



# Addressing Barriers

# to Learning

*New ways to think . . .*

*Better ways to link*



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## Addressing Disparities by Enhancing Equity of Opportunity at School

*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 (2001)

**A**t every step of schooling, the tendency is to breathe a sigh of relief when a youngster moves on to the next grade. Concern for specific individuals creeps in when learning, behavior, and emotional problems interfere with progress. Public health concerns arise when large numbers of youngsters are reported as not doing well. Civil rights concerns spring forth when large scale disparities become evident. And economic concerns emerge with enhanced visibility about the costs to society of so many students dropping out before high school graduation and the impact on global competitiveness of too few students going on to and succeeding in postsecondary education.

Previous policy and practice reports from our Center have provided analyses indicating that reducing dropouts, increasing graduation rates, and closing the achievement gap require more than improving preK-12 instruction, enhancing school management, and increasing the school's role in providing health and social services. This earlier work clarified fundamental flaws in prevailing school improvement policies and practices for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and recommended transformative changes. Two recent works from the Center build on and extend our earlier analyses and recommendations. Each has much to say about addressing disparities by enhancing equity of opportunity at school. We think these two resources are particularly timely given growing concerns about the large numbers of children whose emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems are not being well addressed and often are exacerbated by their experiences at school.

*This edition of our Center's newsletter/journal highlights these two new works.*

## **Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools**

<http://www.corwin.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book234072&>

To paraphrase Goethe: *Not moving forward is a step backward*

**M**any matters arise when the topic of mental health in schools is discussed. Prominent are questions such as:

Why should schools be involved with mental health?

Should the focus of mental health in schools be on

- mental illness? mental health? both?
- special education students or all students?
- services or programs or a comprehensive system of supports?

What is the context for the work and who should be responsible for its planning, implementation, and evaluation?

Because of the urgency for creating a school environment that promotes mental health and reduces problems, our just published book on the topic explores all this and much more. The thrust is on *moving forward in new directions*. And the systemic changes proposed represent an ambitious agenda for all who are concerned with improving public education, public health, and society in general.

Over the years, we have pursued the advancement of mental health in schools by focusing on fully integrating mental health concerns into school improvement policy 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 embedded in the Project's national *Center for Mental Health in Schools*.

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.

Our primary aim in publishing this latest book is as an additional stimulus for discussion of systemic transformation. To this end, the emphasis is on new ways of thinking about mental health in schools and on what it takes to facilitate systemic change. At the same time, we include a range of resources to aid the everyday work of making lives better for students and school staff.

The book begins with a reflection on what schools have been and are doing about mental health. We recognize that each day many professionals are striving under daunting conditions to ensure students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Then, we explore major concerns, emerging trends, new directions, and policy and systemic change implications; and we call for change.

*To share the essence of the work, the following pages provide adapted excerpts from  
**Mental Health in Schools:  
Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools***

## Advancing Mental Health in Schools

Clearly, mental health activity is going on in schools. Equally evident, there is a great deal to be done to improve what is taking place.

Efforts to make improvements begin with the understanding that education is the primary mission of schools.

Around the world, many stakeholders are determined to enhance how schools address mental health and psychosocial concerns. And, now is a critical period for doing so.

Some see the field of mental health in schools as in its infancy; others think it has grown into adolescence. What it will look like as an adult is unclear; what it should look like is under debate.

For years, schools have been lobbied to include a focus on mental health. While many societal considerations are involved, for the most part the rationale for doing so has stressed one or both of the following points:

- Schools provide good access to students (and their families) who require mental health services.
- Schools need to address psychosocial and mental and physical health concerns to enable effective school performance by some (often many) students.

Implied in both these points is the hope of enhancing the nature and scope of mental health interventions to fill gaps, enhance effectiveness, address problems early, reduce stigma, and fully imbue clinical and service efforts with public health, general education, and equity orientations.

Point one typically reflects the perspective and agenda of agencies and advocates whose mission is to improve mental health services. The second point reflects the perspective and agenda of student support professionals and some leaders for school improvement, and also provides a supportive rationale for those wanting schools to play a greater role related to addressing young people's health concerns.

