BOOK REVIEW

Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools

By Howard Adelman PhD & Linda Taylor PhD

22010, Corwin, USA, 310 pp.

$41.95, ISBN: 9781412975384

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Growing numbers of children are suffering needlessly because their emotional, behavioral, and developmental needs are not being met by the very institutions and systems that were created to take care of them.

-U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) found in Adelman and Taylor (2010)

In public schools across the United States school administrators, teachers, psychologists, counselors and other support staff face the challenge of ensuring their students receive needed mental health services despite budget cuts and other significant logistical constraints. For example, with the elimination of AB3632 funding in 2010, Local Educational Agencies across California are feeling immense pressure to deliver mental health services to students who previously received assistance from the Department of Mental Health. A timely addition to the educational literature, authors Adelman and Taylor comprehensively address this juxtaposition of need and constraint in their most recent book, *Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools*. Within the text, readers are provided with valuable information regarding the restructure, development, and enhancement of school-based mental health programs. The authors open with a review of the history and current state of mental health in schools and move toward making suggestions for how to better address the mental health needs of students. They advocate persuasively for effective collaboration among stakeholders when providing mental health services in the public school systems. School psychologists, in particular, may find the guidelines provided by the authors useful in paving the way for school-based mental health service delivery models because they will undoubtedly be responsible for creating comprehensive programs to address student needs.

PAST

School based mental health service providers have historically been tasked with large number of referrals for the provision of mental health services and it is estimated that the ratio of school psychologists to students will continue to rise from 1 to 2,500 to even larger numbers (Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003).

Adelman and Taylor begin their analysis of mental health services with an historical review. The authors evaluate the proliferation of legislation and public policy, which has sparked various movements in the delivery of school-based mental health services. They argue that these undertakings, including the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003) and the 2007 Progress Report on the President's New Freedom Initiative, have created conflicting agendas. These initiatives call for schools to be involved in the provision of mental health services while at the same time demanding that they

maximize their focus on instruction in the school setting. As a result, practitioners are often perplexed about how to balance these demands and implement these services in the schools and their surrounding communities. School systems have traditionally operated under a deficit model of mental health service delivery, which consists of the marginalization and compartmentalization of services seen as auxiliary or unnecessary for the betterment of the whole. For example, student support programs and services are often added to the educational curriculum on an ad hoc basis, via student support personnel who are rarely part of the school's overarching organizational structure.

Adelman and Taylor assert that this compartmentalization of service, does not effectively address the challenges our students have encountered and will continue to face. Thus, the only way to meet the needs of the students is to develop a comprehensive approach of service delivery. To do so, we must move the focus of education from accountability and standardized achievement tests to the well being of the students. We must remember that our job is to provide all youth an equal opportunity to learn.

PRESENT

According to Adelman & Taylor, the mental health concerns that currently impact students are not new. Students now, as in the past, continue to experience depression and anxiety, face issues such as bullying and interpersonal conflict, and engage in behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, eating disorders, and self-harm. Schools have the opportunity to play an active role in both preventing these problems and in promoting positive mental health. Because many children's only source of mental health care is the school system, schools function as a vital resource for psychological services (Burns et al., 1995, Crespi & Fischett, 1997).

Rather than focusing on the diagnosis of pathology, which is the most commonly utilized approach, Adelman and Taylor call policy makers and practitioners to re-evaluate these challenges from the perspective of the student. They urge school practitioners to develop a full continuum of comprehensive preventative programs and interventions, including the promotion of mental health and intervention with problems at an early age, rather than focus only on the presence or absence of a disorder. Adelman and Taylor suggest that for us to do so, we need to create readiness for change, re-engage students in the learning process, obtain the resources to create change, and create supportive school environments.

FUTURE

School-based strategies

As we move forward, we must change how we approach the difficulties that students are experiencing. We must guarantee that all students have an equal opportunity to learn by providing an integrated school-community system that promotes mental health, prevents mental health and psychosocial problems, and provides special assistance for those who are experiencing severe and pervasive mental health challenges.

Adelman and Taylor urge us to abandon the "wait to fail" model that is often in practiced in schools. They advise us to find a better way to work together via a comprehensive framework for learning supports using the following methods: classroom focused enabling, support for transitions, home involvement with schools, crisis response and prevention, community involvement and support, and student and family assistance. This new model of student support services involves an integrated infrastructure designed to create protective barriers, which will be embedded in the school system and promote the optimum development of students.

Adelman and Taylor propose a model that facilitates social and emotional development and learning processes to help children develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness. To make this happen, schools must develop ways to respond to behavior problems that identify the antecedents of the problem and develop specific strategies for addressing these areas through teachers, clinicians, parents, and students themselves. Schools should try and move away from models of social control and

punishment by preventing and anticipating misbehavior, reacting during misbehavior, and following up with students and appropriate stakeholders. One way to do so would be by implementing school-wide positive behavioral supports to address misbehavior and motivational concerns. To create a positive school culture, personalizing instruction and providing special assistance, if necessary, are important.

Moreover, students need to perceive the instructional process, content, and outcomes as fitting with their interests and capabilities. If they do not, efforts to create this personalization may be necessary for engagement in the school climate. The simplest way to create a supportive comprehensive school environment is to involve students in major decisions.

We must also remember that it is essential to focus on the well-being of the school staff. With the increased class sizes, work-related duties, and reduced funding, school staff can easily feel overwhelmed and over-worked. In this stressful school environment, we must remember to focus on our own mental health, by supporting one another, and creating a more positive school climate.

Policy and systemic change

To meet the needs of students and create schools in which comprehensive supports are easily accessible, essential resources must be made available including finances, personnel time, space, and equipment. The piecemeal and fragmented natures of the current systems need to be coordinated and used more effectively to address student needs. Thus, individuals involved should make attempts to collaborate more effectively. Schools are more efficient and create a more caring environment for all when a symbiotic relationship between the family, community, and schools is established. When those involved create a formalized agreement to accomplish mutually desired results, all stakeholders' needs are met.

If this process of change is to be truly successful, we cannot keep trying the quick fix methods that most schools utilize. Presently, we tend to focus on the major issues confronting us now without looking at the possibility that there is a better option: prevention.

The systems changes that are involved in this movement are complex and must occur at both the school and district level. Adelman and Taylor posit that the steps necessary to facilitate systemic change include: 1) articulation of a clear shared vision for the changes; 2) mobilizing interest, consensus, and support among key stakeholders; 3) clarification of feasibility; 4) major policy commitment from all participating stakeholders; and 5) negotiating agreements with decision-makers and implementers. After all of this has happened, the infrastructure must be developed and enhanced based on a clear articulation of basic functions. The authors note that the change requires training, resources, and support for scale-up, sustainability, and ongoing capacity building.

Final thoughts

Adelman and Taylor have provided school psychologists and other educators with an in-depth analysis of the history of the mental health service delivery in the public school system. They have also thoroughly addressed the need for the modification of the present structure while providing suggestions as to how to facilitate this change. Adelman and Taylor's text aids us in our endeavor to create the necessary changes in ensuring that the mental health needs of our students are being met. They leave the actual process of change up to us.

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