

Helping School Boards Move Forward in Addressing Barriers to Learning

To: School Board Members Across the Country and others concerned with improving public education

From: the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports

We know there is considerable pressure for schools to do more to meet the pressing, immediate needs related to mental health concerns. We certainly understand the importance of addressing mental health concerns. Such concerns undoubtedly should be a high priority for society, and they require a broad-based societal response.

BUT the heavy media blitz and political focus mainly on student mental health and what schools should do about it has a downside.

In contrast, our Center stresses that it is essential not to ignore the reality that students, parents, and school staff are confronted every day with a significant range of *learning, behavior, and emotional problems*, and the pandemic has increased the numbers related to *all* these concerns. A related reality is that schools cannot and should not be expected to solve all this alone.

At the same time, given that the mission of schools is to educate, it remains the case that schools must and can play a major role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. As a Carnegie task force on education noted: *School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.*

Addressing mental health concerns is part of the challenge, but the larger challenge for schools is to improve the role they play in directly confronting factors negatively affecting students' learning. These factors include a full range of pervasive and complex barriers to learning and teaching. This requires a comprehensive approach that *embeds* mental concerns rather than frames and limits the focus to mental health problems and services.

The need for school board leadership is critical as schools struggle to provide effective student/learning supports. This summer is an essential time for boards to analyze policies with a view to rethinking such supports. School boards can move policy forward to end the fragmentation of current practices and help districts take initial steps toward developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

As a resource for school boards, we recently prepared and circulated a Center report on

>How School Boards Can Pursue New Directions to Help Schools Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/boardrep2022.pdf>

Also see:

Reversing the Fragmentation of Student/Learning Supports: ...

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/summer2022.pdf>

On p. 3 of this brief article you will see that we are planning a national online Summit about all this, **and we are seeking your input to guide planning.**

If you there are ways you think we can be helpful beyond offering this info, we do have many free resources online* – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/> ; and we provide free technical assistance – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>

*Board members have found particularly useful the overviews and in-depth details provided in the following:

> *Improving School Improvement*

> *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

> *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

all three books can be freely accessed at

http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html