

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism: School Nurses Leading for Change

Session 3

March 6, 2025



SHIELD

School Health Institute for Education and Leadership Development

Zoom Instructions

All participants are muted.

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Type any questions or comments you have for the instructor into the chat box. We will address as many as we can.

Today's Schedule

Topic	Time
Opening Remarks and Overview of Today's Session	15 min
Breakout Room Activity	20 min
Addressing Chronic Absenteeism: Equitable Solutions through MTSS, Focusing on Trauma, Immigration, and Tier 3 Supports	45 min
Break	5 min
Case Scenario Review and Discussion	60 min
Next Steps and Wrap-up	5 min

MDPH School Health Unit

Welcome

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Session 3 Learning Objectives

After completing this session, you will be able to:

1. Apply understanding of the impacts of trauma, poverty, and racism on school attendance to recommend equitable solutions that address individual and school-wide trends in chronic absenteeism.
2. Integrate understanding of the unique mental health challenges experienced by immigrant and refugee populations into school nurse interventions designed to improve school attendance.
3. Identify areas for collaboration and partnerships with community organizations to develop strategies designed to alleviate barriers to school attendance (Tier 3 interventions).

Our Speakers



Beverly Heinze-Lacey, MPH, BSN, RN
Director of SHIELD
Boston University

Rashmi Paudel, MPH, BSc Nursing, DrPH(c)
SHIELD's Evaluation Coordinator - Special Projects
Boston University



Our Speakers



Felicity Crawford, EdD

Clinical Associate Professor of Special Education
Moderate Disability Program at BU Wheelock College

Monica Onyango, RN, MPH, MS, PhD
Clinical Associate Professor
Boston University School of Public Health



Our Speakers



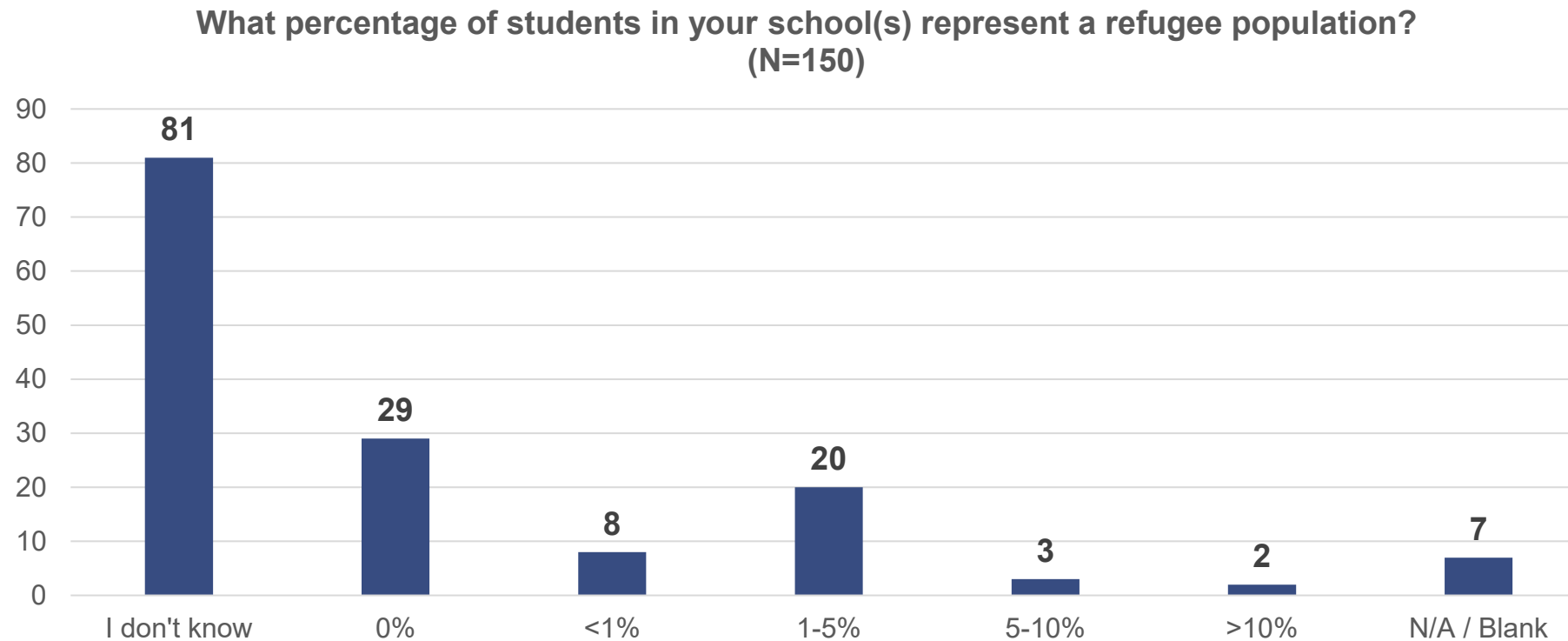
Jane Kimani, MEd, CHES
Executive Director
UHA for Health Inc.

