

Not Addressing Mental Health Concerns is a Barrier to Learning at School*

When mental-health needs go unrecognized, students are frequently misidentified as defiant, unmotivated, or academically incapable.

(U.S. Department of Education, 2021)

Mental health challenges among students are widespread and significantly affect academic performance, engagement, and overall well-being. In many classrooms, “one or two students are dealing with serious psychosocial stressors relating to poverty, domestic violence, abuse and neglect, trauma, or a psychiatric disorder” (Rappaport & Minahan Learning, 2024).

When these needs go unrecognized, students are often mislabeled as defiant, unmotivated, or incapable of learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). This misidentification not only delays appropriate support but also increases the risk of academic failure and school disengagement.

Schools frequently prioritize short-term behavioral management strategies – such as suspension, expulsion, or referral to alternative programs – over formal evaluation or accommodation. Reports indicate that students with disabilities, particularly those with mental health problems, are suspended or expelled at rates more than twice those of their peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021; Losen & Martinez, 2020).

Teachers and administrators, under pressure to maintain classroom control and meet academic benchmarks, may interpret signs of anxiety, depression, or attention difficulties as deliberate misbehavior. This reactive approach perpetuates inequities and fails to address the root causes of many learning, behavior, and emotional problems. The overemphasis on discipline and control often becomes another barrier to learning and teaching.

Consequences of Reactive Approaches

A reactive school approach results in mobilizing resources only after problems escalate. (Schools have been criticized for having a “waiting for failure” intervention policy.) Such a reactive culture tends to focus on managing symptoms rather than addressing underlying causes.

Without a schoolwide framework and operational infrastructure that unifies efforts to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems, staff are left to make subjective judgments – leading to inconsistent and often inequitable responses. As a result, students fall further behind academically, and school climate suffers.

What Federal Guidance Says

The U.S. Department of Education (2021) has acknowledged these deficiencies and urges schools to integrate social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health supports into their overall improvement plans. Federal recommendations emphasize the need for systemic change – moving away from short-term discipline and toward a more comprehensive intervention approach. Despite this guidance, progress has been slow, and many schools continue to rely on punitive measures rather than preventive strategies.

*The material in this document builds on work done by Meeneh Mirzaian as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2025.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

Schools can play a key role in supporting students' mental health and well-being

When students feel welcomed and connected to their school community, they have improved mental health and academic and behavioral outcomes and are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors.

Students' connection to school is supported when schools:

- >Foster positive relationships
- >Promote social and emotional development
- >Implement restorative practices
- >Provide mental health supports Learning Policy Institute (2025)

Moving Forward:

Key Actions for Schools

To effectively address mental health as a barrier to learning, schools must:

- Adopt a schoolwide framework that integrates mental health into academic and behavioral supports.
- Shift from crisis response to prevention, emphasizing early identification and intervention.
- Build operational infrastructure for collaboration among teachers, counselors, and families.
- Provide professional development to help staff recognize and respond to mental health needs.
- Embed mental health concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports and enhance policy priority for including the system in school improvement plans – ensuring sustainability and equity.

Concluding Comments

Misidentifying the cause of a student's misbehavior rarely is the result of a single oversight; instead, it emerges from broader system actions that prioritize behavioral compliance and use discipline instead of support and guidance. As a result, students with internalizing or externalizing symptoms are often experience disciplinary rather than supportive interventions that address the root causes of their struggles.

Schools must move beyond reactive discipline and isolated interventions to a unified system that supports mental health and addresses mental health problems. By doing so, they can create environments where all students can thrive academically and emotionally.

When schools recognize mental health as a fundamental part of learning, they create environments where students' needs are addressed early, their behaviors are interpreted more accurately, and their opportunities for academic and social success expand. By committing to preventive frameworks, investing in mental-health resources, and building genuine partnerships with families, educational systems can move closer to the goal of ensuring that every student has the chance to learn, engage, and thrive without being misunderstood or left behind.

Only through major systemic changes can schools ensure that students are not defined by their symptoms, and are understood in context and supported through appropriate interventions.

Key References Used in Preparing this Information Resource

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