Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Problems at School

(http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/promotingmh.pdf)

Promotion of mental health encompasses enhancing knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to foster social and emotional development, a healthy lifestyle, and personal well-being. The scope of work overlaps primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions for preventing mental health and psychosocial problems. The desired outcomes encompass those designated as 21st century skills in the framework for 21st century learning.

Interventions to promote mental health encompass not only strengthening individuals, but also enhancing nurturing and supportive conditions at school, at home, and in the neighborhood. All this includes a particular emphasis on increasing opportunities for personal development and empowerment by promoting conditions that foster and strengthen positive attitudes and behaviors (e.g., enhancing motivation and capability to pursue positive goals, resist negative influences, and overcome barriers). It also includes efforts to maintain and enhance physical health and safety and inoculate against problems (e.g., providing positive and negative information, skill instruction, and fostering attitudes that build resistance and resilience).

Promoting healthy development, well-being, and a value-based life are important ends unto themselves. The Exhibit outlines a synthesis of major areas of focus for mental health promotion.

While schools alone are not responsible for all that is outlined in the Exhibit, they do play a significant role, albeit sometimes not a positive one, in social and emotional development. School improvement plans need to specify ways school (1) directly facilitate social and emotional (as well as physical) development and (2) minimize threats to positive development. In doing such planning, appreciation of differences in levels of development and developmental demands at different ages is fundamental, as is personalized implementation to account for individual differences.

From a mental health perspective, helpful guidelines are found in research clarifying normal trends for school-age youngsters' efforts to feel competent, self-determining, and connected with significant others. And, measurement of such feelings can provide indicators of the impact of a school on mental health. Positive findings are expected to correlate with school engagement and academic progress. Negative findings are expected to correlate with student anxiety, fear, anger, alienation, a sense of losing control, a sense of impotence, hopelessness, powerlessness. In turn, these negative thoughts, feelings, and attitudes can lead to externalizing (aggressive, "acting out") or internalizing (withdrawal, self-punishing, delusional) behaviors.

Promoting mental health has definite payoffs both for academic performance and reducing problems at schools. And, as noted, promoting healthy development, well-being, and a value-based life are important ends unto themselves. Therefore, an enhanced commitment to mental health promotion should be a key facet of the renewed emphasis on the whole child by education leaders.

Areas of Focus in Enhancing Healthy Psychosocial Development

Responsibility and integrity (e.g., understanding and valuing of societal expectations and moral courses of action)

Self-esteem (e.g., feelings of competence, self-determination, and being connected to others)

Social and working relationships (e.g., social awareness, empathy, respect, communication, interpersonal cooperation and problem solving, critical thinking, judgment, and decision making)

Self-evaluation/self-direction/self-regulation (e.g., understanding of self and impact on others, development of personal goals, initiative, and functional autonomy)

Temperament (e.g., emotional stability and responsiveness)

Personal safety and safe behavior (e.g., understanding and valuing of ways to maintain safety, avoid violence, resist drug abuse, and prevent sexual abuse)

Health maintenance (e.g., understanding and valuing of ways to maintain physical and mental health)

Effective physical functioning (e.g., understanding and valuing of how to develop and maintain physical fitness)

Careers and life roles (e.g., awareness of vocational options, changing nature of sex roles, stress management)

Creativity (e.g., breaking set)