

Don't Just React: It's Time to Rethink Policy for Mental Health in Schools

Reactive, ad hoc, and piecemeal approaches to policy making seem inevitable and inevitably are easy targets for criticism and backlash. The policy responses to the Newtown tragedy are the latest example of this.

As happens each time there is a shooting at a school, there is a flurry of activity to improve school safety and do more about mental health in schools. The reactions to Newtown include the *President's Plan to Protect our Children and our Communities by Reducing Gun Violence*. It will surprise no one that this plan has raised major concerns and criticisms.

From a political perspective, a particularly significant backlash is seen in the reaction of the Republican leadership of the U.S. House Committee on Education and Workforce Training. Noting that the administration's plan consists of 23 executive actions and a series of Congressional proposals, the committee leadership sent Secretary Duncan a letter on January 31, 2013 stating that they were

“already examining the needs of our nation's elementary and secondary schools, both public and private; studying the effectiveness of existing federal K-12, juvenile justice, and other child safety programs; and considering whether additional tools are needed to help protect students.”

The group, then, requested an extensive list of information to “inform discussion during an upcoming hearing on school safety.” They asked that a briefing be scheduled no later than February 7, 2013. (See the Exhibit on the following page for the matters the committee is asking about.)

Putting aside the politics, what the committee leadership's list underscores is the long-history of approaching safety and mental health concerns in schools with ad hoc and piecemeal policies. Our Center's analyses over many years have emphasized that this fragmented policy making has seriously handicapped school efforts to address factors that interfere with learning and teaching which, in turn, compromises equal opportunity for students to succeed at school (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/materials/policyprogram.htm>).

To combat further fragmentation, the president's plan does recognize the need for flexible implementation. And the hope is that, when combined with other federal policies calling for flexibility and innovation, the proposals can help strengthen school improvement policy and practices. A similar hope arises with respect to the proposed *Mental Health in Schools Act of 2013* (from Senator Franken and Representative Napolitano).

In all instances, an increased focus on enhancing how schools address mental health concerns is welcome. Problems arise, however, when the policies formulated are designed in ways that only produce temporary assistance for a relatively few schools and students.

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Exhibit

Specific Information Requested from Secretary Duncan by the House Committee on Education and the Work Force (January 31, 2013)*

“To assist the committee's efforts to evaluate the administration's various school safety and mental health proposals and examine the effectiveness of existing federal programs, we request you provide the committee with the following information:

Executive Actions

1. Please describe the timeline the department will use to implement the executive actions announced by the president on January 16, 2013, including those initiatives jointly conducted between agencies.
2. Please provide additional details on the purpose, schedule, and end result of the mental health listening tour.
3. The president's plan indicates each agency will be issuing "best practices" to address school safety. What methodology will the department use to determine best practices for elementary and secondary schools and institutions of higher education? How will the department address the differences and diversity among our nation's schools?
4. The president's plan to release model emergency plans for schools and institutions of higher education and provide security assessments seem to displace many activities currently provided by the private sector. What steps is the department taking to ensure it is not supplanting private companies?
5. Please provide a cost estimate of the policies included in the executive actions issued by the president (e.g., development of model emergency plans, the completion of security assessments, and the mental health listening tour). Please identify the specific account from which such actions will be funded.
6. Please provide the legislative authority the department is expected to invoke to carry out the executive actions announced by the president on January 16, 2013.

Congressional Proposals

1. Will the new school safety and mental health proposals be included in the president's budget request for fiscal year 2014? How will the programs be reconciled with past efforts to consolidate safe and drug free schools funding? In what office at the department would the proposed new programs be housed?
2. Please indicate how the administration's proposals differ significantly from the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program, Project SERV, the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program, Grants for Integration of Schools and Mental Health Services and the Promotion of School Readiness through Early Childhood Emotional and Social Development Program, currently or previously funded through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act?
3. Will the new proposals replace the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program, Project SERV, and the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program?
4. How will these new programs address the shortcomings raised through numerous evaluations of the Safe and Drug Free Schools State Grant program (i.e., where funds were spread too thin to make a substantial difference in preventing school violence)?

5. How will the new school mental health proposals align with special education and related services offered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which promotes service integration and the coordination of state and local education, mental health, and other services?

6. How will the new school mental health proposals align with state and local mental health-related programs administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, including, but not limited to: School-Based Health Centers authorized by section 4101 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families program, and Statewide Family Network Grants administered by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration?

Existing Programs

1. Please provide the program goals and actual performance for the Safe and Drug Free Schools State Grant program, the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program, Project SERV, the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program, Grants for Integration of Schools and Mental Health Services, and the Promotion of School Readiness through Early Childhood Emotional and Social Development Program for the past five fiscal years. For defunded programs, please provide the program goals and performance data for the last five years the program received federal funds.

