SPECIAL ENEWS

From: Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA

Re: Lessons Learned so far (11/22/05) — Disaster Aftermath

As you know, we requested and have been receiving feedback about lessons learned for schools from the recent disasters aftermath response.

So far, the following seems to sum up the big points:

(1) As always, there was an outpouring of talent and resources who expressed a desire to help.

(2) From the various accounts, a significant proportion of those ready to volunteer assistance did actually attempt to help initially. However, in many cases, the mechanisms for linking resources to where they were needed often wasn't in place.

(3) The focus seems to have been mainly on using sparse resources to provide clinical services (e.g., triage and counseling) to individual students in need, but the numbers in need far outweighed the available clinical services.

(4) In some, but not enough situations, school districts and specific schools did move quickly to develop systemic plans and implement broad-band programs to address the needs of the many. These places seemed to the leadership and line staff with the breadth of understanding about how to go beyond immediate crisis response to address the multifaceted and ongoing needs of students, families, and staff.

(5) Those schools where crisis response training had been done effectively in recent years apparently were able to respond better than those without such training. A few districts and schools did the type of systemic planning and responding necessary to effectively (a) address the transition needs of many students, families, and staff who had to move into new schools (often in new states) and (b) deal with the longer-term psychological and social aftermath effects that continue to interfere with students learning and teachers teaching.

(6) In all cases, a major burden fell on a relatively few people, and they continue over the longer term to bear the responsibility and often overwhelming stress. Their plight underscores the need for systemic changes that enhance how school and community resources are woven together to broaden the base of support and provide support for those bearing the brunt of helping others.

(7) In some places the response was particularly bad. One volunteer reported feeling that: "The bottom line [was] ... NO ONE was prepared, not one agency!" Another emphasized there was no effective coordination. The situation was described in the feedback as the "disaster within the disaster."

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The policy and practice question at this point is:

What changes will be made given what has been learned?

Hopefully, it will not be limited to enhancing crisis response. Those districts and schools that responded well understood and often had been working on evolving a broad systemic approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. They had the mechanisms in place not only for immediate crisis response, but for implementing plans to provide for a wide range of student, family, and staff needs.

Our ongoing analyses of how schools address barriers to learning and teaching suggest that crisis response is but one of six areas that schools must build into school improvement plans. All available data have indicated that major systemic changes are urgently needed. The recent

disasters simply underscore that urgency.

As with all crisis response, the danger is that school decision makers will apply the "band aids" and ignore the need to substantively address the major systemic changes that are long overdue. In the coming months, it will be essential to remind policy makers and education leadership about the need for a much more systemic and programmatic approach to addressing barriers to student learning (e.g., a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approach that is fully integrated into school improvement planning and implementation).

This will require a strategic and unified approach. Otherwise, we can expect the usual counter-productive competition for sparse resources.

We recommend the following three reports from the Center as resources for highlighting the urgency for schools to proceed with the type of major systemic changes that are essential. (The following documents can be downloaded at no cost from our website. We will send you free hardcopies if you need them.)

One report is entitled: "Another Initiative? Where Does it Fit? A Unifying Framework and an Integrated Infrastructure for Schools to Address Barriers to Learning and Promote Healthy Development" http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infrastructure/anotherinitiative-exec.pdf -- This report was developed to highlight the current state of affairs and illustrate the value of a unifying framework and integrated infrastructure for the many initiatives, projects, programs, and services schools pursue in addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development. Specifically, it highlights how initiatives can be embedded into a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive framework and outlines how existing infrastructure mechanisms can be integrated to address marginalization, fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and wasteful redundancy.

A second report is entitled: "School Improvement Planning: What's Missing?" which is accessible at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/whatsmissing.htm . This report analyzes current school improvement planning guides (including the guides for the New York City and Boston schools). The lens used is how well the guides focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

A third is entitled: "Addressing What's Missing in School Improvement Planning: Expanding Standards and Accountability to Encompass an Enabling or Learning Supports Component." This document can be accessed online at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enabling/standards.pdf .

The Center has online (at no cost) many tools (including an example of a formal proposal) as aids to help schools move in new directions for student support – see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm

We continue to be concerned and want to support the ongoing efforts of schools as they continue to cope. The aftermath of the disasters is far from over, and indeed, matters such as the housing problem will continue to exacerbate the state of affairs.

Please let us know what you think we can do to help – contact: ltaylor@ucla.edu We will certainly continue to communicate what we learn about available resources, etc., and we encourage you to use the resources and links on the Center's website http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/

And, don't forget the urgent need to play a role in shaping the policy changes that are being discussed across the country in the wake of the disasters.