consultations are available Mondays and Wednesday from 2-4pm.



New Faces

Meet the Postdoctoral Fellows joining the SMHC Center this year:



Caroline Mierzwa, PhD, BCBA



Frances Coolman, PhD



Our 2026-27 Graduate Assistants



Our graduate assistants are an important part of what makes our Center thrive. With our new office suite, they now have dedicated space within the Center to work, collaborate, and connect with faculty, SMHC staff and one another.

Research for Practice

From Data Collection to Data Use: A Systematic Review of Early Childhood Educators' Practices and Perspectives.

Quanshan Zheng, PhD.

[Access Here](#)

What Research is Saying

Early childhood educators consistently collect data, yet there remains a real gap in actually using that data to shape instruction and interventions.

Most data collection in early childhood settings happens informally rather than through structured observations, making the data collected harder to understand and use consistently for planning.

Teachers across multiple studies consistently advocate for the same thing: they don't need more training on how to collect data, they need to learn how to interpret and apply it.

What's Helping in Practice

Aligning the types of data collected, data collection methods, and purposes of data use is key for meaningful decision making.

Using tailored supports like simplified data visualization tools and collaborative teams bridges the gap between data and instructional planning.

Programs should prioritize creating supportive environments for educators where they have time, resources, and collaborative spaces to analyze data and engage in problem solving.

Research for Practice

From Choose and Hope to Evidence and Impact: Rethinking School-Based Behavioral Health Decisions.

Joseph Latimer, PhD.

[Access Here](#)

What Research is Saying

School decision makers prioritize practical feasibility, resource availability, and immediate fit over academic research when choosing behavioral health interventions.

Limited time, competing demands, and incomplete data often lead to school teams using a “choose and hope” approach.

While many resources provide evidence on whether an intervention works, there is often little information on where and how to adapt them to meet the needs of resource-strained schools.

What's Helping in Practice

The STAR (Select Trial Assess and Revise) Implementation framework allows for school teams to continuously adjust mental and behavioral health interventions to fit their school's needs.

STAR relies on empowering teachers who are often times tasked with implementing interventions and aligning those interventions with classroom routines and IEP goals.

Professional Development



School **Mental Health**
Collaborative
Research, Training, & Technical Assistance Center

CoursesTestimonialsContact Us

Online Continuing Education for Behavioral & Mental Health Professionals



Evidence-Based Counseling Techniques

CE Hours: 3\$29



Individualized Behavioral Interventions

CE Hours: 3\$29



Individualized Social and Emotional Interventions

CE Hours: 3\$29

learnsmhcc.org

Professional Development Workshops

We provide professional learning workshops tailored to the needs of school-based mental health service professionals, educators, parents/caregivers, and community groups. Topics include: Positive Psychology Practices and Principles, Motivational Interviewing, Individualized and Group Social and Behavioral Interventions, Evidence-based Counseling Techniques, Classroom Management, Screening and Data-driven Decision-making, Threat Assessment, Suicide Prevention/Intervention, Trauma-informed Practice, Educator Wellbeing.

Half-Day (3-hour PD) - \$1,800

Full-Day (6-hour PD) - \$3,300

Request Professional Development and Technical Assistance [here](#)

Approved Continuing Education (CE) Provider for the Florida Board of Psychology, Office of School Psychology, Clinical Social Work, Marriage and Family Therapy, and Mental Health Counseling; National Association of School Psychologists (NASP); Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP); and the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB).

Project Highlight

Project STAY: Stepped Care Approach for Addressing Youth-Motivated School Refusal Behaviors

Chronic absenteeism keeps climbing, and one big reason gets missed: **emotionally based school refusal**, where anxiety or distress makes walking into school feel impossible. This **isn't defiance** and it isn't skipping. These are students who want to be in class but can't get themselves through the door. **Most evidence-based treatments were built for community clinics, not schools**, so school teams are left without tools that fit the building they actually work in.

A USF team led by Dr. Rose Iovannone with Drs. Shannon Suldo, Alison Salloum, and Kim Crosland, built Project STAY to close that gap. A stepped care approach for addressing emotionally-based school avoidance behavior in youth, Project STAY is designed for elementary and middle schools and funded by a four-year Institute of Education Sciences (IES) grant. It runs in two steps:

Step 1: Telehealth (about a month): a brief, function-matched cognitive-behavioral intervention.

Step 2: In person (about two months): individual CBT when a student needs more support.

School psychologists, social workers, and counselors deliver both steps, trained by the STAY team. The idea is simple: give schools a realistic, stepped way to get anxious students back in class before a few missed days turn into a pattern that leads to school failure. Initial results (not public) of feasibility study suggest that the STAY approach improves attendance and reduces anxiety and depression in participants. The full evaluation runs through 2026-2027. Districts in the Tampa Bay area can partner. For more information, contact Dr. Shannon Suldo at suldo@usf.edu.

