

Mental Health Plan for Student Athletes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Connecticut State Department of Education — March 2024



[Section 10-212l of the Connecticut General Statutes \(C.G.S.\)](#) requires the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), in collaboration with the governing authority for intramural and interscholastic athletics, develop a mental health plan to raise awareness of mental health resources available to student athletes. Such plan shall be made available to local and regional boards of education and implemented in accordance with the provisions of Section 4 of this act.

To address the mental health needs of student athletes, the CSDE, the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference (CIAC), and the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS), have outlined a plan that addresses:

1. Creation of and access to the mental health services team for the school district;
2. Communication among members of the mental health services team;
3. Crisis intervention services;
4. Screening and recognizing appropriate referrals for student-athletes;
5. Management of the administration of student athlete medications;
6. Mitigation of risk to student-athletes; and
7. Transition care for those student athletes leaving intramural or interscholastic athletics due to graduation, dismissal, or discipline.

The CSDE, CIAC, and DMHAS recommend that every school district develop a well-coordinated approach to this plan. A coordinated approach to services for student-athletes' mental health can provide the framework for families, community-based partners, and schools to work together to improve athletes' overall confidence and healthy performance in sports and school.

Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects feeling, thinking, and actions. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. Experiencing mental health problems throughout life can impact mood and behavior ([Centers for Disease Control, 2023](#)). Mental health issues or concerns and mental illness are not the same. A person can experience mental health issues and concerns and not be diagnosed with a mental illness.

Participating in athletics can be a positive experience for students. Student athletes learn self-discipline, teamwork, confidence, time management, relationship building, resiliency, and dealing with adversity. However, student athletes can become overwhelmed by the significant pressure to perform well in school and in their chosen sport(s). The high intensity and competition in athletics can provoke, increase, or expose mental health issues in athletes ([Clinical Journal of Sports Medicine, 2020](#)).

This plan centers on how schools, the athletic care network (coaches, athletic directors, and athletic trainers), school mental health staff, and mental health providers can assist with prevention, promotion, symptoms, and supports.

Access to the mental health services team for the school district

The most effective way to provide access to mental health services is a multidisciplinary approach with collaboration, communication, and team planning among school administrators, coaches, designated team physicians, school nurses, athletic directors, athletic trainers, school medical advisors, school nurse supervisors, and mental health care providers.

Screening and recognizing appropriate referrals for student athletes

Recognizing mental health issues in athletes, from awareness of signs of risk to mild stress and distress to more significant struggles, is critical for engagement. Needs assessments, screenings, referrals, or other school team processes can identify these concerns early to provide intervention services. All school mental health and health professionals in the school and community provide these services. The key is that student athletes and staff can recognize signs and symptoms of potential mental health issues.

Communication among members of the mental health services team

Develop appropriate protocols with a decision tree that indicates how, when, and by whom services will be delivered, the follow-up plan, and how the family will be included in assisting athletes. Include internal and external mental health providers, coaches, designated team physicians, school nurses, and trainers.

Management of the administration of student athlete medication

Connecticut law permits appropriately trained licensed athletic trainers and coaches to provide medication to a specific student with a medically diagnosed condition during intramural and interscholastic events that require prompt treatment in accordance with the student's individual health plan, provided that certain conditions are met per [C.G.S. Section 10-212a](#).

Crisis intervention services

Always ensure the district's crisis plan is current and discussed with all staff who have contact with students. This will increase preparedness and improve emergency outcomes. Student athletes at high risk should have a safety plan, which the school should develop in consultation with the family. The plan should include contact numbers and who to contact to access services at any time. For example, call or text 988 or visit [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org) to chat. Also, 211 is a free, confidential information and referral service. Additionally, information should be included about crisis stabilization units, mobile crisis evaluations, or urgent care facilities.

Mitigation of risk to student-athletes

Ensure that the districts' mental health providers, school nurses, educators, coaches, trainers, and athletic directors receive relevant professional training that increases their skills and capacity to meet the mental health needs of athletes. Provide mental health promotion and prevention services related to sports designed to meet all students' needs regardless of whether they are at risk for mental health problems.

Transition care for those student athletes leaving intramural or interscholastic athletics due to graduation, transfer, dismissal, injury, academic standing, or suspension

A final component for establishing mental health services is the transition of care for student athletes leaving the athletics department. As student athletes graduate, i.e., finish the final season of their sport(s), transfer, are dismissed from teams, or are removed from continued participation due to their condition, a plan should be in place for the timely and orderly transition of their care to another provider.

Additionally, the CIAC and CSDE developed guidance for parents and guardians to recognize and know how to seek help for their children.

Connecticut resources

211 is a free, confidential information and referral service that connects people to essential health and human services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, online and over the phone.

[Care coordination](#) is indispensable to the effective operation of a System of Care/Community Collaborative. It is both a service to children and families and a function of a responsive system.

[Gizmo's Pawesome Guide to Mental Health](#) is an evidence-based resource that introduces mental health and wellness, and how to care for one's mental health in a nonthreatening way that encourages the self-identification of warning signs and when to apply the use of internal and external healthy coping strategies to help reduce risk. It introduces the characteristics of trusted adults, who may be one, how to practice talking with a trusted adult, and promotes proactive communication. It gives youth the opportunity to create a personal mental health plan (of action) that they can use daily, and in a time of need that can help them avert crisis. Various resources are available on the website, including free plans, pledges, social media messages, games, and books.

[Resources for Families and Students](#) is an online resource document created by the CSDE and is annually updated and distributed to local and regional boards of education. The information includes educational, safety, mental health, and food security resources and programs available for students and their families.

NCAA resources

[Mental Health Best Practices](#): This includes information about understanding and supporting student athlete mental wellness.

[Supporting Student Athlete Mental Wellness-coaches](#): Coaches play a critical role in creating an environment that supports the mental health and well-being of athletes. The Sport Science Institute developed a web-based educational module to help normalize and destigmatize mental health help-seeking for athletes.

National resources

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 or visit 988lifeline.org to chat.

References

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2023).

[What is Mental Health?](#)

Chang, C., Putukian, M., Aerni, G., Diamond, A., Hong, G., Ingram, Y., Reardon, C. L., & Wolanin, A. (2020). Mental health issues and psychological factors in athletes: detection, management, effect on performance and prevention: American Medical Society for Sports Medicine Position Statement-Executive Summary. *British journal of sports medicine*, 54(4), 216–220.

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