

Thinking Outside the Box to Enhance Mental Health in Schools

We understand the impetus underlying advocacy for schools to adopt a “Comprehensive School Mental Health” approach and to establish an infrastructure and set of supports *specifically* for that approach.

However, despite use of the term “comprehensive”, we find that those pursuing such an approach are boxed-in to advocating for a much too narrow agenda. They are pushing against the realities that districts are confronted with a large number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems, and much more than access to mental health services and SEL are needed to provide for the well-being of so many students.

So while schools do need to think in terms of a *comprehensive* approach to providing supports for students, it cannot be an approach that is limited to mental health concerns or that continues to pursue identified problems in silos.

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. The current widespread concern about students’ mental health has school 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.

A fundamental transformation of existing student/learning supports is essential, and to this end, we are calling 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.