



Connection Before Code

Layering Technology onto School-Based
Mental Health Literacy

A Guide for District & School Leaders



A WHITEPAPER BY ERIKA'S LIGHTHOUSE

INSIDE THE GUIDE

- ✓ Why standalone tech tools fail without foundational mental health literacy
- ✓ How to map digital mental health onto your existing MTSS framework (Tiers 1–3)
- ✓ Practical Evaluation Tool: Checklist for evaluating EdTech & Mental Well-being tools



INCLUDES:

A Tool for District Leaders: a printable, fillable 1-page version of the evaluation checklist is available for download. See page 9.

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SECTION I

Executive Summary

In response to the ongoing youth mental health crisis, school districts across the country are adopting digital mental health solutions. These range from mood-tracking apps to AI chatbots to virtual telehealth.

These technologies offer promises of scalability, 24/7 availability, and real-time data tracking, but they are frequently deployed as standalone interventions rather than integrated tools.

Erika's Lighthouse believes strongly that **technology cannot replace human connection.**

Technology is most effective when deployed after a foundational understanding of mental health literacy, help-seeking behavior, and good mental health practices have been established within the school.



This paper establishes best-practices for a "layered approach." School-based programming can establish shared values and vocabulary, universal awareness and empathy - so schools can promote an inclusive culture around mental health. Within this ecosystem, tech tools can serve as effective extensions of human connection, rather than a standalone safety net.

SECTION II

Introduction: The Rush to Digital Solutions

Recent data demonstrates the need to address the youth mental health crisis. According to the CDC's 2025 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, one-third of high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year.¹ While this represents an improvement from the peak pandemic levels, the baseline remains elevated, with impacts on students' academics and social development.¹ In the search for solutions, schools and policymakers have increasingly turned to quick, easy to implement digital tools.

The appeal of EdTech and mental health apps is strong. Administrators are facing budget constraints and shortages of school counselors. This makes digital tools seem like a scalable "magic wand." Especially since they promise the ability to reach a student's smartphone, operate outside of school hours, and deliver immediate, personalized coping strategies.

However, this tech-first approach misses a critical link. Providing a student with a standalone mental health tool is ineffective if that student lacks the basic vocabulary to identify their emotions, the awareness to recognize signs of distress or the confidence to overcome the stigma associated with seeking help. Mental health is relational. Resilience, healing, and long-term well-being are built within communities and trusted relationships, not in isolation behind a screen.



1 IN 3

**high school students
experienced persistent
feelings of sadness or
hopelessness in the
past year ¹**



SECTION III

The Foundation: Mental Health Literacy as a Prerequisite

Before introducing tech solutions, schools should define and establish a baseline of mental health literacy. As defined by public health frameworks, mental health literacy involves having the knowledge and understanding of mental health concepts, as well as the practical skills to seek help when it is needed.⁵

This foundational baseline comprises three critical pillars:

01 Mental Health Literacy and Vocabulary

Students are given the tools to differentiate between normal vs everyday adolescent stress and the symptoms of clinical mental health disorders, such as depression or anxiety.

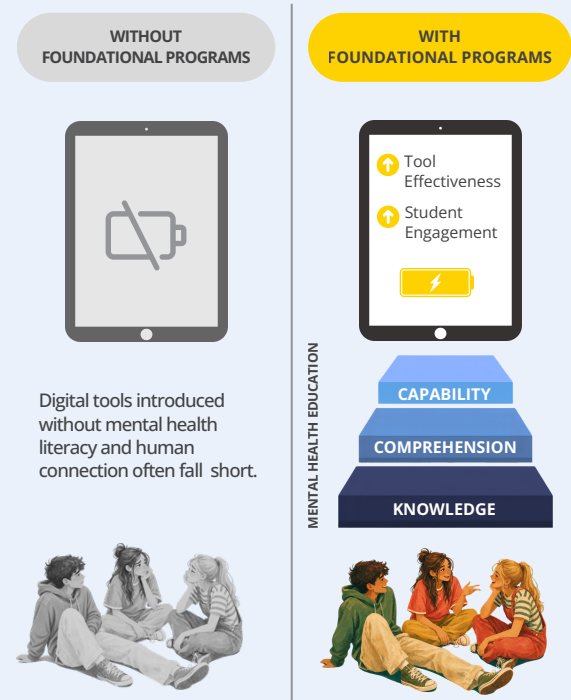
02 Help-Seeking Behavior

Students receive instruction on how, when, and where to ask for help [5]. A critical component of this is actively breaking down stigma that prevents youth from reaching out to adults or supporting their peers.

