

Policy Notes

Comprehensively Strengthen and Improve Students' Mental Health System in the New Era

Wen Yuan¹; Zhuojun Jiang²; Yunfei Liu¹; Ziyue Chen¹; Xiaohan Chu²; Yi Song^{1,*}

The incidence of mental health issues among children and adolescents is on the rise, positioning it as a critical public health concern that could impact the future of humanity (1). To address this challenge, on April 27, 2023, 17 government bodies including the Ministry of Education launched the “Special Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving the Mental Health Work of Students in the New Era (2023–2025)” (hereinafter referred to as the Special Action Plan) (2), signaling a significant advancement in China’s commitment to student mental health. The Special Action Plan delineates eight major initiatives, such as enhancing mental health education, standardizing mental health monitoring, and augmenting the support for psychological professionals. These coordinated efforts aim to establish an extensive, multi-layered mental health framework to enhance student well-being from various perspectives. As a holistic and strategically designed initiative, the policy holds substantial practical importance and serves an instrumental role in guiding advancements in this field.

BACKGROUND

Mental health issues profoundly impact children and adolescents’ development. In 2019, the global count of individuals suffering from mental disorders was approximately 970 million, with prevalence rates for children aged 5–9 and adolescents aged 10–19 years estimated at 8% and 14%, respectively (3). A comprehensive psychiatric survey in China indicated that the prevalence of various mental disorders among children and adolescents aged 6–16 years was 17.5% [95% confidence interval (CI): 17.2, 18.0] (4). Globally, the 12-month prevalence of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) in this demographic was about 19.5% (5). High academic demands and psychological stress among students notably contribute to increasing mental health challenges such as depression and suicide, posing significant risks to adolescents’ well-

being. A study involving 15,623 high school students in rural China revealed a 29.2% incidence of NSSI in the preceding year (6). These disorders also impose substantial economic burdens; in 2017, the total cost attributed to mental disorders in children and adolescents was estimated at 1.191 billion United States dollar (USD), with a direct cost of 565 million Chinese Yuan (CNY) (7). The mental health of children and adolescents in China is a critical public health issue with far-reaching implications for the nation’s future (4,8). Accelerated social changes and evolving living conditions, compounded by the effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, have exacerbated these challenges. The implementation of the Special Action Plan is crucial as it not only tackles the current mental health issues but also aims to establish a robust, multi-tiered mental health support framework. It is essential for the government and societal sectors to proactively develop and enforce policies that address these emerging challenges.

METHODS

The Special Action Plan, initiated under the Chinese Ministry of Education and endorsed by 17 government departments, including the Health Commission, the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Ministry of Finance, is a crucial initiative critical in shaping both policy and practice. The development of the Special Action Plan progressed through four major phases: initial investigation and research, strategic plan drafting, thorough expert debate, and the iterative solicitation of feedback for continual improvement.

In an effort to thoroughly understand the contemporary status of student mental health within China, the Ministry of Education launched an extensive survey project in September 2021. This project, particularly focused on monitoring and surveillance of mental health quality within the

framework of national compulsory education (9), employed diverse methodologies including questionnaires and interviews. These questionnaires and interviews involved a broad array of stakeholders, such as students, parents, teachers, mental health educators, and school principals, thereby providing crucial insights. With data and feedback from these extensive surveys, the Ministry of Education refined the Plan's guiding ideologies, operational principles, goals, methods, and protective strategies, leading to the creation of the "Draft for Comments". Following this, the Ministry organized multiple symposiums to discuss student mental health, involving prominent experts for the thorough evaluation and further refinement of the draft. The Ministry also actively sought input from relevant governmental agencies including the Health Commission and the Ministry of Public Security. Through detailed research and the integration of various perspectives, the Special Action Plan was iteratively revised and enhanced, ultimately leading to a finalized version ready for distribution and execution.

RATIONALE AND EVIDENCE

In October 2016, the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee along with the State Council released the "Outline of the Healthy China 2030 Plan". This plan underscored the urgent need to improve and standardize the mental health service system. Following this, 12 departments, including the National Health Commission and the Ministry of Education, jointly introduced the "Healthy China Action Plan for Children and Adolescents' Mental Health (2019–2022)". This initiative detailed six strategic actions aimed at bolstering mental health in children and adolescents, in accordance with the broader goals of the Healthy China Plan.

The Special Action Plan is designed to significantly enhance mental health initiatives for students in the contemporary era. It highlights the importance of cooperation among government bodies, educational institutions, families, and the community in building an extensive, layered mental health support network. This joint effort is intended to create an environment that promotes students' mental health literacy and contributes to the broader goal of social harmony and stability. The Special Action Plan adheres to an educational philosophy that places a high priority on health, advocating for the comprehensive development of students. It specifically delineates eight principal tasks and introduces twenty-two detailed measures, as

presented in Table 1, to effectively execute and fulfill its goals.

The Special Action Plan, situated within the principles of the contemporary era, emphasizes the critical importance of school health initiatives in bolstering student mental health. Building on foundational recommendations for child and adolescent mental health, the Special Action Plan underlines the essential role educational institutions — colleges, middle schools, and primary schools — play in the educational system. Key responsibilities highlighted include monitoring, early warning systems, psychological counseling, and intervention for students. The plan advocates for comprehensive school-based mental health education, which includes providing operation guides on common psychological issues to parents, principals, teachers, counselors, and other stakeholders, as well as implementing national mental health days for college and middle school students. It also recommends regular mental health classroom instruction and psychological assessments, suggesting that students at various educational levels undergo at least one mental health evaluation annually and that a mental health record be established for each student. Overall, the Special Action Plan offers detailed and systematic recommendations aimed at ensuring the provision of high-quality mental health services within schools.

The Special Action Plan introduces an innovative initiative by recommending the incorporation of psychological peer supporters into high school and college curricula. This represents the first time that the concept of peer support has been formally integrated into a national strategy. Peer support entails the deliberate use of the knowledge, skills, and experiences of children and adolescents organized to aid the development of others with similar experiences (10). Research has shown that adolescents spend nearly one-third of their leisure time interacting with peers (11), underscoring the significant influence that peer support can have on student development. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted countries, including China, to implement isolation measures that effectively contained the virus spread but also posed complex challenges to mental health. Studies have demonstrated a correlation between adolescents' social isolation during the pandemic and an increase in psychological problems such as social anxiety and depression (12). Recognizing the importance of peer support, various domestic and international organizations have launched programs targeting adolescent mental health,

TABLE 1. Eight tasks and specific measures of the Special Action Plan.

No.	Eight task	Specific measures
1	Multi-angle to promote mental health	1–5. All-rounded of morality, intelligence, physical, aesthetic and labor education to promote mental health simultaneously
2	Strengthen mental health education	6. Setting up mental health-related courses 7. Giving play to the role of classroom teaching 8. Carrying out all-round mental health education
3	Standardize mental health monitoring	9. Strengthening government-level mental health monitoring 10. Conducting mental health assessments in school
4	Improve psychological early warning intervention	11. Improving the early warning system 12. Optimizing cooperation mechanisms 13. Improving the quality of talent training
5	Strengthen the psychological talent team	14. Provision of mental health teachers 15. Open channels for teacher development
6	Support mental health research	16. Conducting scientific research 17. Promoting the application of results
7	Improve psychosocial services	18. Enhancing the capacity of social and psychological services 19. Strengthening family education guidance services 20. the protection of minors
8	Create a healthy environment	21. Carrying out science popularization and publicity in a standardized manner 22. Strengthening daily supervision and management

resulting in successful outcomes as evidenced by initiatives like the “Sources of Strength” project and the “I Support My Friends” campaign. As an emerging strategy for promoting well-being, peer or support is expected to play a vital role in the future development of adolescent mental health.

PRESENTATION

The primary aim of the Special Action Plan is to create a comprehensive “four-in-one” system for student mental health, which includes health education, monitoring, counseling, and intervention measures. This strategy intends to strengthen collaboration between schools, families, the broader community, and pertinent governmental departments. By 2025, the objective is to ensure that 95% of schools are equipped with either full-time or part-time professional mental health educators, and 60% of family education guidance service stations actively participate in mental health education initiatives.