Patricia (Trish) Elliott, DrPH
Clinical Associate Professor
Boston University School of Public Health



Session 3 Registration Data

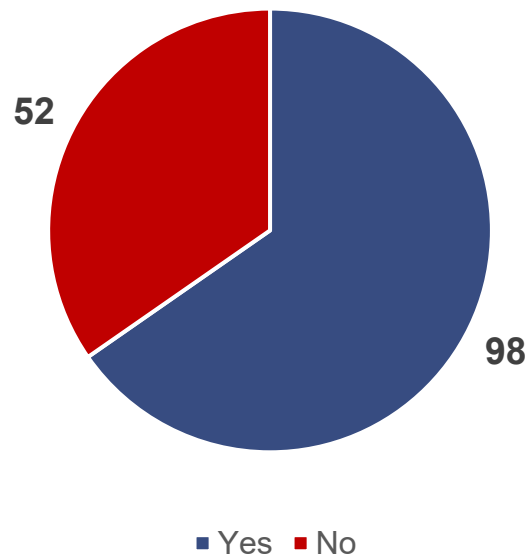
Updated 3/6 at 9:30 AM



Session 3 Registration Data

Updated 3/6 at 9:30 AM

Does your school use tools or resources for creating a trauma-sensitive school environment? (N=150)



If you selected "yes," describe the tools or resources your school uses. (N=85)

- Staff training and professional development
 - Trauma-informed care / SEL
 - Restorative justice
- Offer students support via school guidance/adjustment counselors & social workers
- Perform school climate surveys & screening (e.g., Pride, Panorama, SAEBRS)
- Regular IST/SST multidisciplinary meetings

Session 3 Registration Data

Updated 3/6 at 9:30 AM

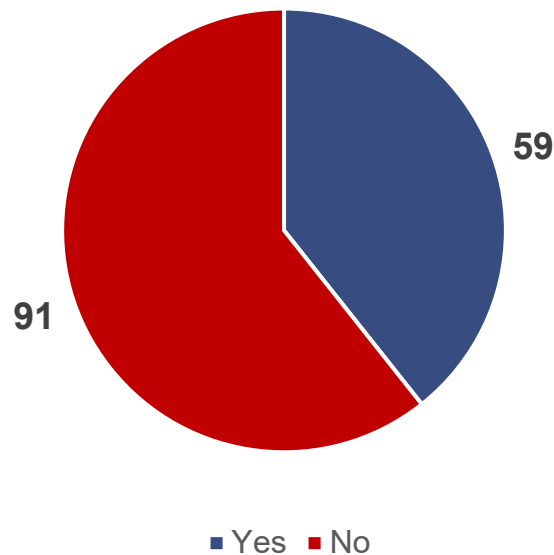
What are the barriers/challenges you face when trying to support students from a refugee population? (N=150)

- Language barriers
- Limited access to healthcare/PCPs and/or health insurance
 - Immunizations
- Navigating cultural differences
- Transportation
- Developing a relationship with parents/caregivers
 - Limited access to computers, phones, internet, etc. affect communication
 - Time constraints
- Lack of community resources

Session 3 Registration Data

Updated 3/6 at 9:30 AM

Do you have strategies to deal with attendance challenges for students who belong to a refugee population? (N=150)



If you selected "yes," what strategies are you using to support attendance among students who belong to a refugee population? (N=56)

- Outreach to families
 - Home visits
- Multidisciplinary team approach
 - School counselors, nurse case managers, & family liaisons provide support
 - Utilize community partners & resources
- Provide translation/interpretation & ELL services
- Transportation accommodations (e.g., special busing & 2nd chance busing, free transport for school-sponsored events)
- Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Breakout Room (10 minutes)



Discussion Questions: Tier 3 Interventions

1. What are the barriers/challenges you as the nurse experience in attempting to address the intense supports needed by students and their families?
2. What successes have you had?

Breakout Debrief - 10 minutes



Addressing Chronic Absenteeism: Equitable Solutions through MTSS, Focusing on Trauma, Immigration, and Tier 3 Supports

Felicity Crawford, Ed.D.

Introduction

- Nearly **one in five Massachusetts students** had missed at least 10% of scheduled school days through March of 2023 ([Boston Globe](#)).
- "96% of Massachusetts students with high attendance in 10th grade graduate from high school in 4 years, while **only 69% of students with low attendance in 10th grade graduate in 4 years.**" (Source: [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#))

Our Ethical Responsibility

A fundamental tenet guiding our conversation is the principle of **equal access to free public education for all students**.

