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# *Introduction*

*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)

One of those institutions is the school. Indeed, available research suggests that for some youngsters schools already are the main providers of mental health services. As Burns and her colleagues (1995) found, “the major player in the de facto system of care was the education sector—more than three-fourths of children receiving mental health services were seen in the education sector, and for many this was the sole source of care” (p. 152).

## **WHY MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS?**

In discussing the involvement of schools in mental health, the first question that arises is, “Why should there be a focus on mental health *in schools?*”

While many societal considerations are involved in responding to this question, for the most part the usual answers incorporate either or both of the following points:

- Accessing and meeting the needs of students (and their families) who require mental health services is facilitated at schools
- Addressing psychosocial and mental and physical health concerns is essential to the effective school performance of students

Implied in both answers is the hope of enhancing the nature and scope of mental health interventions to fill gaps, enhance effectiveness, address problems early, reduce stigma, and fully imbue clinical and service efforts with public health, general education, and equity orientations.

Point one typically reflects the perspective and agenda of agencies and advocates whose mission is to improve mental health services. The second point reflects the perspective and agenda of student support professionals and some leaders for school improvement and also provides a supportive rationale for those who want schools to play a greater role related to addressing young people's health concerns.

## ADVANCING MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS

Around the world, many stakeholders are determined to enhance how schools address mental health and psychosocial concerns. And now is a critical period for doing so.

Anyone who has spent time in schools can itemize the multifaceted mental health and psychosocial concerns that warrant attention. For those committed to advancing mental health in schools, the question is,

*How should our society's schools address these matters?*

The answers put forward tend to reflect different agenda. As a result, efforts to advance the imperative for mental health in schools are confronted with the problem of coalescing agenda and doing so in ways that are responsive to the oft-voiced public concern that schools cannot be responsible for meeting every need of their students.

Education is the mission of schools, and school policy makers are quick to point this out when schools are asked to do more, especially with respect to mental health. They do not disagree with the idea that healthier students learn and perform better. The problem is that prevailing school accountability pressures increasingly have concentrated on instructional practices—to the detriment of all matters not seen as *directly* related to raising achievement test scores.

Those concerned with enhancing mental health in schools must accept the reality that schools are not in the mental health business. Then, they must develop an understanding of what is involved in achieving the mission of schools. After that, they must be ready to clarify how any agenda item for mental health in schools helps accomplish that mission. Of particular importance is how proposed approaches help meet the demand for improving schools, reducing dropout rates, closing the achievement gap, and addressing racial, ethnic, disability, and socioeconomic disparities.

## EMBEDDING MENTAL HEALTH IN THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AGENDA

In 2001, the Policy Leadership Cadre for Mental Health in Schools stressed that advancing mental health in schools is about much more than expanding services

and creating full-service schools. The aim is to become part of a comprehensive, multifaceted, systemic approach that strengthens students, families, schools, and neighborhoods and does so in ways that maximizes learning, caring, and well-being.

To this end, policy decision makers and school improvement leaders must transform the education support programs and services that schools own and operate. Such a transformation must draw on well-conceived, broad frameworks and the best available information and scholarship to develop a comprehensive system of supports for addressing problems and enhancing healthy development. Accomplishing this will require weaving together resources from the school, community, and family.

## **BUILDING ON WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE**

Advancing a field requires a perspective on the past and the present. Therefore, Part I offers a brief reflection on what schools have been and are doing about matters related to mental health and then highlights some basic considerations as a foundation for moving forward.

Advancing this field requires a perspective on major concerns and issues that have arisen about the focus on mental health in schools. Part II highlights such matters.

Advancing the enterprise requires a sense of current and emerging opportunities and new strategies for moving forward in developing a comprehensive system that is implemented in the classroom and schoolwide. This is the focus of Part III.

Advancing any field requires rethinking policy and facilitating systemic change. Part IV outlines some major policy and systemic change considerations.