

School-Based Mental Health



An Empirical Guide for Decision-Makers

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Preface

School-Based Mental Health: An Empirical Guide for Decision-Makers

As we enter the new millennium, there is increasing concern about the growing number of children and adolescents who experience difficulties facing the challenges of development and who succumb to the adverse effects of emotional disturbance. This increase in the need to support America's youth occurs in a context of system transformation aimed at improving the effectiveness of services and increasing the capacity to serve all children who are in need.

An important strategy to help achieve this transformation is the proposed development of effective and integrated school-based mental health services. Recent federal initiatives and acts have promoted schools as an effective location to meet the social and emotional needs of all children while achieving the highest academic standards. The 1999 Report of the Surgeon General on the Mental Health of the Nation, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, and the 2003 report from the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health have all focused attention on the potential of increasing the effectiveness and capacity of school-based mental health services to improve the emotional well being of all children as well as their academic achievement.

While these federal initiatives have fulfilled important roles in increasing advocacy and interest in school-based mental health, they have not supplied recommendations at a level of specificity needed for effective implementation at a scale necessary for significant improvement in outcomes for children. For example, they have triggered an explosion of interest and activity in school-based mental health programming, yet outcomes for children who have emotional disturbances continue to be the poorest of all disability groups (Wager et al., in press). The field can be characterized as being fragmented and underdeveloped, and confused by conflicting terminology and professional perspectives.

The aim of this monograph is to contribute to the dialogue that addresses these barriers preventing school-based mental health services from meeting the hoped for potential to improve service effectiveness and capacity. We have briefly reviewed the history of mental health services supplied in schools, summarized the major conceptual models that currently influence the implementation of services, and provided an overview of the evidence-base for school-based interventions. The monograph also reviews federal policies and funding strategies that affect the implementation of services. We close with specific recommendations for increased accountability and the use of evidence-based practices in the field through the adoption of the public health model for implementing effective school-based mental health services.