This means, according to the state of MA, that regardless of race, color, sex, gender identity, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or immigration status, every child is entitled to an equitable educational experience.

Schools bear the unwavering responsibility to uphold this right and to actively avoid any policies or practices that might discourage or deny school access based on immigration or citizenship status.

Factors That Can Impede Educational Equity

- Equity itself, defined as **access to the resources and opportunities essential for success**
- Pervasive effects of **trauma**
- Burdens of **poverty**
- Systemic realities of **racism**
- Vulnerabilities faced by unauthorized immigrants, including the ever-present fear of deportation

These are not discrete issues, but rather a **constellation of interconnected experiences that deeply affect a child's capacity to thrive.**

Prerequisites for Learning



Figure 2. The four foundations ensure optimal learning and development. These foundations inform the goals for children and expectations for programs.

Source: [Ontario Public Service](#)

Well-being, though lacking one universally accepted definition, is generally understood to encompass positive emotions like contentment and happiness, the absence of negative emotions such as depression and anxiety, life satisfaction, a sense of fulfillment, and positive functioning ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 3, 2022](#)).

Well-Being Includes the Following Aspects:

- Physical well-being
- Social well-being
- Psychological well-being
- Economic well-being
- Development and activity
- Emotional well-being
- Life satisfaction
- Domain-specific satisfaction
- Engaging activities and work



Source: [Boston University Student Wellbeing](#)

Ensuring Equity

To ensure the prerequisites for learning means all children should have **unfettered access to resources and opportunities to thrive.**

It's crucial to acknowledge the central role of school nurses in making this work a reality. You are the linchpins in identifying needs, coordinating care, and building strong partnerships to support our most vulnerable students.

Factors Impacting School Attendance: Trauma, Poverty, and Racism

And the Nurse Administrator's Role

Video Clip – The Raising of America

The Raising of America: Early Childhood and the Future of Our Nation is a five-part documentary series that explores how a strong start for all our kids can lead to a healthier, stronger and more equitable nation.

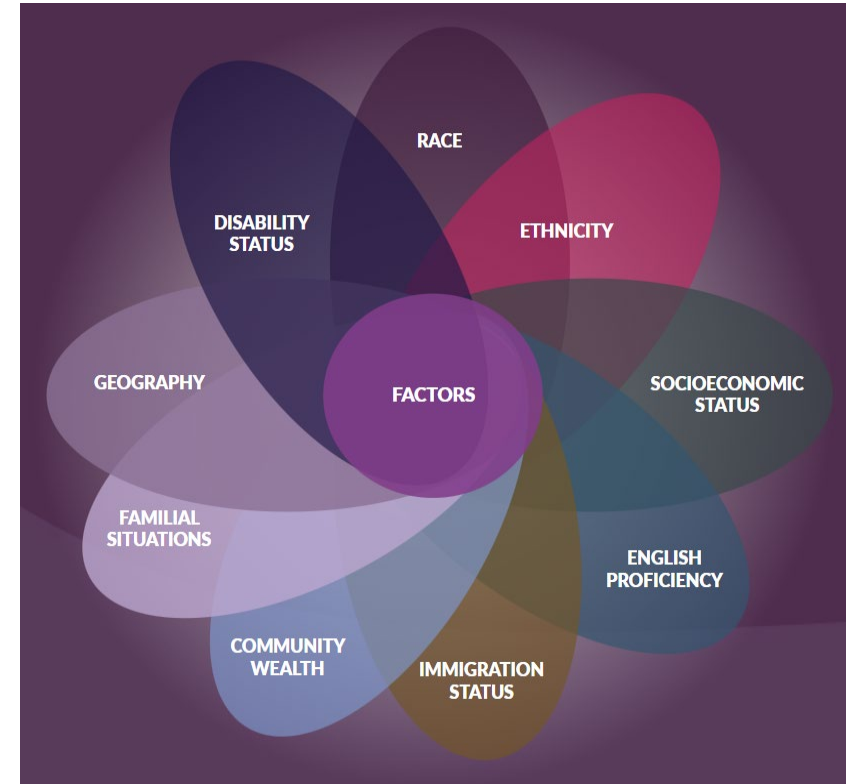
This short clip from *Episode 4: Wounded Places* (0:51-3:41) shows what children in impoverished, urban neighborhoods across America experience.

Source: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/164813>

Sociopolitical Factors

Opportunity Gaps

- Unequal and inequitable distribution of resources and experiences on the basis of these nine factors



Source: [The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#)

Trauma: Understanding the Impact on School Attendance

Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being ([Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \[SAMHSA\], 2014](#)).

