

To: All Concerned with Reducing the Achievement and Opportunity Gaps

From: the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA (January 2026)

Subject: Layoffs of Student Support Staff in U.S. Public Schools

No national dataset reports on reductions in force (RIFs) specific to student support staff (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, MTSS specialists, interventionists, education assistants, family liaisons, etc.).

However, media reports across the U.S. make clear that many districts are enacting substantial RIFs that disproportionately affect these staff. indicate that school districts across the United States are implementing significant Reductions in Force that affect student support staff.

Key Drivers of Current Layoffs

1. *ESSER funding cliff* – Districts used temporary ESSER dollars to hire support personnel; with funds expiring, many positions are now unsustainable.
2. *Enrollment declines* – Enrollment drops since 2020 have lowered state allocations tied to student counts, forcing districts to cut personnel.
3. *Federal education funding is changing and unsettled* – but no major increases are expected in the near term.
4. *Student supports are marginalized in school improvement policy* – because student/learning supports are not central to school improvement policy, they are routinely given low priority in budget decisions, and student/learning support staff are among the first to go when there are reductions in force.
5. *Prevailing approaches used by student support staff have too little impact* – current approaches—including many implementations of MTSS—have not significantly improved schoolwide outcomes or effectively addressed persistent learning, behavior, and emotional problems.
6. *Student support personnel have not offered compelling proposals for fundamental system improvements* – they have mainly and unrealistically argued for more staff.

What is Needed Now

Policy makers must be confronted with the full implications of weakening student/learning supports – especially in schools already experiencing significant opportunity gaps. Without a potent system of supports, they can expect:

- >widening achievement gaps,
- >higher dropout rates,
- >escalating teacher stress and turnover..

At the same time, advocates must present a new approach for student/learning supports that rethinks and restructures such supports in ways that

- >unifies existing supports used by a school into a coherent framework
- >systematically weaves school supports together with overlapping community-based resources
- >provides a multiyear plan for transforming the current patchwork of interventions into a comprehensive, equitable system designed to ensure timely support for every student who needs it.

For a detailed discussion, see

Rethinking and Restructuring Student/Learning Supports –
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/Winter%2026.pdf>

Concluding Comments

The loss of student-support personnel will inevitably worsen student outcomes and overall school performance. Policymakers are aware of this. Yet they continue to prioritize cuts to these positions because they perceive existing student-support practices as having limited impact on reducing opportunity and achievement gaps.

At this critical juncture, it is essential for advocates of student/learning supports to articulate feasible, forward-looking strategies for strategic reinvestment and systemic restructuring — showing how current resources can be used far more effectively to meet the needs of students, teachers, and schools.

Best wishes and be well,

Howard & Linda

Howard Adelman, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology & Center Co director

Linda Taylor, Ph.D., Center Co director

Dept. of Psychology, UCLA

Emails: adelman@psych.ucla.edu Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Website: <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>