
A Reaction to the Narrowing of Student Well-being to Mental Health Concerns

On December 18, under the heading of **Student Well-Being**, EdSource Published a piece entitled: “California looks to the health system to sustain mental health funds in schools”

<https://edsource.org/2023/california-looks-to-the-health-system-to-sustain-mental-health-funds-in-schools/702583>

If you have already read the article, hopefully you are as concerned as we are that the the pressure to address students’ mental health problems is dangerously narrowing down the focus on what students need in the way of supports and what schools (and communities) need to do.

We understand the impetus underlying advocacy for “behavioral health initiatives.”

However, the realities are that districts are confronted with a large number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems, and much more than access to a few more mental health services is needed to provide for the well-being of so many students.

So while schools do need to rethink how to address student well-being, their approach to providing supports for students cannot be narrowed down to a focus on mental health problems or an approach that continues to pursue identified problems in silos.

The current widespread concern about students’ mental health has policy makers typically responding in an ad hoc manner. There is little movement to elevate student/learning supports to a primary and high level priority commitment in school improvement policy and practice. Advocacy for separate approaches for addressing the many overlapping learning, behavior, and emotional problems that schools are experiencing is a recipe for continued fragmentation, marginalization, and counterproductive competition for sparse student/learning supports.

A fundamental transformation of existing student/learning supports is essential, and to this end, we call on all who want schools to do better in addressing mental health concerns to think “outside the box”.

What schools need is a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing the many barriers to learning and teaching encountered every day. And the system needs to be fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice as a primary focus that is essential to reducing opportunity and achievement gaps. Properly designed and implemented, such a system fully embeds mental health concerns in a way that meshes well with a school’s mission.

See a prototype for a transformed system in the following free resources:

> *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>

> *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

The prototype provides

> a framework for expanded school improvement policy,

- >details an intervention design that evolves the MTSS model and organizes domains of support across each level of the continuum,
- >emphasizes ways to weave together school and community resources,
- >illustrates an operational infrastructure for implementation at the school level, for a family of schools, and district-wide,
- >and more.

It is time for speaking out about what is missing in current advocacy for student well-being!

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