

From the Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

## Editorial

### **Mental Health in Schools: *Why is Federal Support Focused so Narrowly?***

News Release last Monday: *The Biden-Harris Administration today is announcing a \$2.6 million award to support mental health services and professionals in schools,*

This is another in a series of awards the feds are making which over several years constitute the largest investment in school-based mental health this country has ever made.

COVID-19 certainly has underscored that schools must play a greater role in addressing mental health concerns. And federal support certainly can help.

Unfortunately, the long-standing inability of schools to play a potent role in addressing mental health concerns has led mainly to calls for hiring and/or contracting more and more staff (e.g., counselors, psychologists, social workers) to provide mental health *services*.

***As a solution, this narrow focus on services represents a fundamental disconnect from reality.***

The reality is that only a relatively few of the over 100,000 schools in the U.S.A. will benefit over the long run from federal funding that is designated primarily for mental health *services*.

A related reality is that sparse district budgets make it unlikely that schools will *ever* be able to afford hiring all the student support professionals advocates say are needed. (After the influx of relief funds and other special grants, school budgets again tighten, and there is no indication that future sources of funding can meet the nature and scope of need.)

And with specific respect to the nature and scope of need, the reality is that schools are confronted daily with multiple, interrelated student learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Student surveys consistently indicate that alienation, bullying, harassment, academic failure, and more are widespread problems at schools. While these raise mental health concerns, the solution to addressing so many problems isn't just to increase mental health *services*. Indeed, a greater focus on prevention and responding with a range of supports when problems first appear would significantly reduce the need for clinical services.

***It is time to accept the realities associated with how best to enhance mental health in schools. It is time to move beyond old and simplistic approaches that overemphasize schools providing mental health services.***

In particular, the emphasis in federal, state, and local school policy needs to shift. Concerns about mental health at schools must be folded into the broader agenda of enhancing well-being and equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school (and beyond). Achieving this agenda involves supporting the development by schools of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that embeds a full range of mental health concerns. Such a system can weave together existing (fragmented and marginalized) school and community resources for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. And, if and when opportunities arise

to increase the number of student support professionals at schools (e.g., counselors, psychologists, social workers), whoever is added can help enhance the whole system's impact as well as providing mental health services to a few more students.

The desire for more personnel to provide mental health services is compelling, but such a narrow focus tends to reify an approach that cannot help very many students and won't provide the range of assistance and ongoing supports of many schools. The limited approach also colludes with increasing the opportunity gap across the country. We suggest that this is especially unfortunate at a time when public education is under considerable attack and needs to highlight its efficacy and value.