

Classroom Problems: *What Can I Do Right Away?*
A Learning Supports Practice Series for Teachers*

Students in Distress

As a teacher, what role should I play with respect to students mental health problems, such as depression, suicide risk, post traumatic stress, etc.?

Here are six immediate strategies for teachers to consider:

- (1) Be alert to students in distress, but don't rush to diagnose and label their problems.
- (2) Talk with the students (individually or, as feasible, in small groups) and try to determine if the source of the problems are related to experiences at school. Find out what the students like and dislike about school and why. Encourage full expression of concerns.
- (3) If you haven't the time or feel uncomfortable talking with students about such matters, ask a member of the school's student support staff (e.g., the school's counselor, psychologist, social worker) to come to the class and find natural opportunities to observe, interact, and talk with the students about experiences at school and elsewhere.
- (4) Based on what is learned from and about any student, a decision must be made about whether the noted distress is so *severe* that an immediate conference with the family is needed to discuss the problem and what to do. Ask a member of the school's student support staff to participate and add their expertise at the conference.
- (5) If the problem is not deemed a crisis, work with the student to improve school experiences. For example, plan and implement classroom changes to build on the student's interests and strengths and address needs by minimizing negative experiences and increasing academic, social, and emotional supports and accommodations.
- (6) If the student continues to appear distressed, schedule another problem solving conference with the family to explore what additional student and learning support options are available at school and in the community. Again ask a member of the school's student support staff to participate.

Three General Matters for Schools to Consider in Helping Teachers Address Students in Distress

Bringing Support into the Classroom. Identification of students who are troubled and troubling occurs each day at schools. Given that most teachers and student

support staff are painfully aware of such students, it seems ironic that there is a push for schools to formally screen mental health concerns such as depression and suicide. The big problem for schools is not identification of students in need; the first problem is effectively providing these students with added supports in the classroom. Schools need to revamp student and learning supports so that student support staff are teamed with teachers and are available to do some of their work directly in classrooms to assist teachers in strengthening the support for students of concern. As described above, this will help in deciding the nature and scope of the problem and what to do immediately.

Connecting with out-of-classroom and community supports. After enhancing student and learning supports in the classroom, the school's must be prepared to connect students who need more help to schoolwide, district, and community student and learning supports. With this in mind, see *Rebuilding for Learning: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching and Re-engaging Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/rebuild/RebuidlingV11RD28.pdf>

Enhancing Professional Development. Currently, the focus of most school improvement and thus professional development for teachers and other school professionals tends to marginalize efforts to enhance understanding and action related to addressing the many barriers to student learning. This is especially a problem in schools in economically downtrodden neighborhoods where many students experience a high and constant level of traumatic stress. A good place to start identifying relevant staff development resources is our Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm> . Each covers a great many topics related to students' emotional, behavioral, and learning problems.

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Often the best way to learn is by addressing a specific concern that needs an immediate response.

With this in mind, the Center is producing a series of resources focused on daily classroom dilemmas teachers experience and some initial ways to deal with such concerns. The emphasis is on engaging and re-engaging students in classroom learning.

As a school moves to develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports, this series can help augment professional development by providing a stimulus for discussion by teachers and other staff.

What can I do right away?

To date, this learning supports practice series for teachers includes the following topics:

- >*Bullying* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/bullypn.pdf>
- >*Disengaged Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/disengpn.pdf>
- >*Fidgety Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fidgetypn.pdf>
- >*Homework Avoidance* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/homeworkpn.pdf>
- >*Students in Distress* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/distresspn.pdf>
- >*Minimizing Referrals out of the Classroom* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/referralspn.pdf>
- >*Addressing Neighborhood Problems that Affect the School* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/neighpn.pdf>

See the complete series and other resources for professional development at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>
(Click on Resources/Publications)

**Feel free to email similar concerns to the Center for discussion as part of
our weekly community of practice listserv. See**
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhpractitioner/practitioner.pdf>

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