
CALL TO ACTION: *Ensuring that mental health is a high priority as schools reopen*

A reporter asked us recently:

Are you hopeful that the COVID-19 crisis and the campaign against police brutality will prove to be game changers that force innovations such as embedding mental health in school improvement?

Our answer: There will certainly be significant changes! We are cautiously optimistic that the increasing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems will open policy makers up to transforming how schools address student and staff well-being as schools reopen and some students continue online.

However, we know that in the past, school planning to address barriers to learning and teaching has been marginalized. And from the reopening plans we see so far these matters remain eclipsed by the concern about creating safe conditions for students and staff to return to school sites. *While safety from COVID-19 clearly is a priority, an equal priority is mental health.*

Soon after schools reopen, teachers will be referring many students to review teams, and they won't need a screening survey to do so. And, as in the past, such teams will be overwhelmed and unable to process more than a small number of the referrals. Many of those processed will join the escalating number of youngsters diagnosed as ADHD, LD, and clinically depressed. How many have been and will be misdiagnosed is anyone's guess. However, it is highly probable that many are students with commonplace behavior, learning, and emotional problems. Such problems can and should be addressed through other than expensive special education and clinical services that consume resources needed to help prevent and respond immediately after the onset of common problems.

Continuing along this path is untenable.

Rather, schools need to devote their limited time and sparse resources to transforming student/learning supports into a system that better addresses barriers to learning and teaching. Given the current depleted state of school resources, the transformation must be accomplished by rethinking and redeploying how existing resources are used. And schools must take greater advantage of the natural opportunities that occur each day for countering problems and promoting personal and social growth.

We have suggested how the current multi-tiered intervention framework can be expanded into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports (e.g., see the latest free book from the Center: *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html.)

We now call on all stakeholders to ensure that addressing students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems are a high priority as plans for reopening are made. The associations and guilds representing student support staff have a major role to play in this.

We know that the needed systemic changes are not easy to accomplish and require committed planning and implementation. And we know how overwhelmed schools are as they struggle to reopen. But not attending to these matters now, and with a sense of urgency, will further undermine the future of public education.

We are at a societal turning point. It must be a turning point for how schools work with families and communities to address the problems and well-being of children and youth. In particular, schools must transform how they work to prevent and ameliorate the many problems experienced by too many students. There is much work to be done as public schools across the country strive to enhance equity of opportunity by meeting the needs of all students.