03 Good Mental Health Behaviors

Establishing consistent habits that promote positive mental health, including sleep, nutrition, hygiene, healthy peer connection and coping skills.

Behavioral Health Tech in Schools



The classroom is an ideal space for this foundation. Integrating mental health into the curriculum positively affects student health.⁵ Research demonstrates that middle and high school students who participate in classroom-based mental health education report improved knowledge, reduced stigma, and a significant increase in help-seeking behaviors.⁵ Erika's Lighthouse own data backs this up, school by school. By engaging in these programs, schools create a shared vocabulary among peers, normalize mental health conversations, and immediately connect students to trusted adults in their community.



SECTION IV

The Limitations of Standalone Technology

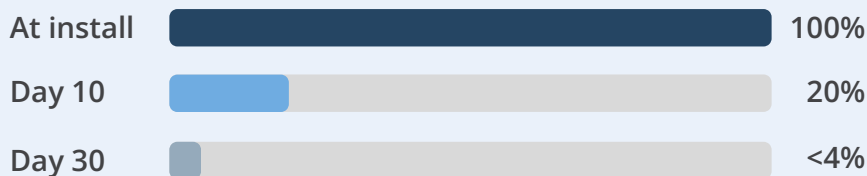
When technology is introduced without a foundation of mental health literacy and human connection, it falls short of its promises. The most glaring limitation of standalone digital intervention is **student engagement**.

An analysis of 93 mental health apps revealed terrible retention metrics: 80% of users abandoned the apps before 10 days and more than 96% stopped using them at 30 days.² High dropout rates also happen in clinical trials for smartphone apps aimed at depressive symptoms.⁴ These figures highlight a simple truth: without a trusted human guiding the process, technology struggles to maintain usefulness.³

User Engagement with Mental Health Apps

80% of users abandoned the apps before Day 10

96%+ stopped using them by Day 30



The average K-12 student uses

72

approved apps in school



There is also the growing trend of limiting or banning smartphones from schools. This may reduce accessibility and use of many apps, even those designed to support mental health.

Furthermore, relying entirely on screens can exacerbate the mental health issues it seeks to solve. Many students already suffer from digital fatigue and social isolation. The average student has to use 72 apps in school.⁸ Expecting a disconnected student to find mental health support in another app ignores the reality of their environment. Algorithms cannot read a school's culture, recognize a shift in a student's demeanor, or understand the dynamics of a student's home life. However, mental health education can provide that through an educator, school counselor or peer.

