

Responses to the Center's 1/12 message: About the Student Mental Health Crisis

We continue to be concerned that advocacy just for more and more student support professionals tends to work against efforts to rethink how schools use the student/learning supports they have. (See the Center's recent discussion – *Rethinking Student/Learning Supports* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/news.htm>).

So recently we began asking: *What do you recommend beyond hiring more personnel?*

Here are some initial responses we received:

>From Superintendents

1. "In the absence of mental health professionals (Social workers and school psychologists) I would advocate for more social worker "coaches". Because we cannot meet the demand, social workers can work with teachers, much like academic coaches work around curriculum. I believe this could help support the entire classroom as more and more students are coming to us with some degree of mental health concerns."

2. "To you question about hiring more "school counselors" (aka guidance counselors), I agree that counselors are just one aspect of student supports. Our district actually did not re-hire our school counselor position after a resignation, but instead hired a mental health counselor."

>From a Principal

"Thank you for asking this important question. As an Elementary School Principal, I have 2 suggestions. First we need to train teachers to grow their understanding of the role they can play in supporting students' mental health. There are so many small changes that can really make a difference for kids and a broad understanding about trauma and how it affects learning will affect how we interact with our students and each other. Also, we need to look upstream and support the families of our youngest citizens. Families with children ages 0 - 4 have so few resources in their new role as parents. There are medical routines for vaccinations and check ups but too few parenting supports. Our society would do well to support this group and the effects of stronger support for this group would result in fewer needs in the schools. Now more than ever, they need our help."

>From a state school counselor association director of advocacy

"A huge step forward would be to allow school counselors to actually implement their programs and eliminate (or at least decrease) the non-school counseling related work they are tasked to do which then takes them from directly serving students. Why is it that the math teacher is allowed to teach/implement their program but school counselors are not? Would an administrator ask a math/science/history/LA teacher to not implement their program material in order to count test papers, or type reports, or arrange meeting times and facilities, do supervisory duties? Research has shown that students benefit from fully implemented school counseling programs in myriad ways. When numbers of school counselors are short, it becomes even more important for school counselors to be focusing on the direct and indirect services they provide to students! Thank you so much for your help and advocacy!"

>From a district pupil services director

I read your memo when it comes out and felt compelled to reach out. I appreciate the data and the straightforward questions that you bring up, specifically when the answer to the question always seems to just add more money to try and hit a moving target.

Currently I am a pupil services director in a school district of 2000 students in rural WI. Even if we had the funds to bring our counseling ratios down to where they can have an impact, we don't have qualified candidates applying to our district. We are about 35 minutes north of a city that has more to offer in the way of jobs, salary and quality of life.

We have turned to trying to build the capacity of teachers on the front line regarding understanding of trauma, poverty, equity and youth mental health. This has had some impact, however, the climate in WI is that teachers can go where they can make more money, so maintaining a stable work force has made this strategy more difficult as well. Also, unfortunately, new teachers coming out of college aren't always aware that coming into the profession is no longer just about academics, which in turn leaves them burned out sooner and leaving.

In rural areas, it was once thought that we don't have the same issues as the urban centers...drugs, poverty, trauma etc. Unfortunately that is no longer the case, and as a double "whammy", we are left with sparse resources to deal with what the students are bringing to us each and every day.

I know that this doesn't directly answer the question posed regarding what I would recommend instead of just hiring more people, but I hope it gives some insight of where we might want to do further research. What else can we do that will have positive impacts on the mental wellbeing of our students other than just hiring more people. Even when we are able to hire, in WI due to the passing of Act 10 in 2011 which eliminated collective bargaining, we have fewer to choose from in both general ed, special ed and pupil services because fewer are going into the profession. Early research is also showing that this has had a negative impact on our students by way of increased teacher mobility impacting student achievement.

Thanks for the opportunity to share thoughts on this very important topic from a real time perspective."

>From a district Director of Social-Emotional Learning & Mental Health

"First of all, I'd like to express my profound gratitude for the enduring work you and Howard have done to move our profession forward! I'm a longtime listener (to your newsletter) and a first-time caller (with this message).