Trauma is not solely defined by the event itself, but rather by the **individual's experience** and interpretation of it. This includes experiences of:

- Abuse
- Neglect
- Violence
- Accidents and Natural Disasters
- Medical Trauma
- Family Separation
- Historical Trauma
- Institutional bullying

Poverty's Impact on Attendance

Lack of basic resources

- Food insecurity
- Lack of adequate clothing
- Transportation barriers

Housing instability

- Homelessness
- Frequent moves

Limited access to healthcare

- Physical health
- Mental health

Poverty creates a context of **chronic stress and adversity**, which can significantly increase vulnerability to trauma.

Racism's Impact on Attendance

Experiences of racism create a hostile and unwelcoming school environment, which can lead to absenteeism:

- Microaggressions
- Discrimination
- Systemic Inequities
- Racial Trauma

Trauma Associated with Unauthorized Immigration Status and Fear of Deportation/Family Separation

Unauthorized immigration status and the constant threat of deportation create a state of chronic stress and fear, often referred to as "toxic stress" ([Shonkoff et al., 2012](#)). This is further compounded by the potential for family separation, which is a deeply traumatic event for children ([Brabeck & Rodriguez, 2018](#)).

- Fear and Anxiety
- Family Separation as Trauma
- Impact on Trust and Safety
- Economic Hardship and Instability
- Mental Health Consequences

Video Clip – The Raising of America

The Raising of America: Early Childhood and the Future of Our Nation is a five-part documentary series that explores how a strong start for all our kids can lead to a healthier, stronger and more equitable nation.

This short clip from *Episode 4: Wounded Places* (11:52-16:03) shows how continuous traumatic stress impacts children.

Source: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/164813>

School Refusal and Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED)

And Its Impact on Brain Development and Behavior

School Refusal

School refusal behavior is more than just skipping school. It's when a child or adolescent experiences significant difficulty attending school, often accompanied by emotional distress. This distress can manifest as anxiety, fear, panic attacks, or even physical symptoms like stomachaches or headaches.

Key features:

- Emotional distress
- Parental knowledge
- Staying at home

Why it happens:

- Anxiety
- Avoiding negative experiences
- Seeking attention
- Positive reinforcement at home

School Refusal ≠ Truancy

Types of School Refusal & Its Impact

While there isn't one universally accepted typology, common presentations include:

- Anxiety-based
- Avoidance of social situations
- Pursuit of tangible reinforcement
- Avoidance of negative affect

School refusal can have significant negative consequences:

- Academic decline
- Social isolation
- Increased risk of mental health problems
- Long-term impacts (i.e., chronic absenteeism, school dropout, difficulties transitioning to adulthood)

SED Under IDEA

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), **Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED)** is defined as a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time, to a marked degree, that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

1. An **inability to learn** that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
2. An **inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships** with peers and teachers.
3. **Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings** under normal circumstances.
4. A general pervasive mood of **unhappiness or depression**.
5. A tendency to develop **physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems**.

Frequency, duration, and intensity help us understand the severity and impact of the disorder.

Video Clip – The Raising of America

The Raising of America: Early Childhood and the Future of Our Nation is a five-part documentary series that explores how a strong start for all our kids can lead to a healthier, stronger and more equitable nation.

This short clip from *Episode 4: Wounded Places* (22:09-27:58) shows how chronic stress affects childhood development and behaviors.

Source: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/164813>

School Nurse's Role (within MTSS)

Identifying Patterns

School nurses are crucial in identifying patterns of absences and considering potential underlying causes, including physical health concerns, mental health issues, and family stressors.

Health Screenings and Assessments

This includes conducting health screenings and assessments, including mental health screenings (e.g., using standardized questionnaires for anxiety or depression).

Communication

Effective communication with parents/guardians and school staff is essential for sharing information, coordinating care, and developing collaborative solutions.

Connecting Families with Resources

School nurses can connect families with appropriate resources within the MTSS framework, including school counselors, social workers, mental health providers, and community organizations.

The Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and School Refusal

A Preventative Multi-Tiered Framework

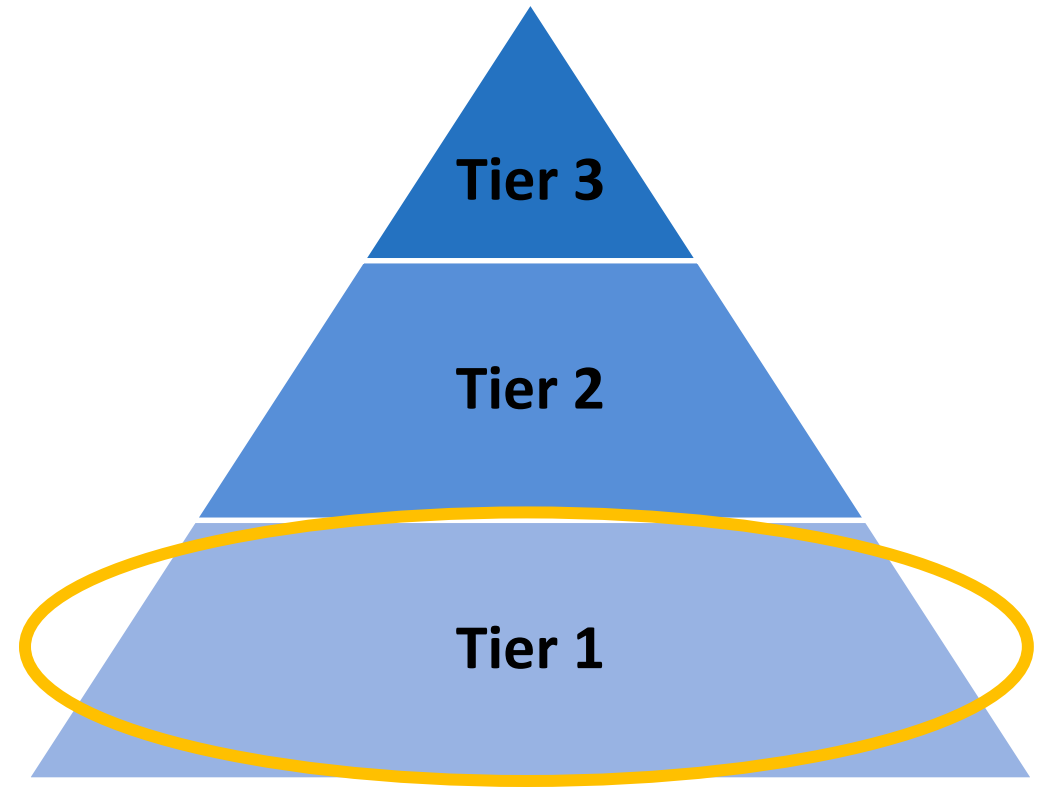
MTSS Tier 1: Universal Supports (Prevention)

Core Elements:

- Positive school climate
- Schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)
- SEL programs
- Mental health awareness and promotion

Connection to School Refusal Prevention:

These universal supports create a foundation that can reduce the likelihood of school refusal by addressing risk factors for all students.



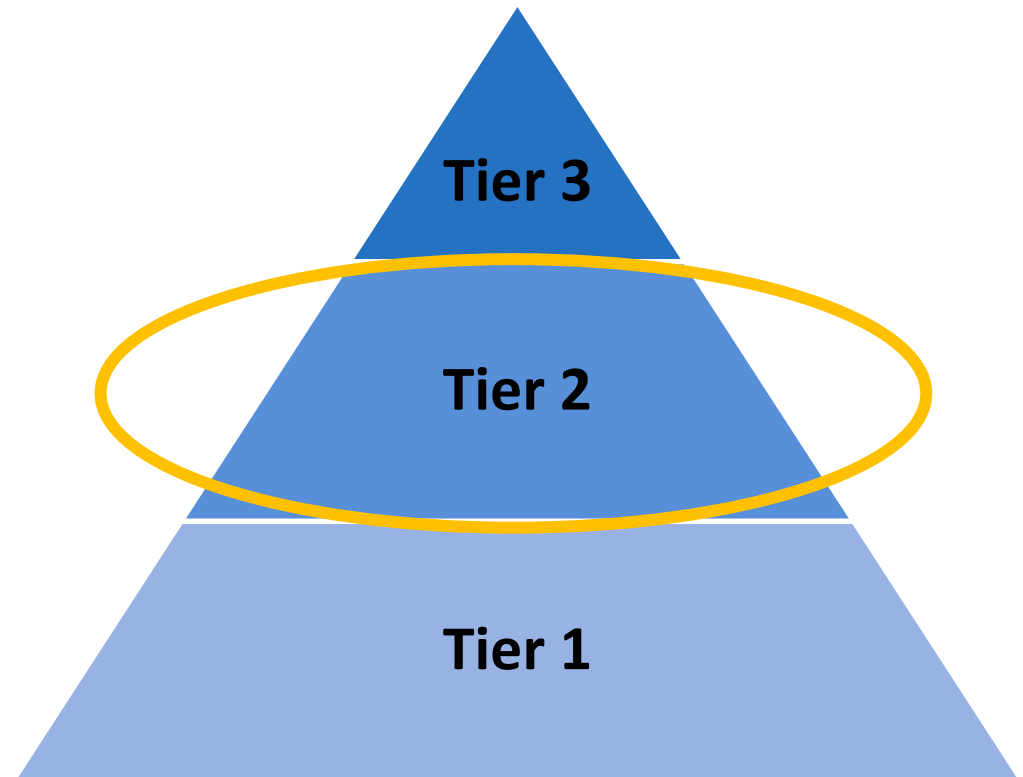
MTSS Tier 2: Targeted Interventions (Early Intervention)

Examples:

