

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 encouraging policy makers from facing up to what is needed in meeting the many 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.
- Schools have a role to play in promoting social-emotional development, preventing learning, behavior, and emotional problems, intervening as early as feasible when such problems arise, and treating severe and chronic problems.
- 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 in the broad mission of schools in our society. To have a high priority, the full range of mental health concerns must be embedded in the mission of schools and framed comprehensively with respect to promoting social-emotional learning and addressing barriers to learning and teaching.
- Fully promoting social-emotional learning (not just social skills) is essential to whole child development and involves a focus on facilitating development and preventing and correcting problems.
- Given the range of factors interfering with learning and teaching and the large number of students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems, the reality is that the many services, programs, and initiatives currently provided as student/learning supports in schools reach only a small proportion of the students who should be beneficiaries. This is the result of these supports being fragmented and marginalized in school improvement policy, planning. And because the budgets for such supports are sparse, there is a great deal of counterproductive competition for allocations. All this confounds effectiveness and does little to enhance every student's civil right to *equity of opportunity* for success at school and beyond.
- Transforming student/learning supports is fundamental to improving intervention effectiveness in ways that enhance equity of opportunity, promote whole child development, and engender a positive school climate.
- Transforming student/learning supports involves ending their marginalization in school improvement policy.
- Transforming student/learning supports involves framing and operationalizing them as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that weaves together school and community resources.

By embedding a broad definition of mental health in schools into a transformed system of student/learning supports, policy makers can

- avoid 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
- better address 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 school efforts to play a role in fully promoting social-emotional learning 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> .

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