

Using ESSA to EMBED Mental Health into School Improvement

The September 2016 issue of the AASA's *School Administrator* magazine addresses several facets of mental health concerns (www.aasa.org). As always, we are pleased for any recognition of the necessity for schools to include a focus on mental health.

At the same time, we worry that the way mental health matters are addressed contributes to the long-standing, limited way mental health is understood and the marginal way it is included in school improvement policy and practice.

The AASA magazine specifically focuses on the school's role in confronting student suicide, the importance of referring cases to community providers, and the connection between mental health and academics (with sidebars about how ESSA will affect funding for Title IV-A and about the multitiered systems of support, or MTSS, framework). There are many lessons to be learned from the magazine's articles. And there are implications for school improvement policy and practice. Our worry is that the limited focus of the presentations will lead to a narrow set of token recommendations that will continue to marginalize and further fragment student and learning supports.

The Need: Addressing the Multifaceted Problems of the Many Students in Need

Every school is confronted with a range of students who manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems. In some schools, especially those serving low-wealth families, as many as 40% of students are not doing well.

And the problems are multifaceted and have a history and context. That is, students who are not doing well at school usually manifest overlapping learning, behavior, and emotional problems, and the causes usually are complex. For example, long before a student contemplates suicide s/he will have had many debilitating experiences at home, in the neighborhood, at school. The same is true for problems such as bullying, addictions, school shootings, and other psychosocial problems.

Unlike mental health agencies, schools must address *all* problems interfering with students' school performance, as well as playing a role in preventing such problems when feasible. Given the nature and scope of the problems, mental health concerns are only one subset. As such, they must be *embedded* in the broader context of addressing the full range of learning, behavior, and emotional concerns schools encounter each day.

The Need: Promoting Mental HEALTH, Not Just Confronting Problems

Focusing on mental HEALTH is an essential aspect of facilitating whole child development and preventing problems. Because so much of the discussion about mental health in schools stresses problems, pathology, and illness, the importance of promoting conditions to enhance mental HEALTH is given short shrift. (Note how much discussion there is about screening students for pathology and psychosocial problems and implementing interventions for individuals with such problems, as well as calls for short-term initiatives that focus on such problems.)

Because the term carries with it a problem-focused image, suggesting that schools do more about mental health produces extremely negative reactions from some school leaders and parents who feel dealing with students who have mental problems isn't an appropriate role for schools.

The Need: Fundamental System Changes to Unify and Develop a Comprehensive and Equitable System of Student and Learning Supports

The need, of course, is for schools to play a fuller and more effective role in promoting health (mental and physical), preventing psychological and psychosocial problems, and responding appropriately when students manifest learning, behavior, emotional, and physical problems.

From a policy and practice perspective, the opportunity presented by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is to use state and district planning to rework school improvement policy and practice with the aim of transforming student and learning supports in ways that enhance equity of

opportunity and well-being for *ALL* students (and staff). This includes embedding concerns for mental health promotion and problem amelioration into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students and families.

Such a system requires the expansion of school improvement policy from a two- to a three-component approach (i.e., establishing a component for addressing barriers to learning as primary and essential and fully connected with the components for instruction and management/governance). It is this third component that provides the foundation for unifying existing student and learning supports and then, over several years, developing them into a comprehensive, equitable system.



And the component reframes the Multitiered System of Supports (MTSS) into a multidimensional approach that (a) interconnects the overlapping levels of intervention, (b) weaves together school and community interventions and resources, and (c) delineates the arenas of supports.

More specifically, the component encompasses an intervention continuum that effectively weaves together school with relevant community resources to produce an interconnected set of subsystems for promoting healthy social emotional development, preventing problems, responding quickly when problems arise, and contributing to helping those with severe and chronic problems. At each level of the continuum, student and learning supports are organized cohesively into a set of well-designed and delimited intervention arenas (e.g., in our research, we have categorized six that schools need to address each day).

All this has implications for enhancing in-classroom student and learning supports by retooling student support personnel (e.g., psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, dropout/graduation support staff, special educators, etc.) so that they can work collaboratively with teachers in classrooms for part of each day. Such collaboration is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

For more on all this, see

ESSA, Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essaanal.pdf>

For places such work is underway, see

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

*Prepared by the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. The Center is Co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor. Contact: adelman@psych.ucla.edu or Ltaylor@ucla.edu