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## About Planning and Action for the Mental Health Needs of Students and School Staff in the Aftermath of a Disaster

There will be many needs to address in the weeks and months after a major disaster (such as a devastating hurricane such as occurred in New Orleans). The following are four major areas of concern that require immediate enhanced planning and implementation to prepare for such an event:

**(1) Transition concerns from a mental health and individual engagement perspective** – It is one thing to facilitate enrollment of students and their families and to add new staff; it is another thing to establish interventions to ease their transition into a new school, support their proactive engagement at school, and address any significant school adjustment problems.

- Now is the time to enhance *welcoming interventions* and ensure effective *social support mechanism* and *anti-bullying measures* are operational.
- In the next few weeks, it is essential to enhance interventions to identify and assist anyone who has not been able to make an appropriate *school adjustment*.
- Those students and staff at schools experiencing a significant influx will be under additional stress and strain, and planning will need to focus on some proactive actions to minimize the impact of all this and to identify and provide assistance for anyone who is coping well.

**(2) Ensuring Special Assistance for New Students Who Needed it Prior to the Disaster** – It is extremely important to quickly identify and provide appropriate supports and accommodations for the many students, including those with IEPs, who were having difficulty at school before the disaster. Changing schools can be an opportunity or it can exacerbate their problems. (Younger students attitudes about future schooling are at stake; some older students probably already will use the event as a further reason to dropout.) Some students will be on special regimens (including medications). In the case of students with IEPs, it will be important to start a process to ensure certain mandates are waived for a while.

As one student support staff member noted: “Students who are IDEA-eligible will be arriving and needing services without any records whatsoever. Typically, we would start serving those students after a transition multi-disciplinary team meeting, and when we got no records after 30 days or so, we would initiate a re-evaluation. For certain students ... conducting a re-evaluation will be a total waste of time, money, resources, and services. These students are likely to be traumatized by the events surrounding the hurricane, safety issues, loss, grief, etc. and any evaluation will reflect that trauma, rather than their actual disability. ... [Someone needs] to petition the federal government to relax IDEA timeline requirements for mandatory re-evaluations for these students. Some of these students will take a much longer time to recover from their trauma than others. I would rather serve them than conduct formal evaluations.”

And, given the need to help so many, this may be particularly auspicious time to enhance the use of *volunteers*.

**(3) Ensuring Special Assistance for New Teachers Who Needed it Prior to the Disaster** – While all teachers new to a school (and/or to teaching) need mentoring and support, those who already were having difficulty before the disaster will need particular attention now. Plans must clarify how those who need it will be identified and assisted.

**(4) Identifying and providing special assistance for those who have been so-traumatized that they require Psychological Aid** – In most cases, referral and treatment systems will be swamped.

- Now is the time to delineate school and community capacity for providing special assistance for short-term interventions and to redesign referral, triage, and support systems at a school so that as many as feasible of those who need immediate assistance can be identified and helped.
- In the next few weeks, teachers and families will be seeing signs of delayed reactions and will need to learn how they can help directly and when a referral is indicated.

***We stress that the key is to begin planning immediately to maximize proactive actions.***  
Student support administrators and staff can lead the way in planning.

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A few relevant Center resources that can be downloaded at no cost:

- *What Schools Can Do to Welcome and Meet the Needs of All Students and Families* (Guidebook) – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/WELMEET/welmeetcomplete.pdf>
- *Crisis Assistance and Prevention: Reducing Barriers to Learning*  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/crisis\\_tt/crisisindex.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/crisis_tt/crisisindex.htm)
- Responding to Crisis at a School  
(Resource Aid Packet) – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/crisis/crisis.pdf>
- *Transitions: Turning Risks into Opportunities for Student Support*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitions/transitions.pdf>
- Student & Family Assistance Programs & Services to Address Barriers to Learning  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/student\\_tt/studentfamily.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/student_tt/studentfamily.htm)
- *Bullying Prevention (Quick Training Aids)*  
<http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/quicktraining/bullyingprevention.pdf>
- School-Based Client Consultation, Referral, and Management of Care  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/consultation/consultation2003.pdf>
- *Volunteers to Help Teachers and Schools Address Barriers to Learning*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/volunteer/volunt.pdf>

Other resources can be readily found and accessed by topic through our Quick Find Online Clearinghouse. See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/websrch.htm>

And, if you can't find something you need, contact us directly:  
By email — [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)



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