

## About the Growing Demand for Mental Health in Schools

During the COVID 19 crisis and the renewed protests about racial injustice, widespread statements have appeared anticipating the growing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems schools will need to address this year. In particular, concern for mental health has grown exponentially.

How schools plan to address these matters remains a controversial matter.

In the past, many well intentioned initiatives and policy reports focused on expanding mental health services in schools. But schools in most locales never had the resources to scale up the type of clinical approach usually advocated. And using the pandemic relief funds and increased reliance on Medicaid reimbursements just to underwrite staffing to provide more clinical services ignores the existing opportunity to transform student/learning supports.

Increasing the numbers of personnel can help, but not if all they do is provide services for a few more students. Also, past history suggests that there inevitably will be a return to tightening budgets and layoffs of staff hired by the temporary funds.

And the promising movement forward in adding social and emotional learning (SEL) to the curriculum is helpful but insufficient (see [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practitioner\(8 4 2021\).pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practitioner(8 4 2021).pdf)).

Our position is that it is 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 (e.g., see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/12 23.pdf>).

The challenge at this time is to escape old ways of thinking about mental health in schools. New directions are needed.

A promising new direction is to ensure mental health concerns are fully embedded in efforts to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. Pursuing such a transformation calls for innovative, big picture thinking about revamping available student and learning supports. The aim of the transformation is to respond effectively in classrooms and schoolwide (and, as appropriate, online) to the overlapping emotional, behavior, and learning problems that interfere with the best teaching practices. The intent is to help all students who are not doing well and enhance equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond.

These matters are discussed in some detail in

- >Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change
- >Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide
- >Improving School Improvement  
(available at this time as free resources  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html) ).

And for information about the research and lessons learned from the National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>