About Temporary Relief Funds and Mental Health in Schools

The COVID-19 relief funds have generated increased attention to mental health in schools and, as we have noted previously, some creative ideas are being put into play using the temporary increases in funding. We now note that REMS (the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools) Technical Assistance Center sent out a resource document about *Considering the Mental Health Needs of Students and Staff in Your Emergency Operations Plan*
https://apps1.seiservices.com/remsemailblast/emailfiles/2021-05/2021-05-28-browser.html

Many of the resources cited are good ones for attending to the immediate coping needs of students and staff.

However, if schools are to take full advantage of the unique opportunity provided by the extra funds, they must go beyond using the relief funds in the ways described for attending to mental health concerns.

As we continue to stress, discussions about using the COVID-19 funds to address MH (and related concerns) have tended to focus on adding a few more personnel and 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/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 establish a leadership team to develop 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. (See *Best Practices in the Use of Learning Supports Leadership Teams to Enhance Learning Supports* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/bestpract.pdf .)

In doing so, districts and 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.
(For a detailed discussion of the intervention framework and its implementation, see the references cited below.)

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.

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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/sites/default/files/2020-11/pb_adelman_nov2020.pdf

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/

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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