
SPEAKING PACKAGE

Dr. Brenda Ortiz McGrath

Ed.D., MSW

Keynotes · Workshops · Institutes · Panels · Leadership Cohorts

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ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Dr. Brenda Ortiz McGrath, Ed.D., MSW is an educational leader, district administrator, consultant, author, and researcher who strengthens PK-12 systems — leadership, policy, social-emotional learning, student support, and family and community engagement — so that every student has a real path to success.

She currently serves as a PK-12 District Administrator for Chelsea Public Schools, leading social work, social-emotional learning, school mental health, grant development and management, data and continuous improvement, staff supervision, and community partnerships districtwide. She previously served as Principal of Waltham High School — the first Latina and first woman to lead the school in 53 years — and as the district's first Latina administrator.

Signature Talks

LATINA LEADERSHIP & IDENTITY

Mija, You Were Built to Lead

Identity, culture, courage, and leadership.

Audience: Latina educators and professionals, women's leadership conferences, student leadership summits, affinity groups, and cohort programs.

Formats: Keynote · Half-day workshop · Leadership cohort

- The five flames of the MijaLumbre Leadership Framework™ and how to apply them.
- Language for naming identity, voice, and power at work.
- A personal leadership plan participants leave with in hand.

Rooted in Identity. Built for Impact.

Leading systems, developing people, and creating pathways for others to rise.

Audience: Superintendents, principals, district leadership teams, boards, and aspiring leaders.

Formats: Keynote · Full-day institute · Executive advising

- How culturally grounded leadership strengthens organizational results.
- Practices that develop people while changing systems.
- A framework for building leadership pipelines that last.

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Tier 1 Is Not Basic

Why universal systems are the foundation of successful student support.

Audience: School and district MTSS teams, student support staff, instructional leaders, and state or regional conferences.

Formats: Keynote · Half-day workshop · Multi-session series

- What strong Tier 1 actually looks like in daily practice.
- How to stop over-referring students into intensive supports.
- A team audit tool for universal systems.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING & STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

From Programs to Systems

Building sustainable SEL, MTSS, and whole-child infrastructure.

Audience: District cabinets, SEL and mental health leads, community partners, and nonprofit leadership teams.

Formats: Keynote · Full-day institute · Multi-session series

- How to move from isolated initiatives to durable infrastructure.
- Staffing, funding, and data structures that hold systems together.
- A phased implementation map for the coming school year.

Formats Offered

Keynote (45-60 minutes) A single, story-driven address for conferences, convocations, and district kickoffs.

Half-Day Workshop (3 hours) Interactive learning with protocols, team planning time, and take-home tools.

Full-Day Institute (6 hours) Deep implementation work for leadership teams building SEL, MTSS, or student ...

Multi-Session Series (3-6 sessions) Job-embedded professional learning across a semester or school year, ...

Leadership Cohort (Custom) A facilitated cohort experience for aspiring and sitting leaders, including ...

Panel & Fireside Conversation (30-90 minutes) Moderated conversation on leadership, equity, youth ...

Executive & Board Advising (Custom) Strategy sessions with superintendents, boards, and nonprofit ...

Virtual Session or Webinar (60-90 minutes) Live online learning for regional, statewide, or national ...

Additional Topics

- Educational Leadership & Systems Change
- Social-Emotional Learning
- Student Mental Health & Wellness
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support
- Culturally Responsive Leadership
- Latina Leadership & Identity
- The MijaLumbre Leadership Framework™
- Artificial Intelligence & Student Support
- Equity & Belonging in PK-12 Education
- Restorative Practices
- Community Partnerships
- Multilingual Learner Support
- Women in Leadership
- Leadership Through Identity, Healing & Purpose

Selected Presentations

bryt Symposium 2026 — Navigating Toward Hope

March 2026 · Conference

Reimagining Tier 1 Student Support with a Clinician-Developed AI Resource

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Annual Networking Conference

February 2026 · Conference

Using a Continuous Improvement Cycle to Create Safe, Supportive Environments

New York University — Master of Social Work Program

March 2025 · Guest Lecture

Tier 1 Mental Health Support and AI Tools in Schools

CASEL

2025 · Conference

CASEL 2025 Presentation

MASCA

April 2024 · Conference

Using Tech to Support a Comprehensive Counseling Program

CASEL SEL Exchange

February 18-19, 2026 · Conference

AI in Action: Explore Personalized SEL Through Research and Practice

The Urban Assembly — SEL 4 All Symposium

May 16, 2025 · Conference

Building a Comprehensive SEL Team-Based Model to Transform School Culture

Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education

September 20, 2022 · Conference

Presented Chelsea Public Schools' districtwide approach to social-emotional learning, behavioral health, mental health, wellness, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, highlighting clinical partnerships, community collaboration, funding strategies, and relationship-centered practice.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Multiple Engagements · Workshop

Facilitated workshops and presentations for Massachusetts educators and leaders on social-emotional learning, mental health, student support, equity, and district systems of care.