Anyone who has spent time in schools can itemize the multifaceted mental health and psychosocial concerns that warrant attention. For those committed to advancing mental health in schools, the question is:

*How should our society's schools address these matters?*

Currently, the answers put forward tend to reflect different agenda. As a result, efforts to advance the imperative for mental health in schools are confronted with the problem of coalescing different agenda and doing so in ways that are responsive to the oft-voiced public concern that schools cannot be responsible for meeting every need of their students.

Education is the mission of schools, and school policymakers are quick to point this out when asked to do more, especially with respect to mental health. It is not that they disagree with the idea that healthier students learn and perform better. It is simply that prevailing school accountability pressures increasingly have concentrated on instructional practices – to the detriment of all matters not seen as *directly* related to raising achievement test scores.

Those concerned with enhancing mental health in schools must 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. After that, they must be ready to clarify how any agenda item for mental health in schools helps accomplish that mission. Of particular importance is how proposed approaches help meet the demand for improving schools, reducing dropout rates, closing the achievement gap, and addressing racial, ethnic, disability, and socio-economic disparities.

### A New Professional Field

Mental health in schools is an emerging new *field*. This reality is reflected in federally-funded national centers focused on policy and program analyses; published books, reports, and scholarly journals; and university research and training programs. In addition, organizations and centers that have relevance for a school's focus on mental health and psychosocial concerns continue to burgeon. On a policy level, the 2003 report of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health and *The 2007 Progress Report* on the President's New Freedom Initiative recognized that efforts to enhance interventions for children's mental health must involve schools. As a result of its growing status as a professional field, many of those interested in improving education and those concerned about transforming the mental health system in the U.S.A. and elsewhere are taking a new look at mental health in schools.

### Embedding Mental Health in the School Improvement Agenda

*In the last analysis,  
we see only what  
we are ready to see.  
We eliminate and  
ignore everything  
that is not part of  
our prejudices.*

Jean-Martin Charcot

The current state of affairs related to mental health in schools is explored in Part I of the book in order to provide a foundation and jumping off place for moving forward. We emphasize that, while mental health in schools increasingly is under discussion, what's being talked about often differs in fundamental ways. Various agenda are pursued. Divergent policy, practice, research, and training agenda emerge. The result is confusion and conflict. This all adds to the continuing marginalization of efforts to move forward.

With a view to ending the marginalization, in 2001 the *Policy Leadership Cadre for Mental Health in Schools* stressed that advancing mental health in schools should be about much more than expanding services and creating full service schools. They proposed embedding the work into a comprehensive, multifaceted systemic approach designed to maximize learning, caring, and well-being by strengthening students, families, schools, and neighborhoods.

From this perspective, current education support programs and services that schools own and operate need to be transformed and fully integrated into school improvement policy and planning. The transformation will require weaving together school owned resources and community and family resources to develop a comprehensive system of supports for addressing problems and enhancing healthy development.

Can you tell me what "status quo" means?

Sure. It's a fancy name for the mess were in.



### Three Major Issues Confronting the Field

*Frankly, I'm suspicious of anyone who has a strong opinion on a complicated issue.*  
Scott Adams

Not long ago a group in Virginia called for the removal of counselors from their elementary schools. The group argued that: (1) school counselors introduce issues to their children that are inappropriate, such as child abuse, death, and sexual relationships, and (2) schools should not be centers for mental health and should focus solely on academics.

In response, teachers and counselors launched a counter-campaign. They stressed the need for support services in schools by noting the many problems students experience that must be addressed.

The incident underscores that mental health in schools remains highly controversial in some places and that certain practices may be controversial almost anywhere. Those who support mental health in schools must understand the issues and problems and help schools make decisions about how to address them. Part II of the book discusses dilemmas related to (a) *Labeling, Screening, and Over-pathologizing*, (b) *Evidence-based Practices in Schools*, and (c) *Social Control Versus Engagement in Learning*. Analyses and resource aids for each of these topics and more are available at no cost by going to the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find menu – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/websrch.htm>

#### Advancing the Field: Opportunities and New Directions

The world around us is changing at an exponential rate and so must the way schools approach factors producing behavior, learning, and emotional problems. As schools develop improvement plans, the roles and functions of all who provide student and learning supports require rethinking. In many schools, the need to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage students is critical but is not reflected in the plans that emerge. This disconnect helps explain the plateau effect related to achievement test scores and the continuing achievement gap.