The Special Action Plan prioritizes the psychological needs of Chinese students and emphasizes strengthening organizational leadership. Its objective is to enhance the students mental health working mechanism through interdepartmental collaboration, social engagement, and nationwide involvement. The plan details strategic initiatives for mental health development, ranging from comprehensive planning to detailed implementation. Further strengthening of the plan was achieved through the Ministry of Education’s endorsement on November 6, 2023, via the “Notice on the Establishment of the National Student Mental

Health Advisory Committee”. This Committee is charged with significant duties including research, consultation, monitoring, evaluation, outreach, and guidance pertaining to the national mental health programs across universities and schools. At its inaugural plenary meeting on March 21, 2024, the Committee announced that China will develop a cohesive national system for student mental health monitoring and early warning. Its goal is to unequivocally enhance the mental health capabilities of students and advocate for mental health education in this new era and journey. These efforts aim to provide robust organizational support and ensure the effective execution of the Special Action Plan.

DISCUSSION

The Special Action Plan emphasizes the importance of enhanced coordination at the local level, advocating for comprehensive planning and the optimization of financial structures. It highlights the critical need to secure substantial funding for student mental health initiatives and encourages active support from social organizations. After a practical implementation phase, the plan proposes the creation of master and principal studios for student mental health education, aimed at nurturing and sharing effective practices. Additionally, educational and health management departments at all levels are urged to seamlessly incorporate the plan’s principles into routine activities and school governance. By prioritizing student mental health, these departments are instrumental in promoting students’ overall development.

doi: 10.46234/ccdcw2024.162

Corresponding author: Yi Song, songyi@bjmu.edu.cn.¹ Institute of Child and Adolescent Health, School of Public Health, Peking University, Beijing, China; ² Training and Outreach Division, National Center for Mental Health, Beijing, China.

Submitted: March 01, 2024; Accepted: May 24, 2024

REFERENCES

1. Charlson F, Van Ommeren M, Flaxman A, Cornett J, Whiteford H, Saxena S. New WHO prevalence estimates of mental disorders in conflict settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet* 2019;394(10194):240 – 8. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(19\)30934-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30934-1).
2. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, The Supreme People's Procuratorate, PRC, Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China, Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China, The Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China, et al. The special action plan for comprehensively strengthening and improving the mental health work of students in the new era (2023–2025). 2023. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/202305/content_6857361.htm. [2024-3-20]. (In Chinese).
3. World Health Organization. Depression and other common mental disorders: global health estimates. 2017. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/254610>. [2023-3-20].
4. Li FH, Cui YH, Li Y, Guo LT, Ke XY, Liu J, et al. Prevalence of mental disorders in school children and adolescents in China: diagnostic data from detailed clinical assessments of 17,524 individuals. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry* 2022;63(1):34 – 46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13445>.
5. Lim KS, Wong CH, McIntyre RS, Wang JY, Zhang ZS, Tran BX, et al. Global lifetime and 12-month prevalence of suicidal behavior, deliberate self-harm and non-suicidal self-injury in children and adolescents between 1989 and 2018: a meta-analysis. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 2019;16(22):4581. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16224581>.
6. Tang J, Li GW, Chen BX, Huang ZJ, Zhang YM, Chang HJ, et al. Prevalence of and risk factors for non-suicidal self-injury in rural China: results from a nationwide survey in China. *J Affect Disord* 2018;226: 188 – 95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.09.051>.
7. Xu L, Li CF, Li JJ, Yang F, Wang J. The economic burden of mental disorders in children and adolescents in China: a cross-sectional study. *Lancet* 2019;394(S1):S48. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(19\)32384-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)32384-0).
8. Lu J, Xu XF, Huang YQ, Li T, Ma C, Xu GM, et al. Prevalence of depressive disorders and treatment in China: a cross-sectional epidemiological study. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2021;8(11):981 – 90. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(21\)00251-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(21)00251-0).
9. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. National compulsory education quality monitoring program (2021 revision). 2021. http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A11/moe_1789/202109/t20210926_567095.html. [2023-3-17]. (In Chinese).
10. Zou H. The development function and influencing factors of peer relationship. *Psychol Dev Educ* 1998;14(2):39-44. <http://qikan.cqvip.com/Qikan/Article/Detail?id=1002372591>. (In Chinese).
11. Larson RW, Richards MH, Moneta G, Holmbeck G, Duckett E. Changes in adolescents' daily interactions with their families from ages 10 to 18: disengagement and transformation. *Dev Psychol* 1996;32(4): 744 – 54. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.32.4.744>.
12. Meade J. Mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and adolescents: a review of the current research. *Pediatr Clin North Am* 2021;68(5):945 – 59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pcl.2021.05.003>.