
From the Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Support

A Caution About How the Feds Think About Student/Learning Supports and Mental Health

For various reasons, the focus on mental health by federal agencies has increased. Just yesterday (May 25), six agencies across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a Joint Letter to states, tribes, and jurisdictions encouraging them to prioritize and maximize their efforts to strengthen children’s mental health and well-being.* Efforts to bring together fragmented resources certainly are needed, especially in the wake of the pandemic and the horrific mass killings in Buffalo, NY and at the Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX.

The U.S. Department of Education’s increased focus on mental health in schools also has been evident. See their recent document *Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health*. The document offers much to consider about mental health in schools. We note that it does concur with many of the concerns our Center has raised about mental health in schools *and student/learning supports*. Unfortunately, it also contributes to some core problems facing the efforts to improve student/learning supports for students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and for promoting healthy development.**

Examples of shared concerns are reflected in statements such as:

“The current system is not working for many children, students, families, and staff, with notable problems that existed before the pandemic made much worse during the pandemic.”

“Current systems focus on individual level needs, leaving out community supports.”

“There is increasing recognition of the need to (a) move away from co-located programs involving ad-hoc involvement of mental health system staff in schools or programs and (b) move toward approaches that clearly integrate education and mental health systems.”

The document cites our Center’s work when it notes that “...within schools, those providing direct services to children and students, including teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and social workers, are often siloed and work in relative isolation from one another affecting all children and students ...”

It stresses the importance of starting to improve the focus on mental health by establishing “positive, nurturing environments where all children, students, and staff thrive; and layer on additional supports to address the unique needs of some.” And it stresses that “Children and students learn more, report feeling safer, and develop more authentic trusting relationship with peers and adults if the learning

and social environments of the school are positive. Educators foster safe and supportive environments by maximizing child and student connections, arranging engaging and successful learning, and being positively constructive in responding to the needs of children and students.”

In recommending development of an integrated framework, it recognizes the problem of fragmented approaches and discusses blending funding, developing policy, changing job descriptions, etc.

(Detailed discussion about all these matters and more can be found in resources developed by our Center

that are online for free access. We have listed some of the resources in our recent brief commentary on

*Mental Health in Schools: Taking Stock, Moving Ahead.****)

At the same time, we hasten to caution that the document from the U.S. Department of Education also contributes to *marginalizing* efforts to move toward the type of *unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports* that schools need to effectively address students’ learning, behavior, and emotional problems and promote healthy development.

For example, in its recommendation for establishing “an Integrated Framework of Educational, Social, Emotional, and Behavioral-Health Support,” it treats schools as if they were primarily in the mental health business rather than having a much larger role to play in our society. For instance, the document fails to embed the focus on *Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health* into the school’s mission to educate and what that means for designing a system of student/learning supports. Instead, it only recommends establishing “a comprehensive system of mental health support” and integrating systems such as education, health, and mental health within a MTSS framework. There is no effort to clarify the limitations of the MTSS framework or the narrowness of the concept of a “comprehensive system of mental health” or how to enhance mental health in schools by embedding the efforts into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.**** In discussing policy, the document doesn’t address the need to expand the frameworks for school improvement policy and school accountability in order to end the marginalization of how schools pursue student/learning supports.

So, while the document emphasizes seven key challenges to and offers recommendations for “providing school- or program-based mental health support across early childhood, K–12 schools, and higher education settings, we are concerned that the narrow focus skews and contributes to the prevailing limited thinking about student/learning supports at schools. The feds, states, and localities need to expand school improvement policy in ways that embed mental health concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Such a system is essential if schools are to effectively address factors interfering with learning and teaching, reengage disconnected students and families, and promote the well-being of students, families, and school personnel.

*Joint letter from federal agencies

<https://www.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/hrsa/about/news/2022-joint-letter-childrens-mental-health.pdf>

***Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health,*

<https://www2.ed.gov/documents/students/supporting-child-student-social-emotional-behavioral-mental-health.pdf>

****Mental Health in Schools: Taking Stock, Moving Ahead* (includes links to resources detailing matters involved in improving student/learning supports in classrooms and schoolwide and replicating district-wide)
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/5-19-22.pdf>

*****Embedding Mental Health as Schools*
Change <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>

If you share our concerns, please share this with others.

Also, note that our Center offers free technical assistance and coaching; see
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>

Best wishes, be well,

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