With all this in mind, Part III explores opportunities and new directions for moving the field forward with an emphasis on engaging learners, preventing problems, and improving schools. The chapters cover

- Why this is a period of transition and possible transformation
- Strategies for embedding mental health in school improvement
- Social and emotional learning, promotion of mental health, and implications for addressing behavior problems
- Challenges and opportunities for promoting mental health in the classroom
- Mental health assistance for students at school
- A focus on the well-being of school staff

Specifically, it is reiterated that maintaining a narrow *service* orientation contributes to the marginalization of student and learning supports. Various opportunities to end the marginalization are highlighted. A comprehensive approach is outlined. The objective is to expand school improvement policy and

planning – in the classroom and schoolwide. The emphasis in doing so is on developing systematic and institutionalized interventions to (1) enhance the role schools play in promoting healthy social and emotional development, (2) help schools minimize the ways they contribute and respond to mental health and psychosocial problems, and (3) provide an integrated school-community system to promote mental health, prevent mental health and psychosocial problems, and provide special assistance for severe and pervasive mental health problems.

### Policy and Systemic Change for Moving Forward

Based on a broad view of mental health in schools, Part IV emphasizes policy and implementation strategies for moving student support programs and services in new directions. The imperative for this is laid out in ways that support a Carnegie education task force’s position that “...while school systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students, when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.” (See chapter on *New Directions*)

Transforming currently marginalized student and learning supports into a cohesive and primary component of school improvement requires policy that facilitates weaving together the resources of schools, families, neighborhoods, and institutions of higher education. Strategically, effective collaboration is the name of the game. And effective collaboration requires creating a productive infrastructure and providing potent capacity building to ensure appropriate implementation of the new approach. (See chapter on *Collaboration: Working Together to Move Forward*)

*I am unable to make the days longer, so I strive to make them better.*

Thoreau

Because accountability drives systems, policy makers also must expand the framework for school accountability. In doing so, attention must be paid to embedding accountability into a program evaluation framework that can extend the research base for a comprehensive approach. (See chapter entitled *Show Us the Data: Using and Extending the Research Base*)

And, of course, sufficient resources must be allocated for implementing widespread system change and “scale-up.” This includes underwriting model development and capacity building for system-wide replication of promising models and institutionalization of systemic changes. (See chapter on *Addressing Systemic Change*)

### Call to Action: Ending the Zero Sum Game & Moving Forward

In most places, mental health in schools still gets defined mainly as mental illness and the form of intervention tends to be case-oriented and clinical. This provides services for only a relatively few of the many students experiencing behavior, learning, and emotional problems.

It’s fortunate that school personnel and/or co-located and linked community service providers have been able to supplement existing efforts to provide individual and small group counseling/therapy for those children and adolescents who need it. And, it’s tragic that not enough of these clinical services are equitably available.

It is clear, however, that the number of students in need far outstrips the possibility of providing more than a small percentage with clinical services – even if this were the best way to address the wide range of concerns. And, because resources are so sparse, providing so much for a few students tends to work against developing programs to prevent problems and promote social and emotional health.

Leaders concerned with advancing mental health in school need to focus on much more than just increasing clinical services. This is a message long conveyed by those who stress that concerns about mental *health* is about much more than mental *illness*. Concern for mental health encompasses promoting youth development, wellness, social and emotional learning, and fostering the emergence of caring, supportive, nurturing, and just environments.

A zero sum game is a situation or interaction in which one participant's gains result only from another's equivalent losses. In trying to make the world a better place for children and adolescents, many advocates feel they must focus strategically and laserlike on one concern because resources are sparse and distributed politically. Thus, they enter into a zero sum game.

The continuing tendency of many advocates for mental health in schools is to compete in this way even though it pits the needs and interests of some youngsters against the needs and interests of others. And, too often, it generates counterproductive relationships among school staff and between school and community professionals, with the situation at times exacerbated by narrow pursuit of specific professional guild interests.

Inevitably, some advocacy is necessary for specific groups of children and adolescents. Given current policy inequities, however, those doing the advocacy can only hope for small zero sum successes. With respect to mental health in schools, usually this means immediate specialized help for a few more students, but at a cost for others that is seldom articulated.