Book a session

Requests and availability: innovateleadelevate@gmail.com
drbrendaortizmcgrath.com/speaking · drbrendaortizmcgrath.com/keynotes
<https://mijalumbre.info> · <https://corekind360families.com>

Using a Continuous Improvement Cycle to Create Safe, Supportive Environments

Chelsea Public Schools

January 21, 2026

Brenda Ortiz McGrath, MSW
Director of Social Work, SEL, Specialized Student Supports

Chelsea: Nuestra Comunidad



11 Schools

Pre-K — Grade 12

District Enrollment

5,749 Students

Student Race and Ethnicity

- Hispanic - 89%
- African American - 4.3%
- White - 6.3%
- Asian - .7%

Populations Served

- First Language not English - 84%
- First Language Learner - 43.7%
- High Needs: 90.6%
- Low Income - 80.5%



Why Continuous Improvement?



Culture & Climate Require Systems That Learn

- Student needs and school contexts change over time
- One-time initiatives do not sustain culture or climate
- Data helps surface inequities that are not always visible
- Systems create consistency and reduce initiative fatigue
- Continuous improvement allows us to respond, not react

Chelsea's Continuous Improvement Cycle



How We Organize the Work

- Listen & Assess
- Identify Needs
- Implement Supports
- Monitor & Adjust
- Reflect & Improve



Listening & Assessing



How We Understand Student and School Needs

- **Panorama:** Student and staff perceptions of belonging, safety, and relationships
- **RCADS:** Universal screening for student mental health indicators
- **Aspen:** Attendance, behavior, and engagement patterns
- **eCINS:** Social work supports, interventions, and follow-up

Listening & Assessing

How We Understand Student and School Needs



We use multiple data sources and perspectives to understand strengths, needs, and gaps.

From Data to Action



How the Cycle Shows Up in Practice

- School-based SEL and mental health supports
- Student Support Teams and MTSS structures
- Crisis response and coordinated care protocols
- District SEL guidance and alignment
- Clinical consultancy to support staff practice

From Data to Action

How the Cycle Shows Up in Practice



- **School-based SEL** and mental health supports
- **Student Support Teams** and MTSS structures
- **Crisis response** and coordinated care protocols
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- **Clinical consultancy** to support staff practice

We use **multiple data sources** and **perspectives** to understand strengths, needs, and gaps.

Emerging Work Within the Cycle



SEL Walkthrough Rubric

- Identified through climate and implementation data
- Intended to focus on observable adult practices
- Being developed as a non-evaluative learning tool
- Designed to inform coaching, professional learning, and system alignment

Emerging Work Within the Cycle

SEL Walkthrough Rubric (In Development)



Identified through climate and implementation data



Intended to focus on **observable** adult practices



Being developed as a non-evaluative learning tool



Designed to inform **coaching**, professional learning, and system alignment



This is an example of how data helps us identify the next area for growth.

Reflection & Discussion



Continuous Improvement in Practice

Discussion Prompt:

How are you using continuous improvement to strengthen culture and climate in your context?

What data has been most helpful in guiding your work?

Where has alignment been challenging?

How do you balance responsiveness with staff capacity?