- Small group counseling
- Check-in/check-out systems
- Mentoring programs
- Targeted social skills groups
- Parent support groups

Transition to Tier 3:

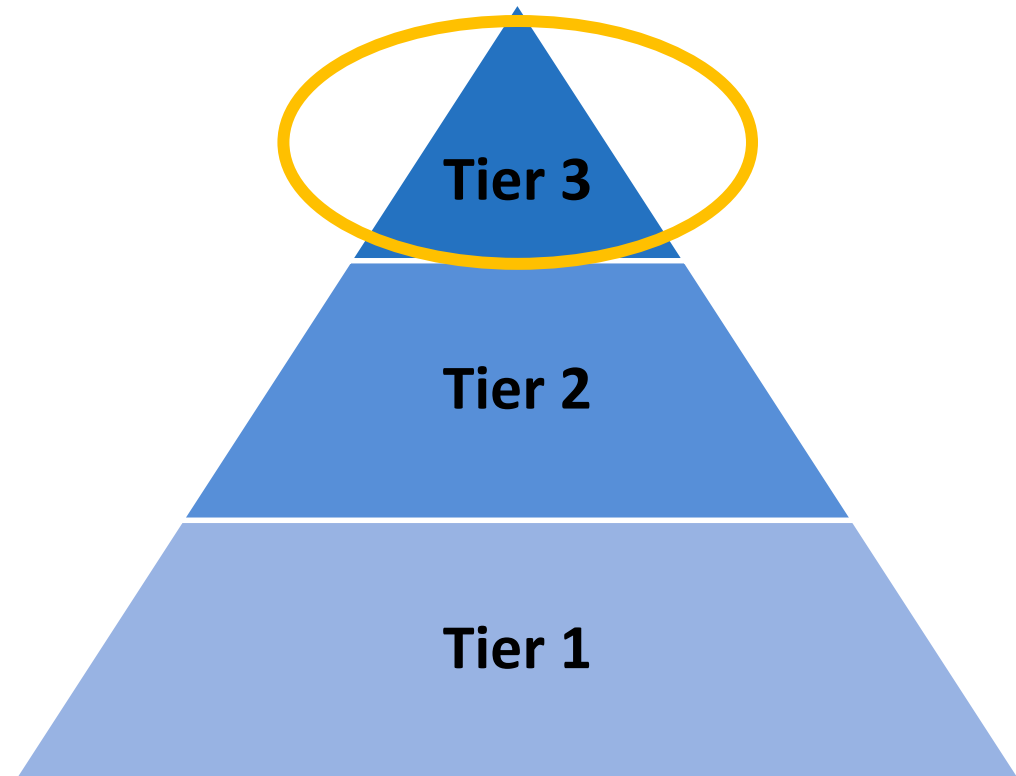
While Tier 2 interventions are effective for many students, some will require more intensive, individualized support at Tier 3, especially those with complex trauma or SED.



MTSS Tier 3: Intensive, Individualized Supports (Addressing Complex Needs)

Key Components:

- Comprehensive Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)
- Highly Individualized Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIPs)
- Intensive Individual Therapy
- Wraparound Services
- Case Management
- Collaboration with Community Mental Health Providers and Other Community Organizations



Addressing the Unique Needs of Immigrant and Refugee Students

Mental Health Challenges of Immigrant/Refugee Populations

Immigrant and refugee students face a multitude of stressors that can significantly impact their mental health and, consequently, their school attendance. These include:

- Pre-migration trauma
- Acculturation stress
- Language barriers
- Family separation
- Fear of deportation
- Discrimination

Unauthorized Immigration: Heightened Vulnerability

Students who are unauthorized immigrants and those with unauthorized family members face additional stressors:

- Constant fear of deportation
- Limited access to resources
- Economic hardship

Examples of Adapted Tier 3 Supports

- **Therapy in Native Language:** Providing therapy in the student's native language is crucial for effective communication and building trust.
- **Culturally Competent Therapists:** Working with therapists who understand the cultural context of the student's experiences is essential.
- **Referrals to Legal Aid Organizations:** Connecting families with legal aid organizations specializing in immigration law can help address legal concerns and reduce stress.
- **Assistance Navigating Complex Systems:** Providing assistance navigating complex systems (e.g., healthcare, social services) can help families access needed resources.

It is essential to emphasize the importance of **building trust and ensuring confidentiality** with unauthorized immigrant students and their families. This includes explaining confidentiality policies and assuring them that information will not be shared with immigration authorities.

Integrating Cultural Competency into School Nurse Interventions

Cultural competency is essential for providing effective care to immigrant and refugee students. Practical strategies include:

- Using interpreters
- Understanding cultural differences in communication styles
- Building relationships with community cultural brokers
- Cultural humility

The Nurse Administrator's Role within MTSS

Leadership and Advocacy for MTSS Implementation

Nurse administrators play a vital role in advocating for full and effective MTSS implementation, including:

- Ensuring that all staff are trained in MTSS principles and practices.
- Advocating for adequate resources to support all three tiers of MTSS.
- Promoting a school-wide culture of prevention and early intervention.

