About How Temporary Relief Funds for Schools are Used

One of the Center co-directors had the opportunity yesterday to participate in a webinar with several university colleagues, three district superintendents, and a state superintendent; the focus was on how to the best use the American Rescue Plan Education Funds. The discussion also touched on the parallel pandemic related to systemic racial injustice.

There was much to be admired and learned from what was shared during the webinar.

Dominating the discussion were such major immediate concerns facing schools as

>making schools safe with respect to COVID-19
>outreaching to bring reluctant students/families back to school
>having guidelines that can aid in using COVID relief funds in the most effective way
>addressing the mental health needs of students
>supporting school staff as they cope with so many schooling changes
>helping staff prepare to explore current racial injustice events with students
>promoting social emotional learning and development as part of efforts to restore student well-being

These are matters being widely discussed across the country, and some creative ideas are being put into play using the temporary increases in funding.

However, if schools are to take full advantage of the unique opportunity provided by the extra funds, they must address the above pressing concerns in ways that initiate significant *system changes* that reduce the achievement and opportunity gaps.

As an example, here are some thoughts to consider about improving how schools address emotional, behavioral, and learning problems and reengage disconnected students:

It is clear that the pandemic has increased the number of students who are experiencing emotional, behavioral, and learning problems. Overlapping this is the almost overwhelming number of students who need to be reengaged with their schooling. All this is related to the concerns about mental health and points to the necessity of not limiting the focus on what will be needed to address the multifaceted and overlapping needs of so many students.

Discussion about using the COVID-19 funds to address the above matters has tended to focus on adding a few more personnel and adding a couple new ad hoc initiatives. The problem with this is that schools always have had more students in need than they could help. So while adding a few more personnel at this time is called for, *it is important not to just bolster old ideas*. A new direction in providing student and learning supports has long been necessary and the increased numbers make it imperative.

(For those tempted to just "add some more," remember that when the extra funding runs out, you know what will happen to the added staff, and you know how rare it is for specially funded initiatives to be sustained.)

At this time, it is essential that schools do much more than pursue old ideas in addressing the many multifaceted and overlapping barriers to learning and teaching that confront students and staff. Now is

the time to start a bold and innovative process for transforming student and learning supports to better address a broad range of barriers to learning and teaching and enhance equity of opportunity.

In doing so, schools not only can play a significant role in addressing the MH problems of *some* students, but also can develop a *unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports for all* students and especially those experiencing emotional, behavioral, and learning problems. It also can do more for families and school staff.

Our research has clarified that a comprehensive system of student/learning supports includes not only enhancing the continuum of interventions beyond the limited way MTSS is currently conceived, it also involves organizing the domains of student and learning supports. We have categorized six domains that schools deal with on a daily basis:
>enhancing supports in regular classrooms to enable learning
>supporting transitions
>increasing home and school connections
>responding to and, where feasible, preventing school and personal crisis and traumatic events
>increasing community involvement
>facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistant as needed.

When such a system is implemented effectively, interventions are planned and developed in collaboration with families and community stakeholders to create a caring and safe learning environment, provide immediate assistance in emergencies, and enable follow up care as necessary (e.g., referral to treatment).

In sum, temporary increases in funding provide a way to do more than address immediate mental health needs; they provide a special opportunity to initiate the transformation of student and learning supports to better address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. And when the temporary funds disappear, the transformation can be sustained by (1) *redeploying regularly allocated funds for student and learning supports* and (2) *weaving in whatever community resources are available to fill gaps.*

For more about a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports, see the recently released policy analysis from 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

And here are three free resources our Center has developed to provide online in depth aids to guide school transformation planning:

>Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change
>Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide
>Improving School Improvement
All three can be accessed from our Center's website.
Go to: http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

A host of other free resources are available from the Center's website http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/

Please share this information with those who may find it helpful.

And if you have any questions or want to share something you think others might find relevant, send them to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Finally, for those moving forward to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports, we offer free distance coaching and technical assistance http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf ,