Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change

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To facilitate efforts to address barriers to learning, this resources is freely accessible online.
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/barriersbook.pdf

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Preface

During the COVID-19 crisis and the renewed protests about racial injustice, widespread statements have appeared anticipating the growing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems schools would confront. Concern for mental health has grown exponentially. How schools plan to address these matters remains a marginalized discussion.

In the past, many well intentioned initiatives and policy reports focused on expanding mental health services in schools. But schools in most locales never had the resources to scale-up the type of clinical approach usually advocated. And with tightening budgets, the situation is worse today.

The challenge at this time is to escape old ways of thinking about mental health in schools. New directions are needed.

A promising new direction is to ensure mental health concerns are fully embedded in efforts to *transform* how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. Pursuing such a transformation calls for innovative, big picture thinking about revamping available student and learning supports.

The aim of the transformation is to respond effectively in-classrooms and schoolwide (and, as appropriate, online) to the overlapping emotional, behavior, and learning problems that interfere with the best teaching practices. The intent is to help all students who are not doing well and enhance equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond.

Before the pandemic, we laid out prototypes for reframing and reorganizing student and learning supports. These are included online in two free and accessible books:

>*Improving School Improvement*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

The prototypes provide blueprints for adapting current policy and practices to unify and weave together available resources and rework the operational infrastructure at schools and districts. We have incorporated the prototypes into this book to clarify how they apply to embedding mental health into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. In the process, we highlight the type of new directions that are fundamental to effectively promoting whole child development, improving school climate, and enhancing equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school.

The ambitious agenda for change discussed requires the attention of all who have a stake in public education. Therefore, our intended audience is quite broad (e.g., field leaders, administrators, student support staff, teachers, other practitioners, researchers, those involved in personnel preparation, and policy makers).

As always, we owe many folks for the contents of this work. Many of these are reflected in the references cited at the end.

We thank everyone for their contribution, and of course, we take full responsibility for any misinterpretations and errors.

Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor*

*Over the years, we have pursued the advancement of mental health in schools by focusing on fully embedding the efforts into school improvement policy, planning, and practice. Since 1986, our work has been carried out under the auspices of the *School Mental Health Project* at UCLA, and since 1995, our efforts have been pursued as a national Center.

Initially, the Center was named the *Center for Mental Health in Schools*; in 2017, to more fully underscore the breadth of the work, the Center name was expanded to *Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports.* One facet of the Center's work is designed to facilitate discussion of issues, write and share policy and practice analyses and recommendations, and develop prototypes for new directions. Another facet provides guides to and resources for practice. Readers who want to drill deeper into the many topics covered in this book can turn to the growing body of resources available at no cost on the Center's website – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/ .

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CALL TO ACTION

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Introduction

Growing numbers of children are suffering needlessly because their emotional, behavioral, and developmental needs are not being met by the very institutions and systems that were created to take care of them.
Department of Health and Human Services

As school re-open with and without online instruction, each day offers a variety of opportunities and challenges. The challenges include the many psychosocial and health problems that can affect learning and performance in profound ways. And the challenges are exacerbated as students internalize the debilitating effects of performing poorly at school.

All this has long been understood. In response, schools have provided a range of supports to address students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems. For example, with respect to mental health, researchers have reported that three-fourths of children receiving mental health services were seen in the education sector. Still, while schools see the need to deal with mental health problems to the degree feasible, it is not a priority unless a student is diagnosed for special education.

Anyone who has spent time in schools can itemize the multifaceted mental health and psychosocial concerns that warrant attention. Around the world, many stakeholders are determined to enhance how schools address mental health and psychosocial concerns. For some, this includes promoting mental *health* and prevention of problems.

The growing interest makes this a critical period for moving forward. For those committed to advancing mental health in schools, the question is:

How should our society's schools address these matters?

The answers put forward tend to reflect different agenda. For example, agencies and advocates whose mission is to improve mental health *services* see schools as a venue for enhancing access and meeting the needs of children (and their families). School professionals, however, want schools to do more about addressing mental health concerns to minimize problems at school and enhance student performance.

At the same time, school policy makers are quick to point out that education is the mission of schools. This limits what schools can do with respect to mental health and other societal concerns. They agree that healthier students learn and perform better, but they are constrained by sparse resources and the emphasis in school accountability to quickly raise achievement test scores.

Nevertheless, as the Carnegie Council Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents states:

> *School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.*

In response to the prevailing state of affairs, the Policy Leadership Cadre for Mental Health in Schools in 2001 stressed that advancing mental health in schools is about much more than expanding services and creating full-service schools. Rather, the aim is to embed a full range of mental health concerns into a comprehensive, multifaceted, systemic approach that enables schools to play a significant role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Such an approach must encompass promoting mental *health,* preventing problems, responding quickly when problems appear, and playing a role in serving those students who have chronic, severe problems.

In moving forward, stakeholders concerned with enhancing a focus on mental health in schools would be wise to accept the reality that schools are not in the mental health business. Then, they must develop an understanding of what is involved in achieving the mission of schools. Based on such understanding, they will be in a better position to clarify how agenda items for mental health in schools can help accomplish that mission. Of particular importance is how proposed approaches

help meet the demand for improving schools, reducing dropout rates, closing the opportunity and achievement gaps, and addressing racial, ethnic, disability, and socioeconomic disparities.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic of racial injustices are increasing the opportunity gap, and this will increase the achievement gap. Some students are not thriving under current conditions, and those students who have not done well in school previously are falling further behind. Distance learning has taken its toll on students and their families and on school professionals and their families. There is no way that business as usual can be sufficient as schools re-open. If education professionals fail to take time to plan innovatively, the number of dropouts and the related personal and societal costs will exacerbate the health and economic consequences.

Our aim in what follows is to clarify the need for and ways to fully embed mental health concerns into a school's mission. Our research indicates that this will require transforming existing approaches to providing student and learning supports. To aid such a transformation, this book provides broad frameworks and synthesizes a wide range of available information and scholarship.

- Parts I and II reflect briefly on what schools have been doing about matters related to mental health. While we highlight system deficiencies and concerns, we know that the work is carried out by professionals who strive each day to ensure the well-being of students.
- In discussing new directions, Part III emphasizes transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. This includes embedding mental health concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.
- Part IV organizes classroom and school-wide student/learning supports into six domains of common-purpose interventions.
- Part V stresses what is involved in transforming student/learning supports, focusing on facilitating sustainable systemic change.

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to
promoting whole child development, advancing social justice,
and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.