
Mental Health in Schools: We won't Argue Against Adding More Counselors, BUT ...

News Headline: *Plan to increase mental health staff in schools – 250 million measure would seek to add 10,000 clinicians across state*

While the numbers for smaller states will be less dramatic, the tendency is the same in many states, namely to add a few more “mental health” staff. At first glance, adding 10,000 appears like a lot, but there are a little over 10,000 schools in the state cited in the article.

COVID-19 certainly has underscored that schools must play a greater role in addressing mental health concerns. The question is: *How best to do it?*

As in the past, we see folks simply drawing on old and simplistic ideas, such as hiring another student support staff member for a school (e.g., a counselor, psychologist, social worker).

We also see some efforts to

- >use schools as an integrated component of the mental health services delivery system
- >increase the emphasis on mental health education
- >expand the school's focus on social and emotional learning.

All of these are relevant, but insufficient as a way to fully embed mental health in schools, especially given everything schools need to do in the wake of COVID-19.

And the way MTSS, PBIS, and Community Schools are being adopted and how relief funds are being used related to mental health concerns tend to perpetuate approaches that are too limited for effectively dealing with the multifaceted and complex problems schools have and continue regularly to experience.

Given the relatively small pool of resources available to so many schools and the range of students in need, this is a critical time for schools to

- >rethink how they are addressing barriers to learning and teaching
- >improve their approach to reengaging disconnected students and their families.

The essential goal is to transform student/learning support so that the sparse resources available can be deployed in more potent ways to address the wide-range of factors interfering with school learning and teaching. The focus of such system (re)building is on

- >unifying the district's student/learning supports
- and then
- >weaving in whatever resources the community and those at home can add.

It is into this type of system that the many ways mental health promotion, prevention, and response can most comprehensively be embedded. Without transforming student/learning supports, just adding more mental health staff in schools will contribute to the ongoing fragmentation and marginalization of efforts to cope with the increased number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems schools are confronting.

Maximizing the benefits of mental health in schools requires an ambitious agenda for transforming student/learning supports. The goal is to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students (not just adding another staff member to provide mental health services). Achieving such a goal is vital to enhancing equity of opportunity for all students at school and beyond.

For those interested in ways to move forward, see

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/movingforward.pdf>