2. Please provide the budget justifications, relevant annual reports required under law, and program evaluations conducted or funded, in whole or part, by the department for the above referenced programs.

3. Please provide a list of grantees and subgrantees, if possible, that received funds for the last five fiscal years for the above referenced programs.

4. What percentage of federal funds under the Safe Schools/Healthy Students program is spent on counseling, mentoring, and referral services provided by school-based mental health service providers? What percentage of program funds is spent on the training of teachers to appropriately identify and intervene in at-risk behavior?

5. What steps has the department taken to implement the terms of section 822 of the Higher Education Act regarding model emergency response policies, procedures, and practices, including information sharing between the department and institutions of higher education?

*<http://edworkforce.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=318343>

It is time to rethink the policy approach for student and learning supports.

The aim should not be to introduce yet one more initiative and set of projects that will come and go; it should not just embed a few more mental health services in schools for a few more students.

Rather, it is time for “out of the box” thinking about mental health in schools. *The opportunity of the invigorated interest in mental health is to fully embed such work into school improvement policy and practice in ways that go beyond reacting to current crises.*

Clearly, the aim cannot be to turn schools into mental health agencies (after all schools are not in the mental health business). The point is to establish systems for promoting social-emotional development, preventing problems, and responding as early after problem onset as feasible in order to address a wide range of barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. And at the same time, improve referral procedures and participation in treatment systems (e.g., systems of care).

Focusing on a full continuum and on establishing student and learning supports as a unified component fits nicely into the aims of developing the whole person and ensuring equal opportunity for all students to succeed at school. *Thus, policy should stress the development in strategic and sustainable ways of a unified school component for addressing a wide range of barriers to learning and teaching.* This requires establishing school district leadership with the charge of and accountability for facilitating processes that

- unify currently marginalized and fragmented district/school programs and services for addressing the many interrelated emotional, behavioral, and learning problems manifested at schools and
- over time, evolve a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

Properly designed, such a component fully embeds procedures that

- >enable schools to connect with community resources to enhance individual student and family access to mental and physical health and social services and
- >improve existing crisis response and prevention mechanisms and interventions.

* For more on all this, here are a few recent Center discussions:

>*Blueprints for Education Reform: Have You Analyzed the Architects’ Vision?*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/blueprint.pdf>

>*2013 – The Year for Schools to Accelerate Development of a Unified & Comprehensive System to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching*

[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/whatsnew/announcement\(1-15-13\).pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/whatsnew/announcement(1-15-13).pdf)

>*Common Core Standards for Learning Supports*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/comcorannounce.pdf>

>*Improving Student Outcomes, Enhancing School Climate: Teachers Can’t Do it Alone!*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/winter13.pdf>

Embedding Safety and Mental Health Concerns into a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: Some States and Districts Are Already Doing It

A unified student and learning supports component provides an umbrella under which school initiatives for safety and mental health can be integrated into school improvement policy and practices in ways that advance the transformation of public education. Such an approach already is taking root at some state departments of education and districts (see *Where's It Happening* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>).

With a committed focus on developing the whole person, ensuring equal opportunity for all students to succeed at school, closing the achievement gap, increasing graduation rates, and ensuring students are college- and career-ready, these pioneering initiatives are bringing a new perspective to social and emotional learning, addressing barriers to learning and teaching, and re-engaging disconnected students. By rethinking student and learning supports, they are recognizing that teachers can't and shouldn't be expected to do it alone.

It is essential that schools not wait for Congress or the President to lead them out of the current morass of fragmented initiatives, projects, programs, and services. Leaders at any level can build on what has been learned about

- (1) rethinking and coalescing existing programs and services in order to develop a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports
- (2) establishing an effective school, home, and community collaborative to weave together different funding streams, reduce redundancy, and redeploy available resources.

Any locale, despite sparse dollars, can use available resources to begin the process. As design aids, prototype frameworks for policy and a unified and comprehensive approach to intervention are available.*

*See the Rebuilding Toolkit – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>
Or contact the Center: Ltaylor@ucla.edu or adelman@psych.ucla.edu

Starting a Discussion About Developing a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

(1) Circulate a brief introductory document – see for example,

Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf>

(Note: if this document doesn't seem to fit the situation, there are others to choose from in Section A of the Center's Rebuilding Toolkit –

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>)

(2) Follow-up by providing information about a few of the other places that have pursued development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. Specifically, refer to the following:

>***Brohures from Districts and State Departments***

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita1a.htm>

>***Examples of State and District Design Documents***

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb1a.htm>

(3) To answer typical questions raised, see and share as needed material from

>***Q & A Talking Points*** (in Section A of the Center's Rebuilding Toolkit)

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita2.htm>

(4) Review the following documents:

>***Developing a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: First Steps for Superintendents Who Want to Get Started***

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/superstart.pdf>

>***Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports at a School: Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff***

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf>