

Questions remain about Florida's new school-based mental health effort

July 26 2019, by Chrystian Tejedor

Florida is planning to reinvent school-based mental health awareness, but Florida International University (FIU) psychologists are raising questions about the plan's implementation.

The goal is to help students identify the signs and symptoms of mental illnesses, how to get help for themselves and others and what to do or say to peers affected by a [mental health disorder](#).

The plan calls for public school districts throughout the state to provide students in grades six through 12 with at least five hours of instruction on mental health awareness and assistance each year.

"The devil is in the details and I worry about the implementation plan—the who, what, when and how," said FIU psychology professor Stacy Frazier.

It's unclear how districts will implement the policy with classes beginning in a few weeks. What's also unclear is who will teach the courses.

"Teachers are the first line of defense related to [mental health issues](#) in students—they are the school's first responders," FIU school psychology professor Philip J. Lazarus said. "I would argue that the majority of school teachers are not prepared to teach these topics as they have not been trained in these areas."

While teachers could be trained to teach a mental health curriculum, the information is bulky, most programs are designed to run for more than five hours, significant training is required and teachers already have many competing demands on their time, Frazier said.

One way to make a lasting impact on students' [mental health](#) is to leverage natural opportunities during school instruction to encourage or practice communication, problem-solving and emotional regulation skills. This can be done in various classes including physical education and music, she said.

These skills can be taught as early as pre-school, said Andy Pham, an FIU associate professor of school psychology. If schools can incorporate these changes earlier than [middle school](#), as the plan calls for, children can learn to cope with challenges much better.

"This is a good start, but it is nowhere near enough," Lazarus said.

Provided by Florida International University

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