

Time for Straight Talk about Mental Health Services and MH in Schools

When you hear the term *Mental Health in Schools* or *School Mental Health*, what comes to mind?

Probably you think about students who have psychological problems, about what services they need, and how schools don't provide enough of such services. This is not surprising given the widespread tendency for the term *mental health* to be thought of as referring to mental disorders/illness and for relevant interventions to be seen as services (e.g., counseling/therapy).

As a result, many well-intentioned initiatives and policy reports have focused on expanding mental health *services* in schools. Bluntly stated, however, advocacy for more mental health *services* in schools often detracts from efforts to encourage policy makers to address the full range of mental health concerns confronting school staff, students, and their families.

Our analyses of policy and practice stress understanding the following matters as key to advancing a broad approach to mental health in schools.*

- The concept of mental health encompasses a continuum of concerns ranging from *promoting positive social and emotional development to treating mental disorders*.
- Mental health *problems* are fully enmeshed with psychosocial and educational problems.
- Given the above, schools have a role to play in (a) promoting positive mental health (e.g., social-emotional development), (b) preventing learning, behavior, and emotional problems, (c) intervening as early as feasible when such problems arise, and (d) treating severe and chronic problems.
- However, since the mission of schools is education, a mental health agenda (and especially a clinical services agenda) *by itself* is too narrow to be a high priority for our society's schools.

Those concerned with enhancing the role of mental health in schools must guide policy makers to a clear understanding of

- the many factors that are interfering with learning and teaching
- the large number of students who are experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- the fragmented and marginalized state of affairs related to the limited set of services, programs, and initiatives currently provided as student/learning supports
- the small proportion of students reached
- the counterproductive competition for sparse resources.

All the above realities work against enhancing every student's civil right to *equity of opportunity* for success at school and beyond.

Given all this, it is time to focus on transforming student/learning supports. Doing so is fundamental to improving intervention effectiveness in ways that enhance equity of opportunity, promote whole child development, and engender a positive school climate. Doing so requires ending the marginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and then framing and operationalizing them as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that weaves together school and community resources.

In the process, a broad definition of mental health in schools can be embedded into a transformed system of student/learning supports. Doing so will help

- reduce the unrealistic and often inappropriate call for more and more one-on-one direct services
- counter the mistaken view that collocating community services on school campuses can ever be a sufficient approach to filling critical intervention gaps at schools and for enhancing community and home engagement
- increase classroom, school-wide, and community interventions that can reduce the need for one-on-one services
- facilitate the weaving together of school, home, and community resources to gain economic benefits and enhance outcomes
- enhance coordination and cohesion of all resources (school, community, family) intended to support young people.

The bottom line in terms of equitable policy is that we cannot continue to provide a small number of sites with a few more health and social services to establish a few islands of excellence (demonstrations, pilots) and “Cadillac models.” The scale of need demands moving quickly in fundamentally new directions. With over 90,000 public schools in the U.S.A. and so many students who are not doing well, it is time to embed mental health in schools into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. This will enhance the fit with the mission of schools and contribute in a powerful way to schools playing a role in fully promoting social-emotional development and comprehensively addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

*For further elaboration of these points, see

- >Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2010). *Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- >Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2012). *Mental Health in Schools: Moving in New Directions. Contemporary School Psychology*. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contschpsych.pdf>
- >*Embedding Mental Health into a Learning Supports Component: An Essential Step for the Field to Take Now*. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/embeddingmh.pdf>
- >Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2017). *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*. access from the Center's homepage at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>
- >Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2018). *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System*. San Diego: Cognella Academic. <https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html>

and the resources cited as part of the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html> .

From the Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

Send comments, questions, and requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu .