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Dozens of Alabama school districts adopt UCLA guidelines to help teachers, students thrive

Center for Mental Health in Schools framework is reducing absences, improving graduation rates

Stuart Wolpert | May 01, 2015



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The UCLA-created approach encourages schools to make more effective use of their resources and create integrated teams of teachers and staff with greater accountability for addressing problems.



On the heels of its success in **improving test scores and reducing school absences** in a Georgia school district, a program developed at UCLA is being adopted by dozens of school

districts in Alabama. Ten school districts adopted the guidelines two years ago, followed by 29 this school year. An additional 20 plan to get on board in 2015–16.

The results thus far have been dramatic, but the program — developed by UCLA’s Center for Mental Health in Schools — involves largely behind-the-scenes changes: encouraging schools to make more effective use of their resources; creating integrated teams of teachers and staff, each with a designated, accountable leader; and taking new approaches to address challenges that get in the way of effective teaching and learning.

The **Center for Mental Health in Schools** is housed in the psychology department at the UCLA College. Howard Adelman, its co-director and a UCLA professor of psychology, said the approach redeploys existing financial and human resources, rather than adding new ones — a key selling point during a time of stagnant or declining public education funding — and it eliminates waste, redundancies and counterproductive competition among staff.

The center also advises schools to take a proactive approach to preventing problems, rather than punitive measures to respond to troubled students.

“Schools have been trained to control students with rewards and punishment, including removing disruptive students and lecturing parents,” Adelman said. “Don’t punish the students; don’t wag a finger at the parents. You’re not going to win over many people by telling them how bad they are.”

Instead, Adelman said, schools should devote their energies to identifying barriers to learning and addressing them. For example, teachers using the UCLA framework learn strategies for preventing certain common classroom behavior problems. They’re encouraged to redesign classroom instruction in ways that engage students and encourage problem solving, rather than constantly devoting time and energy reacting to disciplinary concerns.

“I’m very encouraged by Alabama’s commitment,” Adelman said. “Tommy Bice, Alabama’s state superintendent of education, has been a trailblazer and a real leader.”

Schools using the UCLA program report declines in the number of behavior problems and the number of students who need to be referred for special services. As Georgia middle school teacher said, “As more of my students became engaged, classroom management was no longer a big problem.”

Another key facet of the approach is encouraging schools to have school counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses and volunteers step into the classrooms where they can more directly support teachers’ efforts.

“If you give a teacher colleagues to work with on the challenges they are facing, you start to improve the whole dynamic,” said Adelman, who created the program based on 40 years of research, in collaboration with Linda Taylor, the center’s co-director.

The Alabama schools that began the program two years ago have already seen tremendous reductions in student absences and significant progress toward preparing students to graduate on time and for college and work, said Linda Felton-Smith, director of the Office of Learning Support in the state’s department of education.

“We hope that Alabama can be a model for [nationwide] implementation and we know that it will be for other districts,” Felton-Smith said.

School districts in Minnesota and Wisconsin have adopted the center’s framework, and Adelman and Taylor are working with educators in Louisiana, Illinois and other states. The center works with Scholastic’s Integrating Learning Supports service to deliver consulting to the schools.

An [e-book on the strategies](#) (PDF), available for free download, was posted to the center’s website in January. In addition, the center distributes information about its approach via email to more than 100,000 principals, superintendents, teachers and community leaders, and Adelman and Taylor participate in frequent conference calls with school districts and state education agencies.

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