

Online and At School: Teachers Alone Can't and Shouldn't Be Expected to Address the Wide Range of Student Mental Health Concerns*

Headline in USA Today –

*Kids' mental health can struggle during online school.
Here's how teachers are planning ahead*

Why is the Focus only on Teachers?

As they begin the school year, it is evident that everyone, (students, families, staff) will have experienced considerable stress, some will have been ill, some will be grieving for a relative or friend who died. And transition-back stressors are likely to exacerbate other factors that interfere with readjusting to school learning and teaching. It is predictable that teachers will encounter an increased number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

And, it is patently unfair and unreasonable to believe that addressing the wide range of students having problems can be done by teachers alone.

School districts hire a range of student/learning support professionals (counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, etc.), and more than ever, they have a critical role to play. So far, we note that nurses are mostly mentioned related to monitoring for physical health, especially COVID-19 monitoring. Some places mention counselors as responding to mental health concerns, but it remains unclear what they will be doing. Some mention is made of community schools and school-based health centers, with an emphasis on *community providers*. It is noteworthy that so many district-employed student/learning support professionals are rarely mentioned.

Recognizing the Wide Range of Students and their Mental Health Concerns

Think in terms of a continuum of students and differences in mental health concerns.

- (1) *Many students are functioning just fine.* They are resilient. They perform and learn online. Along with their peers, they can benefit from instruction and natural opportunities that include a focus on social and emotional development and learning.
- (2) *Some need immediate social, emotional, and academic supports.* They are bored, irritable, anxious, distraught, and/or angry with the current state of affairs; some are grieving over a significant loss; some are in need of personalized instruction.
- (3) *Some have chronic and pervasive learning, behavior, and emotional problems.*

The numbers along the continuum vary with the neighborhood in which a school is located. Whatever the numbers, all schools must plan to provide for the full continuum and for teachers' mental health needs as well. All this requires planning how teachers and student/learning support staff will work together collaboratively each day online (and at school when they are open).

Addressing the Wide Range of Learning, Behavior, and Emotional Concerns

Of course, the range of mental health concerns is just one aspect of the need to address many barriers to learning and teaching. Recognition of this reality has led to the policy emphasis on multi-tiered student supports (e.g., MTSS). Elsewhere we have stressed the importance of such an intervention approach and outlined how to build on limited conceptions of MTSS with a view to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. See, for example, *Schools Re-opening: Safety Plus Enhancing Equity of Opportunity and Social Justice*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/summer20.pdf>

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Here are a few points to consider in initial planning to address problems as the new year begins.

Transition Supports for all Students. Schools must address the variety of transition concerns that will confront students, their families, and staff as the new school year gets underway. Consider:

- What’s in place to welcome, orient, and positively connect with staff, students, and families?
- What outreach will be made to those students and families who were expected but did not return? Tracking who isn’t online is essential, and so is outreach to prevent dropouts.
- How will the school identify and provide supports for those not adjusting well or who disengage from online instruction?
- For schools that are re-opening, how will staff minimize problems during daily transition times (e.g., before school, during breaks, lunch, after school)?

For those who are functioning just fine. Besides the instructional focus on social emotional learning and problem solving, there are natural opportunities to promote social and emotional development. An example is to translate such in-class group interactions as “circle time” to a moderated online activity. This will allow for validating student experiences and feelings about losses and disappointments and for enhancing intrinsic motivation (e.g., the desire to learn; curiosity; creativity; feelings of competence, connectedness to others, and self-determination.)

Students who need immediate social, emotional, and academic supports. It can be anticipated that a significant number of students will not adjust well at the start of the school year. This may be due to past problems or current circumstances. For some, their difficulty will be with conditions related to instruction; for others, the problem will be motivational; and for some, social and/or emotional factors will be to blame. Arrangements for tutoring will be important for those needing academic supports. A focus on intrinsic motivation can help to engage and re-engage students. Small groups co-facilitated by the teacher and student/learning support staff can help students with common concerns (e.g., students who feel lonely and disconnected, those who are relatively unmotivated, anxious, grieving etc.). Online mentors may also be helpful.

Students manifesting chronic and pervasive learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Some, of course, will have special education IEPs. Whether they do or not, students with major problems and their families require regular two-way communication about addressing problems and often need referrals for specialized assistance.

Staff Will Need Regular Supports as Well

A critical support for enhancing the well-being of school staff is to ensure they have the meaningful daily collaborative working arrangements with their student/learning support colleagues. Without such collaboration to address the many barriers to learning and teaching, even the most resilient teachers are at risk.

In addition, as is the case with students, some teachers need social and emotional supports to help address personal concerns interfering with their well-being. District staff can provide online small support groups and referrals as necessary.

Beginning the School Year with a Sense of Exciting Renewal: Generating Hope

The new school year provides the opportunity to start with a “clean slate” and an agenda for renewal. Renewal begins with planning events to kick-off the year. In such planning, it is critical

to work against pressures to primarily cover the many bureaucratic things that “need to be understood” (e.g., procedures, regulations, requirements, rules). Such messages generate a perception of “more of the same;” this counters feelings of renewal and hope about a new beginning.

Creating an optimistic mood and a sense of excitement requires welcoming and supportive participatory activities that highlight

- how much all the stakeholders are valued and the critical role they play
- an exciting agenda for renewal
- plans for making renewal a reality
- new opportunities for stakeholder participation and taking on leadership role

See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring20.pdf>

Student/Learning Support Staff are Especially Essential at this Time

All the above matters have implications for enhancing online, schoolwide, and in-classroom supports by retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., student and learning support personnel – psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, Title I staff, special educators, dropout/graduation support staff, and others).

The special skills of school psychologists, counselors, nurses, special educators, etc. will be invaluable resources in the coming months, especially as they help generate a sense of renewal and work collaboratively with regular teachers online and in classrooms each day. Improving student/learning supports requires effective collaboration, and such collaboration is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

Are you looking forward to the new school year?



I am, but I'm not sure that my teacher is looking forward to my return!

A clear and present danger at this time is that the rate of learning, behavior, and emotional problems will increase leading to higher rates of student disengagement with instruction and dropouts.

The matters discussed in this set of Practice Notes are intended to highlight ways to rethink prevailing policies and practices. Here are three free books that provide more in-depth coverage.

>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

>*Improving School Improvement*

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

They are online at: http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html