

School Improvement Implications of the President’s Plan for Making Schools Safer and Increasing Access to Mental Health

With respect to schools, the President’s plan to “Protect our Children and our Communities by Reducing Gun Violence” includes a section on *making schools safer* and a section on *increasing access to mental health services* which will involve schools.* The focus on school safety and mental health in schools is welcome. And at this pivotal time, the plan can contribute much needed resources to make schools better places for students, families, staff, and the surrounding community. But, as always, making the resources pay the greatest dividends for students and schools remains a significant challenge.

Past trends suggest that, in the rush to pursue new dollars, staff and programs will be added in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner. This will further fragment efforts to improve how schools address learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Moreover, as concerned critics are pointing out, some of what is proposed for schools will perpetuate questionable policies and practices and can interfere with critical efforts related to accomplishing the substantive school improvements necessary if schools are to achieve their mission. Since the unintended negative consequences are predictable, every effort should be made to prevent them.

Focus on Developing Student and Learning Supports into a Unified Component

Instead of introducing more of the same, the opportunity for schools is to *systematically embed* new proposals for school safety and mental health into efforts designed to unify and enhance existing student and learning supports. By recognizing the need for flexibility, the President’s plan, when combined with other federal policies calling for flexibility and innovation, opens up the feasibility of addressing a wide range of barriers to learning and teaching and strengthening school improvement policy and practices.

Moreover, note that the Fact Sheet accompanying the plan states: “A report issued by the U.S. Secret Service and the Department of Education after the Columbine shooting found that one of the best things schools can do to reduce violence and bullying is to improve a school’s climate and increase trust and communication between students and staff.”** This wise conclusion also requires recognition that an improved school climate is unlikely to emerge in the absence of a school’s ability to effectively address barriers to learning and teaching (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolclimate.pdf>).

Some time ago, John Maynard Keynes cogently stressed: *The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones.* With this in mind, we suggest that what the President’s plan proposes for making schools safer needs to avoid perpetuating current policies and practices. Given that the plan generates new resources, the funds need to be another stimulus for unifying and developing a comprehensive and systemic student and learning supports component at schools. Systemically conceived and implemented, such an approach can

- enable teachers, support staff, administrators, and all other personnel at a school to work together to reduce learning, behavior, and emotional problems

*http://gallery.mailchimp.com/fb5fde7638418a5a2ca40d502/files/WhiteHouse_GunViolenceExecutiveSummary.pdf

** http://gallery.mailchimp.com/fb5fde7638418a5a2ca40d502/files/WhiteHouse_FactSheet_Details.pdf

- develop classroom, school-wide, and community interventions that enhance efforts to personalize learning and address student problems, promote a safe and nurturing school climate, and promote academic success and general well-being
- facilitate school, home, and community collaboration to weave together resources (including human and social capital) in order to enhance system development, coordination, and cohesion, garner economies of scale, and enhance outcomes
- reverse the unrealistic and often inappropriate trend toward more and more one-on-one direct services by schools

A unified student and learning supports component provides an umbrella under which school initiatives for safety and mental health can be integrated into school improvement policy and practices in ways that advance the transformation of public education. Such an approach already is taking root at some state departments of education and districts (see *Where's It Happening* online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>). A set of common core standards for learning supports also has been developed (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/commcore.pdf>). These standards and the related quality indicators succinctly address the concerns raised about school safety, mental health, and other barriers to learning and teaching and are designed to enhance development of the whole child and establish an equal opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond (see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elaine-weiss/common-core_b_2427484.html).



The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA,

Write: Center for Mental Health in Schools, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563
Phone: (310) 825-3634 email: smhp@ucla.edu website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

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