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

A cautionary note about how schools focus on students' mental health

At this stage in the pandemic, while it is evident schools must do more to address students' mental health needs, it is essential not to overstate, overidentify, and overpathologize the state of affairs. We all need to be sure that well-meaning efforts to provide special assistance do not collude with such matters as "victim framing," inappropriate labeling and stigmatization, and self-fulfilling prophecies.

Use of words such as *it's a crisis*, *it's alarming* certainly call attention to a situation that warrants system changes at schools. But schools also have to emphasize the fact that so many students have proven their resilience and not only are coping, but are thriving back at school and looking forward to a productive end of the school year.

Moreover, as efforts are made to address the increase in emotional, learning, and behavior problems, schools must not cutback on promoting equity of opportunity for these students with respect to facilitating "whole student" development. This includes building on and enhancing the strengths, assets, and special gifts that can be found in students. It encompasses drawing on what is known about intrinsic motivation to enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to significant others and on minimize threats to such feelings. And it involves attending to the many natural opportunities for promoting social and emotional learning (e.g., enhanced understanding of self and others, increased sense of responsibility for self and others).

So while schools work on making things better for those who need special assistance, now is also the time to plan ways to (a) enhance their hopes for the future and (b) ensure opportunities for recognizing their progress and accomplishments. And as the school year ends, schools need be certain these students are able to experience the pleasures of popular end of the year celebrations.

Schools can and need to do it all if they are to make the Every Student Succeeds Act more than rhetoric.

For more on appropriately *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*, go to http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html.

For more on appreciating and celebrating students, just zero-in on the positives things students are doing.