Featured Partnership

Featured Partnership

PracticeWise MATCH-ADTC

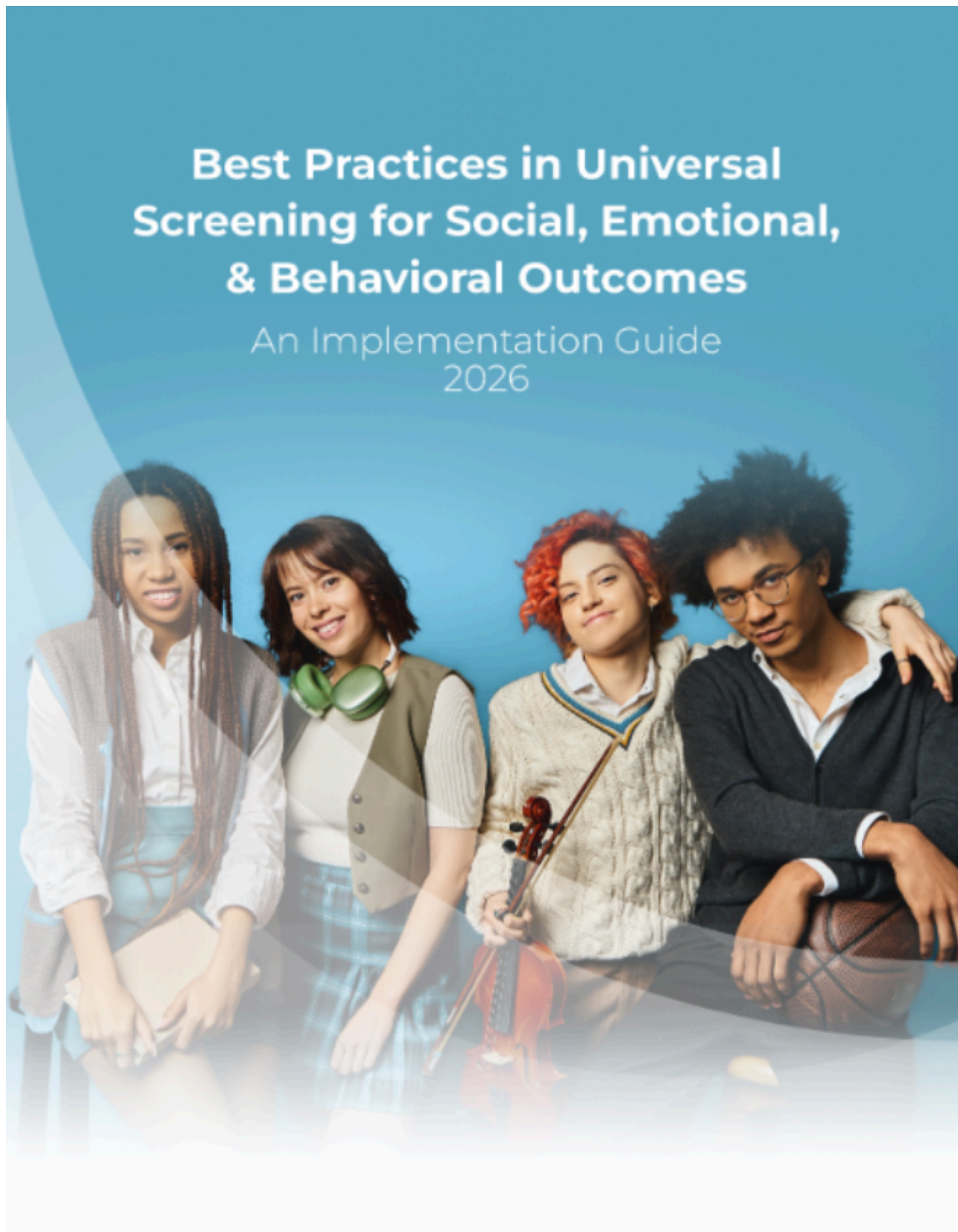
Supporting Students with Emotional Problems through Use of a Modular Approach to Therapy for Children with Anxiety, Depression, Trauma, and Conduct problems (MATCH-ADTC).

The SMHC Center has partnered with PracticeWise to create a 1-day intensive training in MATCH-ADTC, an evidence-based suite of manualized cognitive-behavioral protocols for use in individual and small group counseling to reduce emotional problems among children ages 7 – 15. This 1-day training for school mental health professionals is a compressed version of the 5-day training PracticeWise offers for community mental health professionals. The SMHC Center’s 1-day training demonstrates key features of MATCH-ADTC followed by detailed illustration of how to apply MATCH to an example target area (e.g., depression).

Participant feedback has been extremely positive. Participants have described the training as, “Dr. Suldo did an excellent job and content was amazing!,” “This training was very helpful. I feel ready to implement these materials!” and “Appreciated the hands-on examples with example cases!”

This 1-day training can be held in person or virtual. Email Dr. Suldo at suldo@usf.edu for more information about costs and availability.

Featured Resources



The experiences young people have at school impact their learning and many other outcomes, including social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB). Universal SEB screening is increasingly recognized as a foundational component of a comprehensive, multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). The purpose of this guide is to support district and school leadership teams in implementing a universal SEC screening process as one component of a comprehensive Multi-tiered System of Support approach.

Our Impact

TESTIMONIAL

“

Hands down best training I've had for my counseling role in 20 years.

— Training participant, professional development session

SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH COLLABORATIVE

CURRENT REACH

2025–26 ACADEMIC YEAR

2,580+

CE Training Hours

1,040+

Professionals Trained

THIS YEAR AT SMHC

14

Grants submitted (\$12M+)

51

Studies advanced

16

Peer-reviewed articles

18

Major project deliverables

2 new contracts secured · LearnSMHC.org launched



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