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To: Taylor, Linda L.
Subject: The Literacy Crisis: Why Schools' Current Responses Fall Short—and What's Needed Instead

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

The Literacy Crisis: Why Schools' Current Responses Fall Short—and What's Needed Instead

Across the United States, far too many students are not reading at grade level. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 43% of fourth-grade students reached proficiency in reading in 2023. The disparities are stark: just 17% of Black students and 21% of Latino students met this benchmark.

When students enter middle school without foundational literacy skills, they are not simply behind academically -- they are effectively cut off from meaningful access to the curriculum. Literacy, therefore, is not just an academic issue; it is a fundamental equity concern. Moreover, the literacy crisis is closely intertwined with student and staff engagement, mental health, and overall school climate.

Moving Beyond Simplistic Explanations

Too often, the literacy crisis is framed narrowly as a problem of curriculum or instruction. The growing emphasis on phonics and the science of reading, for example, has highlighted the importance of explicit decoding instruction.

While effective instruction is essential, this perspective is insufficient. Many teachers work in classrooms where a range of barriers to learning and teaching and a wide variation in student readiness make it unrealistic to deliver the level of differentiated instruction that is necessary. The result is a mismatch between what research recommends and what the school is equipped to deliver systematically.

The Impact on Students

As educators and families consistently observe, repeated struggles with learning have consequences that extend far beyond academics. Students who experience ongoing difficulty often develop feelings of failure and diminished self-worth. They may withdraw from participation, act out to deflect attention from their struggles, or disengage from school entirely.

Over time, these patterns contribute to reduced motivation, behavior problems, chronic absenteeism, and increased risk of dropping out. The impact is not limited to students; it also places significant strain on teachers and undermines the overall functioning of the school.

A Systemic Problem Requires a Systemic Response

At its core, the problem is not simply how reading and other academics are taught, but the absence of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports that enables effective teaching and learning.

Such a system emphasizes both prevention and timely intervention; provides layered supports within the classroom; integrates academic, social, and emotional supports; reduces fragmentation and duplication of

efforts; and shares responsibility for student success across the school, rather than placing it disproportionately on individual teachers.

The literacy crisis will not be solved by any single program or instructional shift. It requires a systemic transformation in how schools organize supports for learning. Without a fully developed and highly prioritized system of student and learning supports, even the best instructional efforts are likely to be undermined by persistent learning, behavior, and emotional challenges.

Immediate Steps Schools and Districts Can Take

Schools and districts can begin now to move toward a more effective and equitable system of supports.

(1) **Learn more about transforming student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.** See, for example:

>*Criteria and Rubric for a Best Practice Approach to Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/criteria and rubric.pdf

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

(2) **Use the rest of the school year and the summer to begin the improvement process.** See, for example:

>*An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports: A Month by Month Guide for Systemic Change with Existing Resources*
https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/agendapaper.pdf

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