Time for Straight Talk about Mental Health Services and MH in Schools

When you hear the term Mental Health in Schools or School Mental Health, what comes to mind?

Probably you think about students who have psychological problems, about what services they need, and how schools don't provide enough of such services. This is not surprising given the widespread tendency for the term mental health to be thought of as referring to mental disorders (illness) and for relevant interventions to be seen as services (e.g., counseling/therapy).

As a result, many well-intentioned initiatives and policy reports limit discussion to expanding mental health services in schools. This is especially the case as a result of the increased concern about the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This trend is having unfortunate consequences.

Bluntly stated, advocacy for more mental health services in schools often detracts from efforts to address the full range of mental health concerns confronting school staff, students, and their families. Providing clinical services continues to be too narrow a focus for meeting the nature and scope of student-related problems manifested at schools each day. And it often undercuts the importance of enhancing wellness (e.g., promoting social emotional learning and development).

Our analyses of school improvement policies and practices stress that a narrow agenda for MH in schools works against enhancing every student's civil right to equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond. Our research stresses the following matters as key to advancing a broad approach to mental health in schools that is fully embedded in school improvement efforts.

> •The concept of mental health needs to be framed broadly so that it encompasses not only psychopathology but also
> (a) addresses the wide range of psychosocial and educational problems schools are confronted with on a regular basis and
> (b) encompasses promoting healthy development (i.e., positive social and emotional development).
> •In this context, schools have a role to play in ensuring there is a full continuum of interventions designed to
> (a) promote positive mental health,
> (b) prevent learning, behavior, and emotional problems,
> (c) intervene as early as feasible when such problems arise, and
> (d) help in the treatment of severe and chronic problems.

Those concerned with enhancing the role of mental health in schools must guide policy makers to a clear understanding of

- the many factors interfering with learning and teaching
- the large number of students who are experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- the fragmented and marginalized state of affairs related to the limited set of services, programs, and initiatives currently
  provided as student/learning supports
- the small proportion of students currently reached
- the counterproductive competition for sparse resources
- the importance of promoting positive mental health
- the importance of developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports

Given all this, it is time to focus on transforming student/learning supports. Doing so is fundamental to improving intervention effectiveness in ways that enhance equity of opportunity, reduce the achievement gap, promote whole child development, and engender a positive school climate. Moving forward requires ending the marginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and then framing and operationalizing them as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that weaves together school and community resources.

By embedding a broad definition of mental health in schools into a transformed system of student/learning supports, policy makers can

- avoid the unrealistic and often inappropriate call for more and more one-on-one direct services
- counter the mistaken view that collocating community services on school campuses can ever be a sufficient approach to filling critical intervention gaps at schools and for enhancing community and home engagement
- better address classroom, school-wide, and community interventions that can reduce the need for one-on-one services
- facilitate the weaving together of school, home, and community resources to gain economic benefits and enhance outcomes
- enhance coordination and cohesion of all resources (school, community, family) intended to support young people's well-being and reduce the opportunity and achievement gaps.

The bottom line in terms of equitable policy is that we cannot continue to provide a small number of sites with a few more health and social services to establish a few islands of excellence (demonstrations, pilots) and "Cadillac models." And we cannot use temporary funds just to make temporary improvements.

The pressing nature and scope of need demands moving quickly in fundamentally new directions. With over 90,000 public schools in the U.S.A. and so many students who are not doing well, it is time to embed mental health in schools into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. This will enhance the fit of mental health concerns with the mission of schools and contribute in a powerful way to school efforts

to play a role in fully promoting social-emotional learning and comprehensively addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

For further elaboration of these points, see

>Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2020). *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

>*Restructuring California Schools to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching in the COVID 19 Context and Beyond*. A PACE policy brief. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/restructuring-california-schools-address-barriers-learning-and-teaching-covid-19

>Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2012). Mental Health in Schools: Moving in New Directions. *Contemporary School Psycholo*gy. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contschpsych.pdf

>Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2017). Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

>Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2018). Improving School Improvement. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

>Adelman, H.S., Taylor, L., Mayer, M.J., & Dwyer, K.P. (2019). Intersection of School Safety, Mental Health and Wellness, and

>Family/Community Issues. In D. Osher, M. Mayer, R. Jagers, K. Kendziora, & L. Wood (Eds). *Keeping Students Safe and Helping Them Thrive*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

and the resources cited as part of the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html .

Please share this information with those who may find it helpful.

And if you have any questions or want to share something you think others might find relevant, send them to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Finally, for those moving forward to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports, we offer free distance coaching and technical assistance http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf