

From the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

What's the difference between "School Mental Health" and "Mental Health in Schools"

Although these terms often are used interchangeably, they represent quite different approaches to policy and practice in schools.

The key difference:

- *School Mental Health (SMH)*

focuses primarily on providing mental health services - such as counseling, therapy, crisis response - within schools and/or linked with community providers for identified students. This approach is service heavy and siloed, emphasizing the need for more clinicians, more referrals. It largely addresses MTSS tiers 2-3 and cannot, on its own, meet the scale of need.

- *Mental Health in Schools*

takes a systemic, schoolwide approach, embedding mental health as a foundational part of the school's overall mission and its operational infrastructure to promote well being and support learning and teaching. It aims to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that provides a full continuum of interventions - from prevention to intensive supports - with an organized set of student/learning support domains across each level. The aim is to support all students, not just those with clinical diagnoses.

For a detailed comparison, see the AI-generated table:

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Comparison%20Table%20ed.pdf>

Why It Matters

Districts are investing in addressing mental health concerns, but much of the effort remain service heavy and fragmented, touching only on a fraction of students. The *term School Mental Health* is tied to this approach - and it is more than evident that services alone can never keep pace with the need at many schools. And, it is noteworthy that School Mental Health has been the target of those stakeholders who argue against schools providing therapeutic services.

By contrast, adopting the term *Mental Health in Schools* signals a strategic shift that

- reframes addressing mental health concerns at schools and embeds the work into the existing student and learning supports efforts at a school to address barriers to learning and re engage disconnected students
- can be a catalyst for transforming such supports into a third, fully integrated component of school improvement (alongside instruction and management)
- can unify student/learning supports and develop them into a comprehensive, and equitable system.

Such a shift can help MTSS work as intended.

Such a shift is essential in advancing equity of opportunity for students to succeed at school and beyond.

Best wishes and be well,

Howard & Linda