

(5/6/26) **This continuing education resource is from the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA**

## Featured

**(1) Technology – an important tool for schools, but . . .**

**(2) At issue: AI being used for student mental health**

**(3) A colleague comments on concerns about online therapy**

And, as always, you will find

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**This community of practice *Practitioner* is designed for a screen bigger than an iPhone.**

### **For discussion and interchange:**

**>Technology – an important tool for schools, but . . .**

The excerpt from the following article explores a number of concerns. As you read, we ask you to consider what's critically missing in this discussion of technology.

From: *As Classrooms Go Digital, Are Educators Ready?*

"Today, about 80 percent of K–12 students use computers or tablets at school—up from about 50 percent before the pandemic. Even as parents worry about too much "screen time," schools are ramping it up.

At RAND, we recently surveyed more than 8,000 K–12 teachers about their use of digital instructional materials. Their responses show just how deeply technology has become woven into classroom life—and how uncertain educators remain about its impact on learning.

Schools have gone all-in on digital learning, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. But without clear guidelines on how much screen time is too much, or how technology is used most effectively, schools risk undermining student engagement and learning rather than improving it.

One in three teachers reported that they are required by their district or school to use mostly or entirely digital instructional materials. High school teachers (50 percent) and science teachers (46 percent) are especially likely to report such requirements.

In primary schools, about 10 percent of elementary teachers said their students spend no class time at all on digital activities. These findings reveal a wide range of practices and a lack of consensus about best practices....

The question raised isn't whether technology belongs in schools at all. Rather, it focuses on how schools can best incorporate it into the classroom. Right now, teachers and students alike are receiving mixed messages about what is most effective and appropriate.

Many education leaders see digital tools as a way to modernize instruction. The National Education Association has argued, for instance, that technology can expand learning opportunities and improve instructional quality. It can help teachers tailor lessons to individual needs, engage students through interactive content, and support English learners in building language skills....

Technology can enhance learning, but it has to be thoughtfully integrated into instruction. When screens replace meaningful interaction or hands-on learning, that can hinder engagement and deepen inequities.

School is an environment where students can learn how to effectively use the digital technologies that they are exposed to every day. Teachers can model how students should properly use technology....

So, what can schools do to make digital learning work for students as opposed to getting in the way of their learning?

- >Play to technology's strengths. Choose digital activities that are engaging, personalized, and provide extra practice. Technology should supplement—not substitute—human interaction and creativity.
- >Vary the format and mode of instruction. Try a mix of small-group and whole-class activities. Combine digital and physical materials. Not all digital lessons need to be solo activities.
- >Have adults engage with students while students use screens. Teachers and parents can play an active role by monitoring how students interact with technology and guiding them toward productive use.
- >Select high-quality digital materials. Decisionmakers should apply the same rigor they use when selecting textbooks—checking whether materials are standards-aligned and support diverse learners.
- >Minimize digital distractions. Districts can use site blockers or other tools to keep students focused on learning rather than unrelated online content.
- >Train teachers. Professional development should help educators use technology effectively for their specific student populations.

Students today must learn to navigate technology-rich environments, but they also need guidance on how to use digital tools responsibly and effectively. The goal isn't to roll back technology in schools—it's to make it work better for learning. As educators experiment and refine their approaches, they can develop best practices that ensure digital learning fulfills its promise rather than amplifies its problems.”

## Center Comments

While the article raises important points about teacher readiness for technology as an instructional aid, it reflects a common failure in such discussions by largely overlooking the realities of today's classrooms. Teachers are not simply implementing technology for student who are motivationally ready and able to learn. They are working with increasingly diverse groups of students, many of whom are experiencing significant learning, behavioral, and emotional problems that interfere with engagement and instruction. Under these conditions, teacher technological readiness must include preparation to integrate technology systematically into classroom and schoolwide approaches that address barriers to learning and teaching. In short, preparing teachers to use technology requires attention to the complex conditions under which teaching actually occurs and the supports needed to ensure equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond.

For more on this, see our Center resources

[\*>Technology as an Intervention Tool\*](#)

[\*>Artificial Intelligence and Improving Student Supports\*](#)



## For discussion and interchange:

### >At issue: AI being used for student mental health

*What if the first place a struggling student turns for help at school isn't to a counselor, a teacher, or a trusted peer – but an algorithm?*

From: *With Teens Comfortable Confiding in AI, Should Schools Embrace it for MH Care?*

“.. AI is a major component of the administration’s national education agenda. Yet, some parents, educators and, increasingly, lawmakers, are wary of increasing teens’ time in front of screens. States have also started restricting the use of AI in telehealth....