Resource Allocation and Staff Training:

- Advocating for adequate staffing, including school nurses, counselors, social workers, and other support staff.
- Securing funding for professional development on topics such as trauma-informed care, cultural competency, and working with immigrant and refugee populations.
- Providing ongoing supervision and support to school nurses.

Data-Driven Decision Making and MTSS Evaluation:

- Implementing systems for collecting and analyzing data on attendance, behavior, and academic performance.
- Using data to monitor the effectiveness of MTSS interventions and make adjustments as needed.
- Tracking outcomes for different student groups, including immigrant and refugee students, to ensure equitable access to support.

Recommendations

Providing Compassionate, Ethical, and Culturally Competent Care

Compassionate Care

Human Dignity

- Recognize the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of their immigration status.
- Treat patients with respect, empathy, and understanding, acknowledging their unique experiences and vulnerabilities.

Addressing Fears and Concerns

- Unauthorized immigrants often face significant fears and anxieties related to deportation, family separation, and discrimination.
- Acknowledge these concerns and create a safe and trusting environment where patients feel comfortable seeking care.

Meeting Basic Needs

- Many unauthorized immigrants face significant barriers to accessing basic necessities like food, housing, and transportation.
- Address these social determinants of health and connect patients with available resources and support services.

Ethics of Care

Beneficence and Non-maleficence

- The ethical principles of beneficence (acting in the best interests of the patient) and non-maleficence (avoiding harm) are paramount.
- Provide necessary medical care regardless of immigration status, while also being mindful of the potential risks and consequences for patients.

Justice and Equity

- Ensure that all individuals have access to healthcare regardless of their ability to pay or their immigration status.
- Address systemic barriers and advocate for policies that promote health equity.

Confidentiality

- Maintaining patient confidentiality is crucial, especially for unauthorized immigrants who may fear that their information could be shared with immigration authorities.
- Adhere to strict confidentiality protocols and ensure that patients understand their rights.

Cultural Competence and Responsiveness

Understanding Cultural Differences

- Cultural competence involves understanding and respecting the cultural beliefs, values, and practices of diverse patient populations.
- Be aware of how cultural factors may influence health beliefs, communication styles, and help-seeking behaviors.

Language Access

- Providing language access services, such as professional interpreters, is essential for effective communication and patient safety.
- This ensures that patients can understand their medical conditions, treatment options, and instructions for care.

Culturally Tailored Interventions

- Develop culturally tailored interventions that are sensitive to the specific needs and preferences of different cultural groups.
- This may involve incorporating traditional healing practices or working with cultural brokers.

Federal, State, and Local Regulations

Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA)

- EMTALA requires hospitals with emergency departments to provide stabilizing treatment to all individuals regardless of their immigration status or ability to pay.
- This ensures that unauthorized immigrants can receive emergency medical care.

Limited Access to Public Benefits

- Unauthorized immigrants are generally not eligible for federal healthcare programs like Medicaid and Medicare, except for emergency services.
- This creates significant barriers to accessing affordable healthcare.

State and Local Policies

- State and local policies vary widely regarding access to healthcare for unauthorized immigrants.
- Some states provide limited state-funded benefits, while others have more restrictive policies.

Challenges and Considerations

Fear of Deportation

- The fear of deportation can deter unauthorized immigrants from seeking necessary medical care.
- Healthcare providers must build trust and assure patients that their information will be kept confidential.

Financial Barriers

- The lack of insurance coverage and limited access to public benefits create significant financial barriers to healthcare.
- Many unauthorized immigrants rely on community health centers and free clinics for care.

Language and Cultural Barriers

- Language and cultural differences can make it difficult for unauthorized immigrants to navigate the healthcare system and access appropriate care.

Lack of Data

- Limited data on the health needs and healthcare utilization of unauthorized immigrants makes it challenging to develop effective policies and interventions.

Moving Forward

Advocacy for Policy Change

- Advocating for policies that expand access to affordable healthcare for all individuals regardless of immigration status.

Strengthening Community-Based Services

- Supporting community health centers and other organizations that provide healthcare to underserved populations, including unauthorized immigrants.

Promoting Cultural Competence Training

- Providing cultural competence training for healthcare providers to improve their ability to provide culturally sensitive care.

Conducting Research

- Conducting research to better understand the health needs and healthcare utilization of unauthorized immigrants.

Conclusion

- A comprehensive, multi-tiered approach is essential for addressing chronic absenteeism, especially in vulnerable student populations.
- Addressing trauma, poverty, and racism, and providing culturally competent care are essential.
- Robust and tailored Tier 3 supports, including strong community partnerships, are critical for complex cases, particularly those involving unauthorized immigrant students.