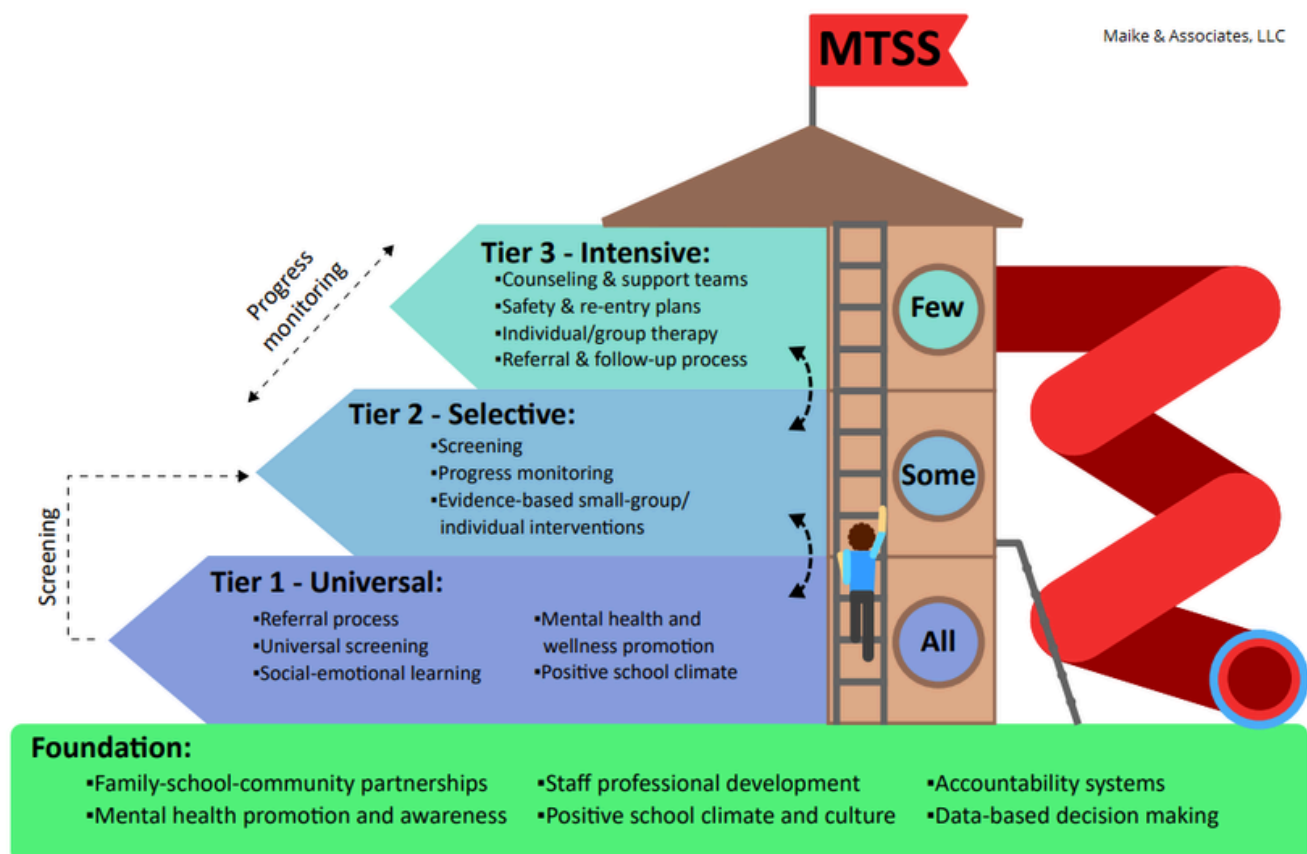


SECTION V

The Layered Approach: Integrating Tech with Human Connection

To maximize the effectiveness of both classroom-based programs and digital tools, schools should adopt a layered approach - especially one that aligns with the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

MTSS is a prevention and intervention framework that integrates data and instruction to maximize student well-being and achievement.⁷ MTSS employs three tiers of support—universal, targeted, and intensive—to ensure students receive the appropriate level of intervention.⁶ By mapping technology onto the MTSS framework after establishing human foundations, schools can create a resilient safety net.





- Erika's Lighthouse Solution
- Technological Integration (The Amplifier)
- Human Foundation (The Bedrock)

TIER 1: UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS

Impacts 100% of students

Implementing school-wide programming to build universal awareness, empathy, and mental health vocabulary.



TEEN TOOLBOX

Broad digital wellness check-ins provide baseline data for educators. Independent learning extensions for students to engage at home.

Establishing student-led good mental health clubs.



TEXT A FRIEND

Anonymous reporting apps become effective because students have learned why looking out for their peers is vital. Role-playing exercises that support students acting as peer leaders.

Engaging and educating families around shared values and vocabulary.



FAMILY TOOLBOX

Independent learning extensions for families to engage at home.

Training school staff to recognize the warning signs of mental distress, learn how to be trusted adults and understand school protocols.



TRUST BUILDER (COMING SOON)

Leverage Student Information Systems to help staff share concerns, seek support and guidance and keep a holistic view of a student.

Initiate school-wide campaigns that promote an inclusive school culture.



MENTAL HEALTH RECHARGE

Good mental health apps or programs that provide on-demand coping strategies and empower students to engage.

TIER 2: TARGETED INTERVENTIONS

Impacts 10-25% of students

Check-In /Check-Out (CICO) systems supported by school staff [6]. Building peer-to-peer support networks.

Small-group counseling, targeted social-emotional learning.

Telehealth platforms bridge the gap when in-school resources are at capacity. These virtual sessions are anchored and facilitated by the school's trusted network, ensuring the student is not navigating care alone.

Mood-tracking and journaling apps act as data-gathering tools. Students use app insights to facilitate richer, more precise human-to-human conversations with their school counselors.

TIER 3: INTENSIVE INTERVENTIONS

Impacts <10% of students

Individualized interventions led by mental health professionals, crisis counselors, and special education teams [6].

Treatment communication apps that connect school mental health staff with external providers to facilitate seamless delivery and support.



Best Practices for School Leaders: Evaluating EdTech

Before purchasing and implementing digital mental health tools, school administrators and district leaders should evaluate how these tools will work within their existing MTSS. Technology should never bypass educators; it should empower them by providing secondary support mechanisms once a safe classroom culture is established.

