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School-Based Mental Health Services Promote Academic Success

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There is good news for students and schools. Mental health has emerged from decades in the shadows to be recognized as central to children's learning and development. In recent years, we've seen significant improvement in understanding how mental health shapes academic outcomes, behavior, and the school environment.

Mental health exists on a continuum that ranges from mental wellness to serious psychiatric disorders. Along that continuum, children develop the capacity to cope with challenges, control their behavior, solve problems, and maintain healthy relationships.

However, according to a 1999 report by the Surgeon General, one in five children and adolescents suffer from a mental health problem serious enough to warrant treatment. Based on 2007 enrollment data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, that's more than 110 million students.

Barely a third of them receive help but the vast majority come to school, bringing such barriers to achievement as anxiety, stress, poor concentration, peer and family problems, substance abuse, depression, and suicide risk.

These problems manifest themselves in the issues schools struggle with most: behavior and discipline problems, bullying, a poor school climate, disengagement, absenteeism, academic failure, violence, and crisis prevention and intervention.

Efforts to address inadequacies in the children's mental health system have coincided with growing evidence of the effectiveness of school-based services. Major studies, such as the 2002 President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, recommend taking a public health approach to mental health—with a strong focus on prevention, wellness promotion, and universal access—and providing services in schools.

Here is the truly good news: We know how to promote children's mental health effectively—and appropriately—within the school context. Districts around the country employ school psychologists, counselors, and social workers who provide services that support student health and improve school outcomes.

In addition to prevention and wellness promotion, school-based professionals provide assessment, counseling, intervention, consultation, and referral.

A longitudinal study reported in the *Journal of School Health* in 2005 showed that programs that strengthen students' social, emotional, and decision-making skills also have a positive impact on their academic achievement, both in terms of higher standardized test scores and better grades.

School-based services are also a good investment over the long term. One such program, the Seattle Social Development Project (focused on grades 1-6), has estimated a \$9,837 per-student savings in averted long-term social problems.

How services are structured differ from district to district, depending on the student population and available resources. But there are a few key principles that underlie all effective school-based mental health services.

School mental health services should be provided as part of a continuum of care that integrates school and community resources. Well-coordinated student support services can be effectively structured according to a three-tiered pyramid model:

- The bottom tier consists of prevention and wellness promotion programs for all students, provided by school employed mental health staff (school psychologists, counselors, and social workers), such as anti-bullying programs, social skills development, improving school attendance, depression screening, and positive behavioral supports.
- The middle tier includes targeted services to at-risk students, such as individual or group counseling and behavioral interventions, provided by school staff and sometimes supported by community specialists.
- At the top tier are intensive services to individual students suffering from serious emotional and behavioral problems, including chronic mental illness. Services are provided primarily by specialists and supported by school staff.

Effective services promote the mission and purpose of schools. They support the curriculum and learning and should enhance student behavior and the school environment. They should help identify barriers to learning; relate to classroom dynamics and the capacities of teachers; and inform interventions, instruction, accommodations, and progress monitoring.

School-based services should be provided by professionals with training in the school context, as well as mental health.

School-employed mental health staff have training in learning and development, school-based consultation, and relevant school laws, such as No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This includes reporting requirements and privacy and disclosure laws. School mental health teams must be grounded in this knowledge. Services that are simply overlaid on schools will not necessarily promote improved student outcomes.

Services should engage and meet the needs of families, as well as students and must be genuinely accessible to all families. Providers must respond sensitively to potential barriers for families and students from diverse backgrounds, such as cultural misunderstanding, communication difficulties, mistrust, and the stigma of mental illness.

Opponents of school mental health initiatives argue that mental health services fall outside the mandate of public education. Just the opposite is true. Schools form the essential construct of society's commitment to help children become productive citizens.

Supporting the whole child, including their mental health, is paramount to that commitment. Many education groups, including NSBA, have signed on to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's "Whole Child" initiative, which calls for "educators, communities, and policymakers to work together to fulfill the new compact for the education of the whole child."

By addressing children where they spend most of their days—in school—mental health providers can address problems before they become chronic or critical, significantly improving students' chances for success in school and life. That is good news for everyone.

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