

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

## **Addressing Student Trauma Involves More than Reactive Crisis Responses**

Last years' fires in Los Angeles provide yet another example of how concern about students' mental health continues to be reactive and marginalized.

Los Angeles students endured more than most communities could imagine. The Eaton and Palisades fires forced evacuations, destroyed classrooms, and left thousands of young people carrying trauma that does not disappear when the flames do. So when Governor Gavin Newsom announced \$2.2 million in funding to support mental health services at 33 affected schools, it was an important policy move.

As we understand it, the funding is designed to deliver trauma-informed curriculum, staff workshops, and a mental health skills app to an estimated 30,000 students in Altadena and the Pacific Palisades. These supports, led by UCLA Health's Sound Body Sound Mind program, draw on the FOCUS model, which is designed to help children recognize and manage emotions before they become overwhelming.

As you probably are aware, our Center at UCLA has spent decades working to improve school-based systems to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems. We see this initiative as yet one more reactive response to meeting such problems. Unfortunately, the challenges facing our schools run deeper than any two year program can fully address.

Consider the physical and emotional toll. At one high school, more than 30% of classrooms were destroyed, forcing students into temporary facilities for over an entire school year. That kind of disruption affects learning, well-being, and the sense of safety students depend on.

The fires struck after years of pandemic upheaval. Many children have spent their entire formative years navigating instability, loss, and constant change. One parent from of an elementary school child is quoted as saying, "My kids jump every time the wind picks up. You don't just 'go back to normal' after losing your school twice in five years. We need the mental health help—but we also need it to last."

That parent is right. When you do the math, \$2.2 million for 30,000 students comes out to about \$66 per student over two years. No matter how dedicated the staff or well-designed the programming, that amount cannot meet the full spectrum of need our communities face.

If we want to help students recover not just emotionally but academically, we must move beyond short-term, crisis-driven initiatives. Schools need a comprehensive, integrated system of student and learning supports that reaches every school, not only those damaged by disaster.

Our work over many years has shown that schools already have many resources in place – counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, community partners, afterschool programs, family liaisons. But their efforts are fragmented and marginalized. A true system weaves them together so that barriers to learning -- trauma, anxiety, housing instability, disengagement -- can be proactively addressed in a more unified, comprehensive, and equitable way.

Trauma does not resolve in a two-year cycle. Recovery does not happen in pockets. And learning cannot thrive when mental health is treated as an “add on.”

Reactive initiatives need to be turned into a meaningful beginning for major systemic changes. They signal recognition of the urgency of supporting student well-being; they need to be pursued as an opportunity to build on that recognition -- to create lasting, equitable systems of student and learning support that will benefit all our students in the years ahead.

Let’s use such moments not just to respond to crisis, but to reimagine how we care for young people every day. Our students deserve that commitment.

**The following may be helpful for discussions of moving forward:**

> *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions* -  
- <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>

> *Trauma-Informed Schools for Children in K-12: A System Framework* -  
- [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/trauma\\_informed\\_schools\\_for\\_children\\_in\\_k-12\\_a\\_systems\\_framework.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/trauma_informed_schools_for_children_in_k-12_a_systems_framework.pdf)

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