

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

Follow-Up Caution About Premature Adoption by Schools of Universal Mental Health Screening Initiatives

Our recent report asks:

Are Initiatives to Improve School-Based Mental Health Services Hindering Efforts to Transform Student/Learning Supports?

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhinitiatives.pdf>

This week brought another example of efforts to move schools toward universal, first-level screening. We urge districts and schools to ask proponents of such initiatives to address the many concerns these proposals raise.

Key Concerns About Initiating Universal Mental Health Screening in Schools

While strengthening attention to mental health in schools is essential, initiatives centered on universal screening are not the best starting point. They risk:

- *Further Fragmenting Student/Learning Supports:* Launching a new, multi-year screening initiative is likely to add yet another layer to already fragmented efforts rather than fostering a cohesive support system.
- *Further Marginalizing Student/Learning Supports:* Externally driven initiatives often sideline existing school and community resources instead of building coherently on those that are productive. A more appropriate first step is to map and analyze current resources and establish priorities for strengthening the overall system before investing in new initiatives.
- *Overemphasizing Adopting Tools Rather than Systemic Change:* Focusing on adopting and scaling screening instruments risks repeating a common pattern – adding another initiative rather than transforming student and learning supports into a unified system capable of addressing the full range of learning, behavior, and emotional needs encountered daily.
- *Violating a Basic Equity Principle:* “Do Not Identify Needs You Are Unwilling or Unable to Address.” Widespread screening generates data – and often labels – without ensuring access to meaningful follow-up supports. This undermines trust, contributes to over-pathologizing students, and raises serious ethical concerns. It also creates a fiscal paradox: scarce resources are diverted to identifying problems, thereby reducing what is available to ameliorate them.

As we have emphasized,

>Schools Do Have a Role in Screening – but Policy must Be Realistic and Responsible

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/5-7-26.pdf>

Policy must not confuse identification with ameliorating problems. Large-scale screening systems certainly can identify needs more rapidly than schools are able to do currently. However, expanding identification in the

absence of adequate referral pathways and on-site support leads to unmet needs, ethical concerns, and increased stress for students, families, and school staff.

Until policymakers align screening expectations with the follow-up supports schools can realistically provide, expanded screening will continue to strain resources, heighten inequities, and distract from the core work of improving student learning and well-being. None of this is good for efforts to enhance mental health in schools.

And an irony is that schools already have a natural and ongoing screening process: teachers and parents routinely identify students experiencing academic, social, and emotional difficulties.

In sum, initiatives for universal mental health screening should follow – not precede – comprehensive efforts to unify and systematize student and learning supports. Without such groundwork, these initiatives are likely to exacerbate fragmentation, marginalize existing efforts, and overwhelm schools' capacity to respond to identified needs.

At this time, priority should be given to building integrated, school-wide systems of support before expanding formal screening mandates. See:

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

>*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Starting the Process*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemchangesteps.pdf>

>*Building on MTSS to Enhance How Schools Address Barriers to Learning*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/BuildMTSS.pdf>

We look forward to anything you want to share.

Best wishes and be well,

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