

From the Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

A cautionary note

Problems with Current Advocacy and Approaches Focused Mainly on Advancing Mental Health in Schools

Because of the long-standing mental health crisis, schools are under great pressure to do more about students' mental health. Unfortunately, ***too much of what is being advocated and pursued reflects a distorted understanding of the role schools can and should play in addressing mental health.***

If schools are ever to play a significant role with respect to mental health concerns, the efforts must fit into a school's efforts to support ***all*** students. And, from a school perspective, that means ***embedding*** the focus on mental health into a system of student/learning supports that addresses a ***broad*** range of barriers to learning and teaching. For this to happen, schools must rethink and mobilize use of existing student support resources and systematically weave in whatever is available in the community.

Too much of the advocacy for enhancing mental health in school is counterproductive to efforts to ***improve*** how schools provide supports for ***all*** students, and especially for the increasing numbers experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Here are examples of what's wrong with approaches that are concerned *mainly* with enhancing mental health efforts at schools. Advocates are calling for

(1) yet another specialized team;

It is commonplace for advocates of initiatives focusing on a specific type of student problem to recommend establishment of a dedicated team (e.g., a School Mental Health Team). The more initiatives, the more teams and the more counterproductive competition for sparse resources and support staff time. (School staff often moan: *Not another team.*)

By embedding mental health concerns into a broader initiative to improve student/learning supports, we suggest that one leadership team and a few workgroups can guide all the initiatives adopted to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.*

(2) yet another needs assessment;

Schools generally have done some form of needs assessment, and it would be surprising if a school was unaware that they have too many students who are experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. School staff probably could learn more from further needs assessment. However, given sparse budgets, the resources used to collect more information are needed and would be better used to improve the supports for the many students already identified.

(3) narrowly focused resource mapping;

*This certainly is an important activity, But, again, it is one that must go well beyond a limited focus on mental health concerns. Every school uses resources to address barriers to learning and teaching and to reengage disconnected students. Some of these resources involve collaborations with the community. Mapping it all allows for a detailed understanding of what is being used, analyses of utility and resource needs, and planning for improvements related to student/learning supports.***

(4) yet more screening;

Calls for formal universal screening of mental health problems (or for dyslexia, assessing threat, etc.) sound great but are not the best way to expend resources for addressing student problems. Similar to needs assessment, parents, teachers, and other school staff already are aware of and likely have asked for help for many students who are experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Currently, in many schools, adequate supports are available for relatively few students. Before expending sparse resources on screening, schools need to expend available funds on improving their support system so that help is available for the many students already identified.

(5) limited focus on intervention tiers;

As widely formulated, the desired intervention continuum for schools currently is discussed as a Multi-tiered Student Support (MTSS) framework. The framework is readily applicable to mental health concerns, as well as to addressing the support needs of **ALL** students. However, it has shortcomings and needs to be evolved to include the six domains of support that schools must address at each level and account for the weaving together of school and community resources.***

(6) too narrow a focus on fiscal concerns;

As finances tighten, schools look for ways to underwrite personnel costs. The emphasis on mental health has led schools to tap into medicaid reimbursements for mental health *services* provided by district staff. However, rather than using the funds to add staff to provide these services, districts are reassigning existing support staff who then are not available to provide other needed student supports.

At this critical juncture for schools, the focus needs to be on strategies for (a) braiding all existing resources designated for student/learning supports, (b) weaving them together with available community resources, and (c) deploying them in ways that rebuild student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.****

(7) narrowly focused scaling-up and sustaining.

Scaling up any major school changes is more than difficult. Given that schools need an improved system of student/learning supports, efforts that focus on separate initiatives tend to interfere with essential improvements and maintain fragmented and marginalized approaches. To counter this state of affairs, those wanting to advance mental health in schools need to refocus their advocacy. As a first step, they can help with efforts to have school improvement policy adopt a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports with mental health concerns fully embedded. Then, they can draw on improvement and implementation sciences to help school districts adopt effective approaches to scaling-up and sustaining the new system.*****

**Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>

***Resource Mapping & Management to Address Barriers to Learning*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/resourcemapping/resourcemappingandmanagement.pdf>

****Rethinking MTSS to Better Address Barriers to Learning*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/fall19.pdf>

****Fiscal Cliff Threatens Student/Learning Supports: It's Time to Braid and Rethink Resource Use*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fall23.pdf>

*****Transforming Student/Learning Supports & Enhancing Equity of Opportunity*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/24mono.pdf>

Also, see:

>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/barriersbook.pdf>

>*Improving School Improvement*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improve.pdf>

Best wishes as we all work to improve student and staff well-being.

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