alongside

Using Tech to Support a Comprehensive Counseling Program



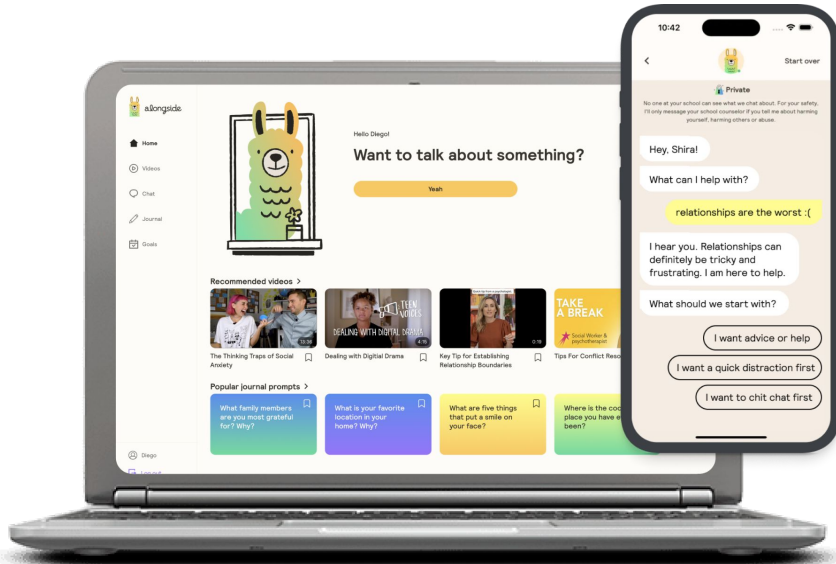
Scott Freschet
Cofounder, Alongside



Brenda Pena, MSW
Director of Social Work
Chelsea Public Schools



Alongside helps schools cover all students with research-based mental health support that adolescents like and trust



Clinician-created content

Provides therapy exercises created by doctoral clinicians



24/7

Available when students have time and feel the desire to open up



Non-judgmental

Provides a confidential place to share thoughts and emotions without judgment



Chatbot magic

Students can chat about any problem they are facing and get validation and advice



Escalation

Connects to school and 24/7 resources in cases of suicidal ideation and severe issues



Native language

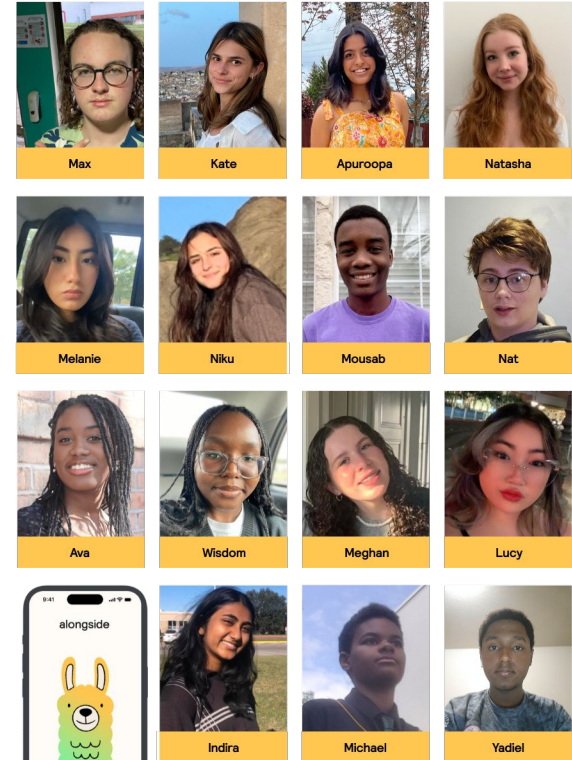
Converses in the student's preferred language, making it easier to communicate feelings

Do you know teens that are passionate about supporting and de-stigmatizing youth mental health?

Have them apply for our ***paid*** summer internship!
Deadline to apply is April 15



Our 2023
summer interns



Student Mental Health in CPS

Chelsea Public Schools

Brenda Pena, MSW

Director of Mental Health | SEL | Specialized Student Supports



Chelsea Public Schools

“Nuestra Comunidad”



11 Schools

Pre-K — Grade 12

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6,611 Students

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Mental Health

DEFINITION

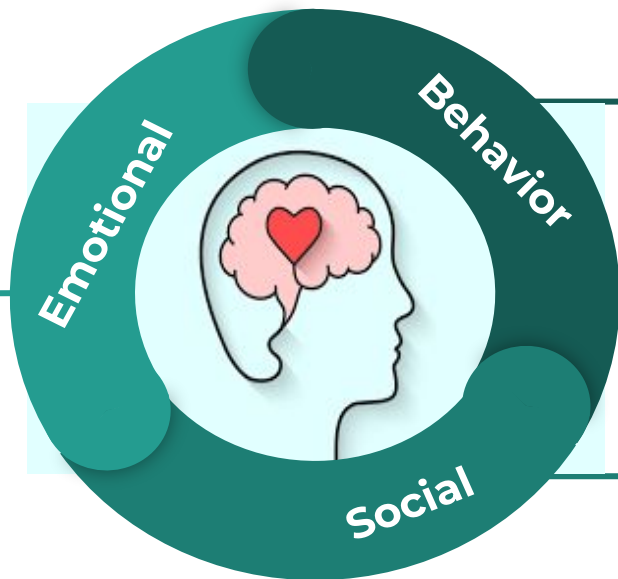
Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices.

