

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

Mental Health in Schools: *An Opportunity Gained! An Opportunity Lost?*

The number of articles focusing on the schools role in addressing mental health concerns has skyrocketed. Among those we received last week was: *As Teen Mental Health Worsens, Schools Learn How to Help* by Christine

Vestal <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2022/04/18/as-teen-mental-health-worsens-schools-learn-how-to-help>

As the article stresses:

“Awash in federal pandemic relief money—roughly \$190 billion in education and health grants over the next four years—states are responding.

Last year, 38 states enacted nearly 100 laws providing additional resources to support mental wellbeing in K-12 schools, according to the National Academy for State Health Policy, a Portland, Maine-based policy research group. Dozens of additional school mental health bills became law this year in at least 22 states, according to the group.”

It goes on to note that “new state laws aim to upgrade school mental health resources and create comprehensive plans to prevent teen suicides and promote child mental wellbeing. ... At least 16 states ... now require K-12 teachers and other school staff to take training courses on how to recognize mental distress in students and what to do when they see it. ... Other laws require school boards to develop evidence-based plans for protecting the mental health of K-12 students.”

IT IS CLEAR THAT ALL THIS PROVIDES A REAL OPPORTUNITY FOR SCHOOLS TO DO BETTER IN ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS.

BUT – as those fully involved with how schools address such matters recognize, moving forward is not really what all the activity will produce. Indeed, the current ways the concern for mental health in schools is being pursued likely will result in another opportunity lost.

Will some immediate help result? Certainly. Will fundamental and essential system changes be forthcoming? Probably not unless policy makers at state and local levels broaden their understanding about the need for embedding the school’s role in addressing mental health concerns into a transformed system of student/learning supports.

As we have noted previously, most schools will continue to do the best they can to address immediate mental health and other related concerns, but they will only meet the needs of a few, and most ongoing inequities will be perpetuated.

In the long-run, some of the well intentioned initiatives currently proposed must (1) give way to system transformation that incorporates new thinking about how schools address learning, behavior, and emotional problems and (2) elevate such concerns to a primary position in school improvement policy and practice.

Here are a few recent resources from our Center that highlight a different way of understanding what needs to be and can be done:

>*We must transform how schools address barriers to learning* <https://edsources.org/2022/we-must-transform-how-schools-address-barriers-to-learning/668110>

>*We won't Argue Against Adding More Counselors, BUT ...*

Addressing Student Mental Health Concerns Involves Much More than Increasing the Number of Mental Health Providers <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/morethan.pdf>

>*Time for Straight Talk about Mental Health Services and MH in Schools*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhinschools.pdf>

>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

>*New Directions for School Improvement Policy* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/policynd.pdf>

(For more, go to the Center website -- <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>)

It is time to move forward in helping schools develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and their families. Focusing only on immediate “crises” is a recipe for an inequitable and self-defeating status quo.

Stay well and move forward,

Howard & Linda

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