For students who’ve grown up encountering chat interfaces through social media and websites, AI interfaces can feel familiar. And kids today find that it’s easier to text than call someone on the phone....

Using AI to work through emotions also allows students to avoid watching facial expressions, which they may worry will carry judgment.... Also, chatbots are available at times when a human might not be, without the hassle of having to make an appointment....

While large language models can be trained to notice symptoms in text, they cannot see or hear what a human clinician can when interacting with a student, the inflections of the voice and the movements of the body, nor can it reliably catch subtle observations or behaviors....

While AI can speed up the diagnostic process or free up time for school counselors, it’s crucial not to overly rely on it for mental health.... The technology can miss some of the nuances that a human counselor would catch, and it can give students unrealistic positive reinforcement. Schools need to adopt a holistic approach that includes families and caregivers....

The Young People’s Alliance released a framework for regulating AI that allows for some therapeutic uses of the technology. But in general, the organization is striving to rebuild the human community and is set against use of AI when it threatens to replace human companionship...

What advocates want to prevent is these bots fueling the loss of social skills because they pull people away from relationships with other people, where they have social accountability....”

From: *Teens Are Using Chatbots as Therapists. That's Alarming*

“On any given night, countless teenagers confide in artificial intelligence chatbots—sharing their loneliness, anxiety, and despair with a digital companion who is always there and never judgmental.

A survey by Common Sense Media published in July found that 72 percent (PDF) of American teenagers said they had used A.I. chatbots as companions. Nearly one-eighth had sought “emotional or mental health support” from them, a share that, if scaled to the U.S. population, would equal 5.2 million adolescents. In another recent study by Stanford researchers, almost a quarter of student users of Replika, an A.I. chatbot designed for companionship, reported turning to it for mental health support....

Marketed as conversational agents, chatbots are becoming de facto digital therapists for many teenagers, for whom this technology now feels native. This raises the stakes for ensuring these tools are safe and governed by enforceable standards. Nearly half of young Americans ages 18 to 25 with mental health needs received no treatment last year—a gap that makes the appeal of 24/7, judgment-free companionship even stronger.

Used responsibly, A.I. chatbots could offer scalable, affordable support and crisis outreach, especially in communities lacking mental health infrastructure. But such uses require rigorous scientific evaluation and regulatory guardrails....

The teenage brain is still developing—particularly in regions governing impulse control, emotional regulation, and risk assessment—making young people more susceptible to influence and less equipped to judge the accuracy or safety of advice. This is one reason teenagers’ attention and emotions can be so easily hijacked by social media platforms.

While clinical trials evaluating chatbots’ impact on teen mental health are essential, they are not enough. We also need clear safety benchmarks that can stress-test these systems and reveal gaps missed even in well-designed trials...

>First, we need large-scale, teenager-focused clinical trials that evaluate A.I. chatbots both as stand-alone supports and as adjuncts to human therapists...

- >Second, we need clear benchmarks for what safe, effective chatbot responses look like in mental health crisis scenarios, especially for teenage users....
  - >Finally, A.I. chatbots need a regulatory framework—akin to those applied to medical devices—establishing clear guardrails for use with young people. This should include age-appropriate safety standards, strict privacy protections for sensitive conversations, transparency requirements that make risks clear in age-appropriate language and measures that hold tech companies accountable when harm occurs...
- Laws tailored to this reality should avoid outright bans, instead ensuring that when teenagers turn to chatbots for mental health support, the systems are safe....”

For more on this, see

*>About Online Mental Health Assistance for Students:  
Discussing the Pros and Cons from a School Perspective*

### For discussion and interchange:

#### >A colleague comments on concerns about online therapy

In 2024, we were amazed at how rapidly schools were signing up to pay for online therapy for their students. According to an analysis at that time by the Associated Press at least 16 of the 20 largest U.S. public school districts were offering online therapy sessions to reach students. In those districts alone, schools had signed provider contracts worth more than \$70 million.

So we asked several colleagues: Do you have

- Any concerns about consent issues for young students?
- Any concerns about the quality of services provided?
- Any concerns about the impact on district/school student services staff?
- Anything else you think about this fast growing field of online counseling?

We immediately received the following comments from a distinguished colleague (a university professor) who has a long history related to mental health and schools.

“The first thing to note is that it is overall very positive that schools are taking these mental health issues seriously. Of course, as always, the details matter but given the sorry state of youth mental health services in our country it is overall positive that there are efforts to get students the support they need. Sadly, schools may have learned not to rely on community-based services given the dearth of providers and overall mixed quality. I’ll take a stab at responding to your probes.

