

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

## How to Embed Mental Health in Schools

For those committed to advancing mental health in schools, the question is:

*How should our society's schools address the matter?*

The answers currently being put forward tend to reflect different agenda. For example, community mental health agencies whose primary mission is to address mental health see schools as a venue for enhancing access and meeting the needs of children (and their families). In contrast, school policy makers are quick to point out that education is the mission of schools, and they are hesitant about investing more of their sparse resources in specialized student supports.

This is not to say that schools have ignored mental health and psychosocial concerns (e.g., school adjustment and attendance problems, dropouts, physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, relationship difficulties, emotional upset, delinquency, violence). There is widespread agreement that healthier students learn and perform better. As a result, over the last 60+ years, various ad hoc and piecemeal policies and initiatives have emerged to address such concerns. Unfortunately, the approach that has evolved is fragmented and marginalized and has produced a counterproductive competition for resources among those involved.

***What has evolved isn't able to meet present needs related to the increasing number of students seen as having mental health problems.***

To make improvements essential to schools achieving their mission, we stress that advancing mental health in schools is about much more than adding more personnel, expanding services, creating full-service schools, and generally just doing more of the same things. Rather, a more potent emphasis is to *embed* a full range of mental health concerns into a comprehensive, multifaceted, systemic approach that enables schools to play a significant role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. Such an approach will enable schools to accomplish their mission (e.g., reduce the opportunity and achievement gaps, reduce dropout rates, graduate healthy and productive citizens and workers).

We have detailed the approach in *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>.

>Part I offers a brief reflection on what schools have been and are doing about matters related to mental health.

>Part II emphasizes transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

This includes embedding mental health concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

>Part III organizes classroom and school-wide student/learning supports into six domains of common-purpose interventions.

>Part IV stresses what is involved in transforming student/learning supports, focusing on facilitating sustainable systemic change.

The Center provides a range of free resources (including free distance TA and coaching) to aid schools in moving forward in transformative ways. -- <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

Here are two recent guides:

>*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>

We look forward to the coming school year and our interactions with all those who are striving to help schools play an improved role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families.