**Needed: A New  
Advocacy  
Coalition for  
the Few  
AND the Many**

The mission of schools calls for ensuring that *all* students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. Therefore, advocacy for mental health in schools must address the needs and interests of all students. And, given that the responsibility for student progress rests so greatly on the shoulders of the adults who teach and those who provide student and school support, advocacy for mental health in schools must encompass a focus on the well-being of staff as well as students.

Anyone who has done a substantive analysis of what schools do to address psychosocial and mental health concerns can articulate a host of deficiencies. Adequate data are available to make the case for systemic changes. The problem is agreeing on an agenda.

Those who view mental health in schools through the lens of providing as many specialized clinical services as possible point to the number who are not served and then advocate for more services. A different agenda surfaces when the situation is viewed by those concerned mainly with classroom management and school discipline interventions. And, still other agenda arise when the concerns are promoting youth development, wellness, social and emotional learning, and fostering the emergence of a caring, supportive, and nurturing climate throughout a school.

The different agenda produce ongoing advocacy for a variety of initiatives, such as Positive Behavior Support, Coordinated School Health, Community Schools, Safe Schools/Healthy Students, Response to Intervention, Early Intervening, social and emotional learning, character education, projects to ameliorate bullying,

violence, substance abuse, pregnancy, dropouts, efforts to enhance school connectedness and student re-engagement, and many more. Each initiative focuses on a defined concern; each has a political constituency and a silo of economic support; each has established a niche. And, each contributes to the piecemeal, ad hoc, and often simplistic approaches that characterize efforts to address multifaceted problems.

### Where to Begin

The next decade must mark a turning point for how schools, families, and communities address the problems of children and youth. In particular, the focus must be on initiatives to transform how schools work to prevent and ameliorate the many problems experienced by too many students. The call is for redesigning student and learning supports to meet the needs of all students. To borrow a phrase from John Dewey, any other agenda for public schools is “narrow and unlovely.”

*I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in which direction we are moving.*

Oliver W. Holmes

A good starting place is to revise policy that perpetuates narrow-focused, categorical approaches. Current policy is a grossly inadequate response to the many complex factors that interfere with positive development, learning, and teaching. Such policy promotes an orientation that overemphasizes individually prescribed treatment services to the detriment of prevention programs, results in marginalized and fragmented interventions, and undervalues the human and social capital indigenous to every neighborhood. School improvement policy must be expanded to support development of the type of comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach that can effectively address barriers to learning and teaching. To do less is to make value statements such as, “We want all children to succeed,” simply rhetorical pronouncements.

Given sparse school resources, moves toward transformation must be accomplished by rethinking and redeploying how existing resources are used and by taking advantage of the natural opportunities at schools for countering problems and promoting personal and social growth. Staff and students need to feel positive about themselves and what they are doing if they are to cope with challenges proactively and effectively. Every school needs to commit to fostering staff and student strengths and creating an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring, and sense of community.

We must and we can move forward.

The book *Mental health in schools: Engaging learners, preventing problems, and improving schools* (2010) is written by Howard S. Adelman and Linda Taylor and published by Corwin Press. It complements two earlier books by the Center Co-directors: (1) *The school leader’s guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning* (2006) and (2) *The implementation guide to student learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide: New directions for addressing barriers to learning* (2006) both also published by Corwin Press.

Readers who want to drill deeper into the many topics covered in the mental health in schools book can turn to these other books and to the growing body of resources available at no cost on the UCLA center’s website.



## Executive Summary

### Interventions to Support Readiness, Recruitment, Access, Transition, and Retention for Postsecondary Education Success: An Equity of Opportunity Policy and Practice Analysis\*

**R**ecognition is growing about the public health and civil rights imperative for reducing the high rate of school dropouts. However, too little policy attention is paid to enhancing equity of opportunity for those transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood by increasing enrollment and success in postsecondary education.

Previous policy and practice reports from our Center have provided analyses indicating that reducing dropouts, increasing graduation rates, and closing the achievement gap require more than improving preK-12 instruction and enhancing school management. This previous work clarified fundamental flaws in prevailing school improvement policies and practices for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and recommended transformative changes. This report extends the earlier work by analyzing postsecondary education with a specific focus on policies and practices related to enhancing readiness, recruitment, access, transition, and retention.

Because who does and doesn't end up in postsecondary institutions is affected by school dropout rates, we begin by underscoring the national dropout problem. Then, we highlight current approaches to enhancing readiness for going on to postsecondary education, bolstering recruitment and access, and improving transition and survival in postsecondary education; special attention is given to underrepresented and underserved student subgroups. Finally, we offer our analyses and recommendations for improving intervention policies and practices.

We find prevailing policies primarily support broad-band, but limited scope direct strategies to enhance engagement and success in postsecondary education. These include interventions focused on

- cultivating early attitudes, a college going culture, and readiness
- recruitment outreach including involvement on K-12 campuses of postsecondary institutions and K-12 students coming to postsecondary sites
- financial aid such as scholarships and loans
- first-year transition programs including welcoming and support networks
- academic advising before the first year
- monitoring to provide further advice, learning supports and special assistance when problems are noted.

\*This report comes from the *Center for Mental Health in Schools* at UCLA. The full report is online at: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/postsecondary.pdf>

Available evidence highlights that such direct strategies are useful in increasing the pool of applicants for postsecondary education, improving transitions, and enhancing retention, but the evidence also suggests that the prevailing set of interventions is insufficient for enhancing equity of opportunity.

As is widely acknowledged, the factors interfering with student engagement and success in a formal education environment are complex, and complex problems require comprehensive solutions. Prevailing policies have led to fragmented and marginalized interventions that connect with relatively few of the many students in need.

In revisiting policy using the lenses of equity of opportunity and social justice, our analysis suggests the need for policy that can guide development of a much more comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of interventions. That system should begin preK and continue in a fully interconnected way through postsecondary graduation. The focus is on enhancing equity of opportunity by addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

Developing such a comprehensive preK-16 system requires developing a unified component for enabling success at school by

- reframing current student support programs and services, and integrating, at every stage, the best broad-band, but limited scope direct strategies
- redeploying available resources and aligning them horizontally and vertically
- revamping school-community infrastructures to weave resources together to enhance and evolve the system
- supporting the necessary systemic changes in ways called for by comprehensive innovation, scale-up, and sustainability.

To these ends, we offer three recommendations:

(1) *Move Beyond Broad-Band, But Limited Scope Direct Strategies to Initiate Development of a Comprehensive PreK-16 System*

Specifically, we propose

- moving preK-16 school policy from a two to a three component framework with the third component directly focused on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students; this third component must be treated as equal and primary to the others in policy so that it is not marginalized in practice,

- embedding under the component to address barriers to learning all efforts to address factors interfering with students having an equal opportunity to succeed at school
- expanding the school accountability framework to encompass the three component framework.

*(2) Revamp and interconnect Operational Infrastructures.*

Conceiving a comprehensive system is one thing; implementing it is quite another. Developing and institutionalizing a component to address barriers to learning and teaching requires a well-designed and effective set of operational mechanisms. The existing ones must be modified in ways that guarantee new policy directions are implemented effectively and efficiently. How well these mechanisms are connected determines cohesiveness, cost-efficiency, and equity.

*(3) Support Transformative and Sustainable Systemic Change.*

Systemic transformation to enhance equity of opportunity across preK-16 requires new collaborative arrangements and redistributing authority (power). Policy makers must provide support and guidance not only for implementing intervention prototypes, but for adequately getting from here to there. This calls for well-designed, compatible, and interconnected operational mechanisms at many levels and across agencies.

In sum, current policies and practices are unlikely to effectively increase the number of students who engage and succeed in postsecondary education. It is time to move beyond piecemeal and marginalized policy and fragmented practices. The need is to develop a comprehensive and cohesive system of interventions that address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students at every stage from prekindergarten through postsecondary. Without such a system there is no equity of opportunity.

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**Are you going to graduate on time?**

**Sure, no matter how long it takes.**



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## Requests, Feedback, Comments

Almost all Center resources can be downloaded at no charge from our website –  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

If a hardcopy of any of the following would be helpful, send a request with your contact info to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu) or circle your request below, copy and fax to (310) 206-8716

- (1) *Rebuilding for Learning: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching and Re-engaging Students* (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/rebuild/rebuildingtoc.htm> )
- (2) *Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf> )
- (3) *Engaging the Strengths of Families, Youth, and Communities in Rebuilding Learning Supports* (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Newsletter/Spring07.pdf> )

Also, email any other requests, comments, or feedback to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)