We're doing the best we can with time, energy, and resources we have, while we continue to advocate for sustainable solutions that support all students, staff, and families. Still, in the last two years we've added 10 school counselors, 13 school social workers, and 4 school psychologists.

When more FTE is not an option, here are some of strategies we use to make our School Counselor ratios FEEL smaller with more targeted, effective use of our current time, energy, and resources:

Current Ratio: 1:328 (with our secondary schools that have greater Tier2/3 needs closer to 1:275)

Contracted Clinicians: We have recruited clinicians in our community to provide "no-cost" individual counseling to students. We remove as many barriers to care as possible, reimburse close to market rates, and pay a "no show" fee of \$75 if students are unable to provide 24-hour notice for missed appointments.

Community Partnerships: We have expanded our School-Based Mental Health Partnerships and are piloting an "EAP Model" where we pay for the first 8 sessions and then transition most students to Medicaid or Private Insurance reimbursement. We do not allow the ability to pay to be a barrier and continue to cover costs beyond 8 sessions for students who are actively engaged in counseling.

Enhanced Mentoring: Approx. 30% of our SC's are on "Emergency" or "Restricted" licenses and some are enrolled in sub-standard graduate programs. We have contracted with retired school counselors to provide additional mentorship and coaching for counselors who are early career or struggling to meet basic expectations for the position. They are paid an hourly rate commensurate with the "Step" and "Range" of their final year as a school counselor, e.g. \$57/hr.

Know Better, Do Better: We have expanded our University Partnerships to learn and implement more EBP's. For example, we recently partnered with the University of Washington SMART Center to train and support 30 of our secondary counselors and social workers to use the Brief Intervention for School Clinicians (BRISC). We will train 30 more next year.

Employee Wellness as an Essential Driver of Equitable Student Outcomes: We are working hard to more deeply and authentically care for each other and ourselves with enhanced employee wellness resources and policies driven by robust data sets for Staff Well-Being and Sense of Belonging. SC's lead this work in many schools and/or at the district level. <https://salkeiz.k12.or.us/employee-wellness/> We have a contract with Bright Morning Consulting to facilitate workshops and book studies of Elena Aguilar's book, "Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators". With a grant from a community partner, we were able to purchase 2k copies of the book and the accompanying workbook for any staff member interested in the workshops, book studies, or ad hoc book clubs.

Mindset: "Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can." ~ Arthur Ashe

None of these strategies are perceived as an alternative to increasing FTE and decreasing ratios; rather, they are intended to enhance the work we're already doing to achieve equitable student outcomes and spotlight innovation and promising practices. In my experience, people generally want more of a good thing, not less...especially when the data and the storytelling connected to the data is clear. We are preparing for potential reductions once ESSER funds sunset, but I have confidence that our counselor, social worker, and psychologist ratios will be stable. Student voice around issues related to mental health has been a powerful lever for the changing beliefs, mindsets, behaviors, and priorities of our district leadership team

If you and your team are open to partnerships with other districts for research and learning purposes, please let me know! We've got 121 awesome school counselors, 25 amazing school social workers, 15 outstanding school psychologists, and 180 inspired leaders (all of whom attended a live in-person keynote from Jeff Andrade-Duncan yesterday) who are anxious to learn."

>From a school psychologist/school consultant

"The plea for more well trained counselors, social workers and school psychologists must remain a goal for education. And it is critical that we use data to measure their impact. They continue to be marginalized and not integrated into annual yearly progress. Teaching social skills has been shown to be more effective when it is not left to chance. Family involvement and supports also must be part of the prevention/intervention staffing. Keep up the good work you provide."

>From a County Office of Education Special Education provider

"Host small group counseling sessions with groups that already exist such as the soccer team or a club. Free lunch with interns from local colleges. A listening ear goes a long way. Request instructional aides to create notes of encouragement for students. Sometimes a note of appreciation, recognition or encouragement goes further than we realize."

>From others

"I would like to emphasize that we do need a minimum of at least one counselor or a part-time counselor in every elementary school. Unfortunately, school counselors are not hired and placed in every public elementary school in the USA."