
Mental Health in Schools: Good! Advocacy for Separate Agenda – Not So Good!

COVID-19 has underscored that schools must play a greater role in addressing mental health concerns.

The question is: *What should that role be?*

As in the past, advocacy has centered on old ideas, such as

- >using schools as an integrated component of the mental health services delivery system
- >hiring *more* student support staff (e.g., more counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, etc.)
- >increasing the emphasis on mental health education
- >expanding the school's focus on social and emotional learning

All of these are relevant, *but insufficient, often unrealistic, and usually produce counterproductive competition for sparse resources.*

Current advocacy is reflected in the contents of the California *Student Mental Health Implementation Guide* developed by the state's Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission and the California Department of Education with assistance from the California Mental Health Services Authority and the California School-Based Health Alliance.

<https://schoolhealthcenters.us16.list-manage.com/track/click?u=da1395f1ad1e32ddb18506b1&id=aaa1a8fdaf&e=d55e45642a>

There is a lot of good information in the guide, and it underscores the importance of mental health in schools. However, it is mainly “intended to support local education agencies (LEAs) and county behavioral health departments (BHDs) as they seek to partner to deliver comprehensive, high-quality school mental health services.” As such, *it is not a guide to embedding mental health in schools, especially given what schools need to do in the wake of COVID-19.*

Too much of the current advocacy for mental health in schools tends to contribute to the ongoing fragmentation and marginalization of efforts to cope with the increased number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems schools are confronting.

System (re)building is an essential focus at this time so that the sparse resources available can be deployed in more potent ways to address the wide-range of factors interfering with school learning and teaching.

The focus of such system (re)building is on

- >unifying the district's student/learning supports
- and then
- >weaving whatever resources the community and those at home can add to develop a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports.

Given the relatively small pool of resources available to schools and the range of students in need, this type of system is necessary for comprehensively embedding a full range of interventions into a school for the promotion of whole student well-being, problem prevention, and response to serious and chronic special education concerns.

- Where schools have adopted some form of MTSS, they can build on that model by reframing each level of intervention into an integrated set of subsystems that braid school and community resources at each level.
- At the same time, it is important to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that encompass a school's efforts to reengage disconnected students and provide student and learning supports each day in the classroom and schoolwide.

We urge all who want to embed mental health in schools to consider the discussions in the following brief documents:

>*Time for Straight Talk about Mental Health Services and MH in Schools*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhinschools.pdf>

>*Embedding Mental Health into a Learning Supports Component:
 An Essential Step for the Field to Take Now*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/embeddingmh.pdf>

For an in-depth discussion of the opportunity to advance mental health in schools during the current crisis and beyond, see our new, free book:

>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

And look at our new policy brief prepared at the request of PACE:

>*Restructuring California Schools to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching
 in the COVID 19 Context and Beyond*
<https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/restructuring-california-schools-address-barriers-learning-and-teaching-covid-19>

Maximizing the benefits of mental health in schools requires an ambitious agenda for transforming student/learning supports. The goal is to develop *a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students*. Achieving such a goal is vital to enhancing equity of opportunity for all students at school and beyond.