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## **Mental health Concerns are Becoming a School Priority: But How Best to Address the Priority Remains Controversial**

Recognizing the emotional toll from the coronavirus pandemic, states, cities, and schools are making mental health a priority.

For example: California's Department of Education has listed mental health support as a prominent focus as plans are made to use the COVID-19 Relief Funding. New York City recently indicated various initiatives, including a plan to pay \$500 to nearly 1,000 parents to address mental health needs at their schools.

Schools clearly want to help students, families, and staff with respect to mental health concerns.

*At the same time, the emphasis should not be on responding by JUST adding a few more personnel and implementing yet another ad hoc initiative.*

Every week we see increasing calls for schools to pursue interventions related to trauma, anxiety, depression, disconnected students and truancy, adverse childhood experiences, bullying, social and emotional health, substance abuse, suicide prevention, and other mental health and psychosocial concerns. Schools are struggling to play a more effective role in addressing such matters. As always, there is pressure to meet the needs of those individuals who are manifesting significant problems. But schools always have had more students in need than they could help. Adding a *few* more personnel at this time is called for, but not just to do more of the same. That just will not be sufficient to meet the increased need. (And when the extra funding runs out, we know what will happen to the added staff.)

As to adding a few new initiatives, policy makers and planners have long been cautioned about pressures to add another "hot topic" program. Such initiatives often are based on magic bullet thinking and buzzword answers to complex problems. They contribute to ad hoc, piecemeal, and fragmented approaches and pull resources away from other priority concerns in ways that too often frequently increase inequities of opportunity for other students. And these special initiatives usually are not sustained over time.

Given the increasing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems confronting educators, it is essential that schools do more than tinker with old ideas. Instead, now is the time to start a bold and innovative process for transforming student/learning supports in ways that substantially and substantively address a broad range of barriers to learning and teaching and enhance equity of opportunity for students experiencing emotional, behavioral, and learning problems.

In doing so, schools not only can play a significant role in addressing the mental health problems of a few students, but can develop a *unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports* designed for all students. It also can do more for families and school staff.

Our research has clarified that a comprehensive system of student/learning supports includes enhancing supports in regular classrooms to enable learning, supporting transitions, increasing home and school connections, responding to and, where feasible, preventing school and personal crisis and traumatic events, increasing community involvement, and facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistant as needed. When such a system is implemented effectively, interventions are planned and developed in collaboration with families and community stakeholders to help ameliorate crises and traumatic events. This

include creating a caring and safe learning environment, providing immediate assistance in emergencies, and ensuring follow-up care as necessary (e.g., referral to treatment).

As plans are made to meet the elevated priority to address mental health concerns, it is time to embed these concerns into a transformed system of student/learning supports. Temporary increases in funding provide a way to do more than address immediate mental health needs, they provide a special opportunity to initiate the transformation of student and learning supports to better address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. And when the temporary funds disappear, the transformation can be sustained by redeploing regularly allocated funds for student and learning supports and weaving in community resources to fill gaps.

Here are three free resources our Center has developed to provide online in depth aids to guide school transformation planning:

- > *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
- > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
- > *Improving School Improvement*

All three can be accessed at [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html) \_

And here is a recently released policy analysis:

> *Restructuring California Schools to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching in the COVID 19 Context and Beyond*

<https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/restructuring-california-schools-address-barriers-learning-and-teaching-covid-19>

(Note that this is not just relevant to California)

Please share this information with those who may find it helpful.

And if you have any questions or want to share something you think others might find relevant, send them to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

Finally, for those moving forward to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports, we offer free distance coaching and technical assistance <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf> ,