As school nurses, you are key leaders in ensuring the well-being of all students.



BREAK (5 minutes)

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Case Review & Discussion

Our Speakers



Monica Onyango, RN, MPH, MS, PhD
Clinical Associate Professor
Boston University School of Public Health



Jane Kimani, MEd, CHES
Executive Director
UHAI for Health Inc.

Case Recap: Student Information

- Name: Janice Ngalula
- Age: 12 years old
- Gender: Female
- Grade: 7th
- Original Home Country: Democratic Republic of Congolese (DRC)
- Family Composition: Mother, 6 siblings (Janice is 7th)
- Location: Worcester, Massachusetts (immigrated with family to the U.S. 10 years ago)
- Reason for Migration: Fleeing war and violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo
- Diagnosis: Mental illness, yet to be determined

Case Recap: Introduction

- Janice has a history of absenteeism in school
 - Recently, she's missed class at least one day/week
 - Parents don't call the school to inform staff of her absence
 - Absences are affecting her academic performance
- When Janice is in school, she seems isolated and sometimes anxious
 - She's not involved in any extracurriculars
- A letter was written to Janice's mother, Marie, to come to the school, but she's never visited
 - Janice shares that her mother works a lot and speaks limited English
- Janice's older sister has passed away
- Janice has missed school to stay home with a younger sibling

First Pause: Let's Discuss

- Have you experienced a case similar to Janice's? How was it handled in your school district?
- If you have not experienced a similar case, what would the response to Janice's situation look like in your school district?

Case Recap: Family Context

- Marie and her 4 children (including Janice) fled the DRC due to escalating violence and instability caused by ongoing conflicts between various armed groups
- They stayed at a refugee camp in Uganda for 3 years before moving to Worcester, MA
 - Moved with the help of the Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center (RIAC), a resettlement agency based in Worcester
- Marie has experienced racial discrimination, language barriers, barriers to healthcare access, and financial instability living in Worcester
- Before fleeing the war in the DRC, Marie and her family experienced gross atrocities
 - The father of Marie's first 3 children was kidnapped and has been missing ever since
 - Marie experienced a sexual violence-related pregnancy that led to the birth of her 4th child

Second Pause: Let's Discuss

- Do you have students who identify as **refugees** in your school district?
- How would you go about establishing and understanding their unique needs taking into consideration:
 - previous circumstances leading to forced displacement,
 - migration journey, and
 - eventual resettlement to the United States?

Case Recap: Additional Context

- **Current Work:** Marie works overnight shifts at FedEx and has worked for other local factories. She takes up manual jobs that do not require verbal/written communication due to her limited English. She's been unable to take Driver's Ed and depends on others for transportation to work.
- **Financial Instability:** Marie is dependent on government housing, food stamps, and local charities to supplement her income. Her job does not have benefits.
- **Healthcare Access:** For Marie and her children, navigating the healthcare system is challenging due to language barriers and a lack of knowledge about available services.

Case Recap: Additional Context

Education for Children:

- Marie's children face difficulties enrolling in school due to language barriers and gaps in their education.
- Marie pulled Janice's older sister out of school after she faced repeated bullying. The same sister was to join college last year, but she could not qualify for FAFSA due to her immigration status. She was eligible for citizenship based on the duration she has lived in the U.S., but Marie couldn't get any assistance to apply for citizenship.
- Ultimately, UHAI for Health Inc. was able to assist them with the application and provided interpretation services for the interview and oath ceremony.

Case Recap: Additional Context

Mental Health Context Among African Immigrant Communities in MA:

- Since 2018, a number of African immigrant youth have committed suicide in MA.
- UHAI for Health Inc. has held statewide community forums to discuss rising suicide rates and mental health issues.
 - Participants reported that a majority of youth are struggling with mental illness but are not receiving appropriate care.
 - The youth expressed concern with stigma around mental illness and suicide in the community.

Third Pause: Let's Discuss

Now that you have the complete context of Janice and her family:

- What other actions does the school community need to take to support this student and her family?
 - What would be your considerations for equity, advocacy, and compassionate care?
 - How will you address the contextual and cultural differences and approaches to the student's mental health challenges?
- Think about your communities. Are there organizations such as UHAI that you can be engaged with for support to similar families?
- How might you change/add to your Level 3 interventions given what you've learned from this case study?

Final Reflections & Comments

What are some of the lessons you have learned from our discussion today?

Next Steps (Due May 6th, 2025)


May Session:
Best Practices Presentations
Seeking submissions!

Padlet: Submit Tier 3 Interventions



Creative Commons: Free vector graphic

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- Purchase order requests are temporarily closing on Friday, May 16th at 4:00 PM until Tuesday, July 1st
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