**Any concerns about consent issues for children?** I would assume that parents would need to consent for services for children under the age of consent which of course differs by state <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/age-of-consent-for-mental-health-treatment-by-state>

If over the age of consent, then student consent would not be required. But even with parental consent I would expect that the schools arrange for child assent.

**Any concerns about the quality of services provided?** Yes of course this is a major concern with all types of mental health services and online services especially as they are often less well scrutinized. The primary concern would be the type and quality of the service (e.g., self-administered, group sessions, face-to-face) and the degree of quality monitoring. As you know, in many (if not most) cases, school counselors are answerable to principals who have little or no ability to judge the quality of services. Online is probably even less scrutinized. That said, the literature suggests that these services can be as effective as in-person and it is just now becoming clear what some of those criteria are that contribute to positive outcomes.

Here are links to a couple of articles that could be helpful.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1357633X211047285>

<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-54232-001>

**Any concerns about the impact on district/school student services staff?** My main concern with school based mental health overall is that it ignores the school context and the importance of relationships that bind kids to school. Also, depending on the type of concern, these services will not contribute to helping teachers know how to support their students. This is especially true for disruptive behavior which simply cannot be outsourced to therapy without also addressing classroom issues. But even with anxiety and depression it is important that teachers know how best to support these students. I doubt that online services address these issues.

**Anything else you think about this fast growing field of online counseling?** Two other issues that comes to mind are the role of parents and the need to establish confidentiality of notes and the degree to which youth have a safe and secure place to receive services. The degree to which parents should be involved in services is correlated with age of student age. But even parents of high school kids often benefit from learning how best to support their child. Regarding confidentiality, these services should be monitored as I note above but it should also be clear that youth have a say in who and how these issues are reported to the school. These are standard issues with clinic-based services but may be less clear when school districts contract with an online provider. Also where students access services is important. Many students will not have full access to computers and therefore maybe using school computers or a centralized family computer. Of if they are accessing by cell phone, are they provided a confidential and safe setting either at home or school?

**>Links to a few other relevant shared resources**

**>>Need Satisfaction in Structured and Unstructured Out-of-School-Time: A Positive Youth Development Approach**

**>>A Sense of Security and Cohesion: Exploring Social Support and Mental Health in Adolescence**

**>>School Threat Assessment Team Recommendations: Surveillance Vs. Social Support**

**>>Determinants of life satisfaction among teenagers in the United States**

**>>A Systematic Review of Family Engagement Practices Across State Educ. Agencies**

**>>An Evaluation of the Many Ways of Being Program**

**>>How American Schools Can Address Political Polarization**

**A Few Upcoming Webinars**

**For links to the following and for more webinars, go to the Center's Links to Upcoming/Archived Webcasts/Podcasts**

**<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>**

5/6 Building resilient students

5/6 Designing Instruction That Works: Targeted Scaffolds for Multilingual Learners

5/7 Support to military connected students

5/14 Engaging Readers, Strengthening Partnerships, and Building Community

5/18 Understanding school avoidance

5/20 Teaching with Precision: Using Microlearning to Move Students Toward Success

5/26 Understanding eating disorders

6/17 Strong Teacher-Student Relationships

6/17 Providing Tier 1 Classroom & Behavior Management Feedback

***How Learning Happens*** (Edutopia's series of videos explores guiding all students, regardless of their developmental starting points, to become engaged learners).

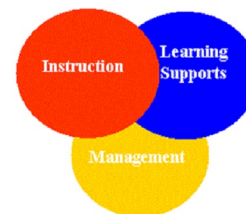
***Unpacking the Impacts of Structural Racism on Youth*** (Webinar recording)

## The Case for Systemic Redesign of Student/Learning Supports

Fundamental, systemic redesign is urgently needed for how schools address factors interfering with learning and teaching. Immediate action is essential to move beyond crisis driven responses toward a cohesive, proactive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

For guidance and resources on how to pursue this transformation, see the  
>[\*National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports\*](#).

***Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights; transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to promoting whole child development, advancing social justice, and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.***



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### To Listserv Participants

We hope you will share this resource with others who may find it helpful.

And let us know what's going on to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 140,000 on our listserv.)

***THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!***

**Send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

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For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

>Looking for information? (We usually can help.)

>Have a suggestion for improving our efforts? (We welcome your feedback.)

**We look forward to hearing from you! Contact: [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

**THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF THE PRACTITIONER**

*Who Are We?* Our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and now is named the  
*Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports.*