(CDC - Centers for Disease Control)

How does mental health present within CPS?

Emotional

- Sadness
- Worry, anxiety, and fear
- Safety concerns: self-harm and or suicidality
- Irritability and/or mood changes
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of interest or motivation



Behavior

- Inconsistent attendance in class and/or school
- Low frustration tolerance
- Difficulty with emotion regulation: shutting down or verbal/physical outbursts
- Physical (somatic) complaints
- Low energy, fatigue

Social

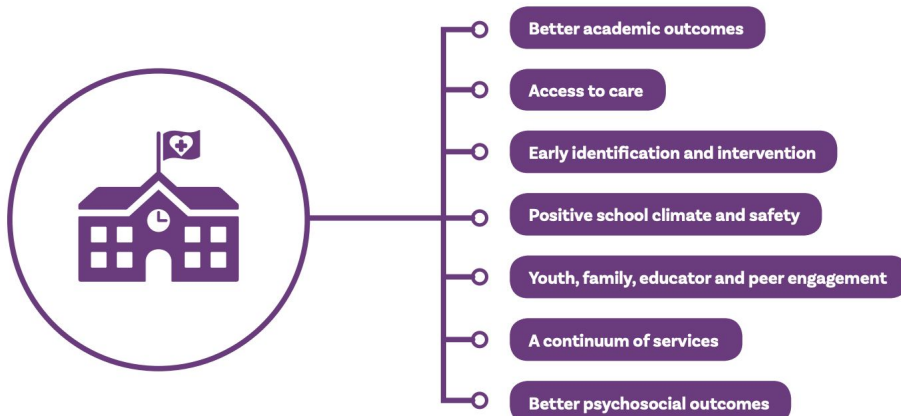
- Difficulty making and/or keeping friends
- Social Isolation
- Peer Conflict
- Verbal/Physical Aggression
- Conflict with adults

Comprehensive school mental health system

Comprehensive school mental health systems provide an array of supports and services that promote positive school climate, social and emotional learning, and mental health and well-being, while reducing the prevalence and severity of mental illness.

CPS Lead Team Members:

- SEL Leads & SEL School-based Teams
- School Counselors
- School Social Workers
- Special Education Staff
- Mediation/MTSS Staff
- Homelessness Liaison
- Young Parenting Coordinator
- Family Liaisons



STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

TIER 2: Group & Individual Supports

- Early Identification, Support, & Progress Monitoring
- Individual and Group Intervention
- Referral and Case Management
- Family Wraparound Support



TIER 3: Individual Supports

- Crisis Intervention
- Counseling/ Treatment Supports
- Collaboration with youth, family, and outside providers

TIER 1: Universal Supports

- Positive Relationships & Safe School Climate
- Universal Screening
- Social Emotional Learning
- Mental Health Promotion and Education

MEETING STUDENT NEEDS

INTERVENTION & ASSESSMENT

- Individual Meetings & Assessment
- Psychoeducation
- Coping Skills Modeling, Practice, and Connection
- Group Interventions

FAMILY & COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- Communication with Families: Guardian Phone Calls & Meetings
- Connection to Community Providers

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- Integration of mental health into SEL Curriculum & Advisory
- Integration of emotion regulation skills into the classroom

Tier 1:

**CPS Universal
Supports**



TIER 1: UNIVERSAL MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING

RCADS-25:

Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale

*(Measures levels of anxiety and
low mood)*

- Administered to Students Grades 3-12
- Voluntary Self-Report Measure
- Provided in Multiple Languages
- Families Able to “Opt-Out”

MENTAL HEALTH SCREENER RESULTS & LEARNING



STRENGTHS

- Students take it seriously.
- De-stigmatized mental health.
- Identified students who may not have previously been referred (~50%)
- Allowed for early intervention and connection to resources.

CHALLENGES

- Some students opt out of participation.
- Percentage of students identified through screener can be larger than national norms.
- Limited capacity of available community resources.

CHILDREN'S CABINET

“Bodies typically composed of the heads of government, business, and nonprofit agencies/organizations with child- and youth-serving programs”

Children's cabinets meet regularly to...

- Coordinate services
- Develop a common set of outcomes
- Collaboratively decide upon and implement plans

...all to foster the well-being of young people



CHILDREN'S CABINET SUBCOMMITTEES GOALS



Mental Health

Improve child wellbeing
(alt: increase access & use of mental health resources)



Out-of-School Time

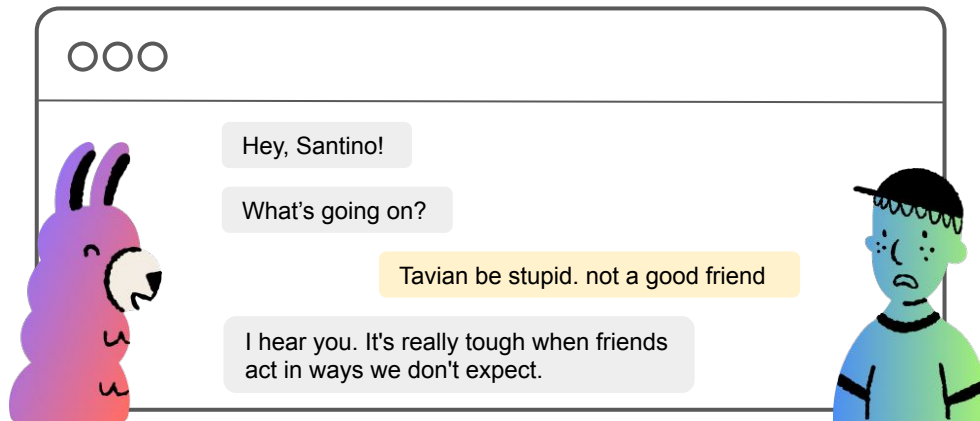
Increase participation of children and youth in out-of-school activities



College & Career Readiness

Increase and broaden post-secondary pathways for students

ALONGSIDE



NEEDS & CHALLENGES

Need effective Tier 1 support and prevention for all middle and high school students

Mental health support must also meet the needs of our Latinx and EL students

HOW ALONGSIDE ADDRESSES

Alongside is a mental health app that provides personalized prevention and early intervention to every secondary student

Students can converse in 30+ languages, making it easier to communicate feelings and get help



What can I
help with?

alongside

WHAT STUDENTS ARE SAYING?

"This conversation made me think more about my health and will take it more seriously"

"I got strategies to help me with the test if i get nervous"

"thank you for helping me for this i think i am ready"

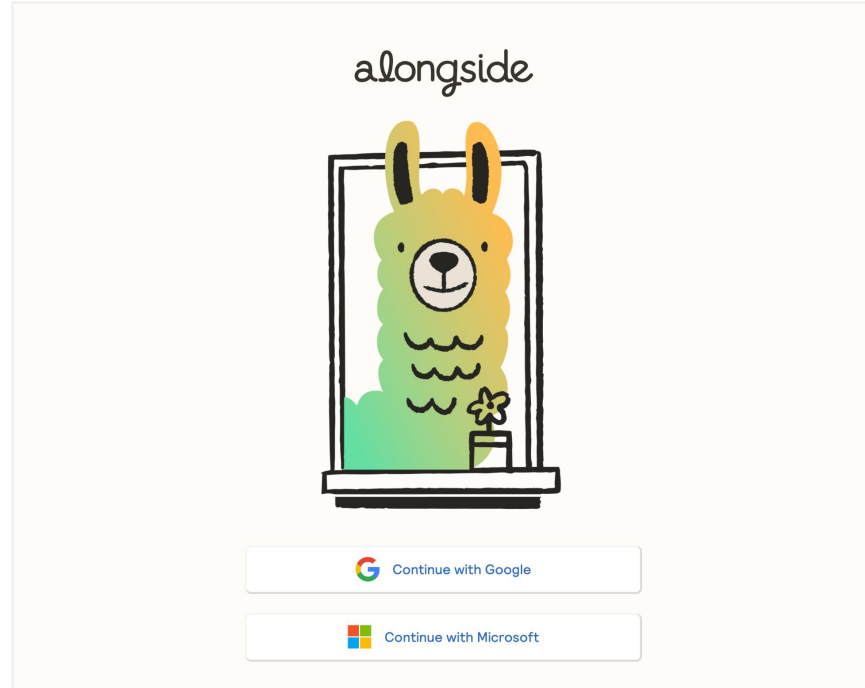
"i liked the help you gave me and the confidence"

"Muchos Gracias!"

"Yes i really appreciate you"

"i liked how we talked through it . ty for helping me and giving me Ideas!!"

LIVE DEMO



app.alongside.care

THANK YOU & QUESTIONS

Brenda Pena

Follow me on LinkedIn



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Explore the app yourself