Tech & Mental Well-being Tool Checklist

A TOOL FOR DISTRICT LEADERS:

DOWNLOAD THE FILLABLE PDF

PART 1: TOOL & SYSTEM OVERVIEW

NAME OF DIGITAL TOOL/APP

VENDOR/CREATOR

REVIEWER NAME & DATE

TARGET AUDIENCE ☐ All Students ☐ Families ☐ Staff/Educators ☐ Specific At-Risk Group: _____

INTENDED MTSS TIER ☐ Tier 1 ☐ Tier 2 ☐ Tier 3

PART 2: THE "CONNECTION BEFORE CODE" EVALUATION

1 Human Connection & Environmental Practicality

YES NO NEEDS WORK

Does this tool enhance human connection rather than attempting to replace human care? ☐ ☐ ☐

Does the tool account for school environment realities, such as smartphone bans or digital fatigue? ☐ ☐ ☐

Does the tool build upon existing, human-centered, foundational activities (curriculum, clubs, etc)? ☐ ☐ ☐

Action Items/Notes: _____

2 Universal Literacy and Bedrock Readiness

YES NO NEEDS WORK

Does our school have an established baseline of mental health literacy before deploying this tool? ☐ ☐ ☐

Do students possess the basic vocabulary required to navigate and accurately interact with the prompts in this application? ☐ ☐ ☐

Does the tool build upon existing school-wide initiatives aimed at destigmatizing help-seeking behaviors? ☐ ☐ ☐

Action Items/Notes: _____

3 Targeted & Intensive MTSS Alignment

YES NO NEEDS WORK

Is this tool actively integrated into our existing MTSS framework? ☐ ☐ ☐

Are there clear entry and exit criteria for students utilizing this specific digital intervention? ☐ ☐ ☐

Does the tool facilitate actionable, data-driven decision-making for our educators and counseling teams? ☐ ☐ ☐

Action Items/Notes: _____

4 Staff Readiness & Safety Protocols

YES NO NEEDS WORK

Are staff adequately trained on how to use the backend/educator dashboard of this tool and/or vocabulary used in the app to support students? ☐ ☐ ☐

Are educators trained on how to synthesize the app's digital data with their own real-world classroom observations? ☐ ☐ ☐

Are there clear, established protocols for what happens if the app flags a student as being in immediate crisis (e.g., self-harm risks during off-hours)? ☐ ☐ ☐

Action Items/Notes: _____

PART 3: FINAL RECOMMENDATION & NEXT STEPS

☐ Approved for Adoption

Tool strongly enhances human connection and maps directly onto our MTSS framework.

☐ Hold / Re-evaluate

Tool has potential, but foundation programs must be implemented first.

☐ Not Recommended

Tool acts as a standalone replacement for human care, adds to digital clutter, or risks isolating students.

Action Items/Notes: _____



SECTION VII

Conclusion: Reaffirming the Classroom Connection



At its core, the Erika's Lighthouse mission recognizes that real, transformative change happens in the classroom, in the hallways, and through authentic peer-to-peer connection. Digital tools possess incredible potential to increase access to mental health resources and provide coping mechanisms. However, they are a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

Policymakers, school administrators, and technology developers should prioritize investments in foundational, human-centric education. The CDC reports that students who feel connected at school are less likely to experience poor mental health, sexual health risks, substance use, and violence. Students are also more likely to engage in positive health behaviors (physical activity and healthy eating), have higher grades and test scores, have better school attendance, and graduate high school.⁹

By prioritizing "Connection Before Code," we ensure that when a student finally reaches for a technological lifeline, they already possess the vocabulary to articulate their pain, the literacy to navigate the tool, and the profound knowledge that there is a real community standing behind the screen, ready to support them.



SECTION VIII

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About Erika's Lighthouse

Erika's Lighthouse: A Beacon of Hope for Adolescent Depression is a non-profit organization committed to raising awareness about mental health and adolescent depression in upper elementary, middle school and high school communities at no cost to schools.

Erika's Lighthouse works to eliminate the stigma surrounding depression and empower young people to take ownership of their mental health. Core programs include video-based, classroom programs -- Level I: We All Have Mental Health, Level II: Depression Awareness and Level III: Depression Education & Suicide Awareness. Erika's Lighthouse also provides Empowerment Clubs, Family Engagement and Policy & Staff Training resources.

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www.erikaslighthouse.org