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

## **Advocating for Mental Health in Schools: Moving Beyond a Narrow Agenda**

As mental health concerns among students increase, advocacy for school mental health has been on the rise. Recent editorials in the Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry have focused discussions about mental health in schools on:

- >*The Case for Universal Mental Health Screening in Schools*
- >*School Mental Health Services: A Source of Hope, Currently Under Threat*

From the perspective of professionals outside the school system, discussions often center on how much mental health support is needed and how schools offer a unique opportunity to meet that need. These are certainly relevant concerns.

However, from a school perspective, they must be considered within a broader context.

With all the threats to funding, advocacy for mental health in schools must become more attuned to how mental health considerations blend into a school's mission.

***Schools are not in the mental health business.*** Their core mission is to educate all students. To do this effectively, they must address a growing number of students struggling with learning, behavioral, and emotional problems. This reality demands that mental health advocacy be embedded within a larger conversation:

### **How can schools improve their student and learning supports for all students, families, and staff?**

Failing to take this broader view has serious consequences.

## **The Problem with a Narrow Focus**

Advocacy that centers primarily on expanding clinical mental health services in schools risks:

- Overlooking the full spectrum of mental health concerns affecting students, staff, and families
- Ignoring the many other factors interfering with learning and teaching
- Continuing to reach only a limited number of students despite increased services
- Failing to address the daily realities and complexities schools face
- Increasing fragmentation and marginalization of existing supports
- Fueling counterproductive competition for scarce school resources
- Undermining investments in wellness and social-emotional development

Our analyses of school improvement efforts highlight that a narrow mental health agenda can inadvertently hinder the transformation of student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

## **A Broader, Embedded Approach Is Essential**

Our research stresses fully embedding a broad approach to mental health in schools into school improvement policy and practice. Key to doing so involves

- Framing mental health to encompass not only psychopathology but also
  - >the wide range of psychosocial and educational problems schools must address daily
  - >the promotion of healthy development, including positive social and emotional growth
- Ensuring a full continuum of interventions, including
  - >promotion of full development
  - >prevention of learning, behavior, and emotional problems
  - >early response to such problems
  - >aiding treatment of severe and chronic problems
- Organizing domains of student and learning support across each level of the continuum.

## Resources for Action

Our Center provides free access to many resources that provide roadmaps for embedding mental health in schools advocacy into a school's mission. See, for example:

>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>

>*An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports:*

*A Month by Month Guide for Systemic Change with Existing Resources*

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/agendapaper.pdf>

For more, see the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports*

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html> .

Best wishes and be well,

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