

Mental Health in Schools is Not Just about More Services: It is part of a Comprehensive Approach to Student and Learning Supports

As President Biden's current budget proposal for schools underscores, the coming school year will be the year when mental health in schools becomes a major focus.

It certainly is a Hot Topic as we recently noted. See

> *Everyone's Talking About Students' Mental Health:
Schools Need to Avoid Five Potential Pitfalls*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/hottopic.htm>

Unfortunately, the way that Secretary Cardona discussed the education budget with Congress this week suggests that whatever funding increases emerge to enhance student and learning supports, they are likely to go for more of the same rather than a much needed system transformation. For example, with reference to Title IV-A, he stressed that President Biden's budget calls for a \$1 billion investment for a new School-Based Health Professionals program to support students' mental health needs. The funds are intended to "increase the number of counselors, nurses, and mental health professionals in our schools, and building the pipeline for these critical staff, with an emphasis on underserved schools."

Increasing the numbers of such personnel can help, but not if all they do is provide *services* for a few more students.

In a December 2020 discussion, we stressed that it was clear that schools have an important role to play in addressing mental health concerns, but conceptualizing that role mainly as a component of the mental health care delivery system contributes to the marginalization and fragmentation of efforts to address the wide-range of factors interfering with school learning and teaching <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/12-23.pdf>

Current student and learning support staff and any new hires must be asked to begin the task of transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. The aim is to bring all the fragmented and marginalized activity into a unified and cohesive component of school improvement and, over the coming years, develop the component into a comprehensive and equitable system of student and learning supports. See

New Directions for School Counselors, Psychologists, & Social Workers
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/framingnewdir.pdf>

Secretary Cardona told Congress the budget proposal aims at reversing "years of underinvestment in Federal education programs and would begin to address the significant inequities that millions of students – primarily students of color – and teachers confront every day in underserved schools across America."

Unfortunately, current Federal funding streams *unnecessarily* continue to engender piecemeal approaches to the learning, behavior, and emotional problems students manifest at school. (Some work has been done to clarify how funding streams can be integrated – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fundinginteg.pdf> .)

Students have overlapping problems and needs that are not well-served simply by enhancing funding for Title I, Title II, Title IV-A, the Full-Service Community Schools program, and IDEA. While many schools clearly are underfunded, it is also evident that they continue to pursue approaches that are not working well.

Whatever budgetary increases are actually approved, it is likely that many schools still will not have sufficient resources to accomplish what is needed to significantly reduce the achievement and opportunity gaps. The need

is to deploy new funds, redeploy existing funds, and weave in community resources to develop a comprehensive and equitable system of student and learning supports (with wrap around services fully embedded). Schools that have adopted some form of MTSS can build on that model by reframing each level of intervention into an integrated set of subsystems that braid school and community resources at each level. At the same time, we stress the importance of organizing interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that encompass a school's efforts to reengage disconnected students and provide student and learning supports each day in the classroom and schoolwide.

For in-depth discussions for moving forward to transform student and learning supports, see the resources the Center has developed to guide planning, including the following three free books:

- > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
- > *Improving School Improvement*
- > *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

All three of these resources can be accessed at no cost at

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

Also, see the following brief prepared for PACE:

- > *Restructuring California Schools to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching in the COVID 19 Context and Beyond*

<https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/restructuring-california-schools-address-barriers-learning-and-teaching-covid-19>

The content, of course, is applicable to other states

A set of resource aids have been compiled into a *System Change Toolkit* at

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

Please share this information. And as always, we ask that you share with us whatever you think others might find relevant. Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Best wishes, be well,

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