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## What Can Schools Do to Counter Unnecessary Referrals for Special Services and Over-Pathological Labeling of Students?

Now that the school year is underway, the number of students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems will be on the upswing. Obviously some students have significant problems that require referral for special assistance and even special education identification and services. However, care must be exercised to avoid mislabeling and overpathologizing such problems, especially given the impact of COVID-19.

Of particular concern for schools is the widespread misuse of the terms ADHD and LD. This includes the problem of inappropriate applications of these labels, and the reality of the number of misdiagnoses. At one point in time, almost 50% of those assigned a special education diagnosis were identified as having learning disabilities. This contributed to the backlash to LD seen in the last reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA). A similar concern has arisen about the number of students who manifest “garden-variety” misbehavior who are misdiagnosed as ADHD. Reports appear rather regularly that suggest a growing backlash, especially as related to the increasing use of medication to treat these youngsters.

This is the time for schools to enable student/learning support staff to work with teachers to

- engage all students in learning
- reengage students who have become disengaged from classroom learning
- accommodate a wider range of individual differences when teaching
- use of in-classroom responses to intervention (RtI) to better inform teaching and special assistance

Professional development can include

- general info – about the wide range of “normal” behavior and individual differences and the importance of not over-pathologizing (e.g., distributing info and fact sheets, offering info as part of a school’s inservice program)
- feedback on specific incidents and students (e.g., using staff concerns and specific referrals as opportunities to educate about what is and is not pathological and what should be done in each instance)
- an emphasis on avoiding interpretations of a student’s actions as “pathological” in order to justify using funding targeted for labelled students.

For related indepth discussions, see the following free resources the Center has developed:

- > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
- > *Improving School Improvement*
- > *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

All three of these resources can be accessed at no cost at

[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

And see the recent Center discussions:

> *About Improving Mental Health Support at Schools: Meeting Immediate Needs, Rebuilding Systems to Enhance Capabilities* [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practitioner\(9-8-2021\).pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practitioner(9-8-2021).pdf)

> *Schools and Mental Health: A Position Statement* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fall2021.pdf>

Also see the links in relevant Quick Finds developed by our Center at UCLA – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm>

We don't have email addresses for all who we hope will read this, so please share this with your colleagues.

And as always, we ask that you share with us whatever you think others might find relevant. Send to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)