Early Intervention in Schools: Recommendations for Enhanced Psychological Services

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Opinion

Childhood and adolescence are times of adjusting to change and increasing demands in one's life. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that in the United States alone, approximately 13% to 20% of children experience a mental disorder each year [1], or that 20% of adolescents experience a diagnosable mental health disorder [2]. Several factors are contributing to these statistics. One such factor is that the rise of social media and technological advancements have complicated life exponentially, [especially related to school expectations and social interaction [3-5]. Moreover, state and federal standards have placed increased pressure on schools to demonstrate that their students are achieving standardized outcomes, which has resulted in teachers and schools (individual schools as well as districts) being held more accountable for students' performance. The increased pressure from school as well socially (e.g., peer pressure, in-person and cyber bullying) has resulted in increased anxiety and depression at younger and younger ages [6-8]. Sadly, most schools are not equipped to manage the number, chronicity, or severity of these concerns which often results in children feeling dumb, isolated, and alone [9]. Over time, these students' struggles are often manifested as poor attendance, interpersonal difficulties, and high-risk or self-destructive behavior [10]. Moreover, student' grades often suffer which only serves to reinforce emotional and interpersonal struggles [11]. Thus, these students become stuck in a very negative and dysfunctional feedback loop which can be challenging to break.

Given the increased demands on teachers coupled with school counselors, psychologists, and social workers being overwhelmed with the scope and chronicity of issues (and in many cases, not clinically skilled enough to address), schools and districts must begin to incorporate school-based counseling psychologists capable of identifying issues early on, providing treatment as needed, and linking families with specific resources which may be necessary to support the student's academic success. The use of seasoned and highly skilled psychologists, familiar with multiple treatment modalities and working with complex and complicated issues could be a tremendous asset to schools and their communities. It is time for schools to begin thinking outside of traditional conceptualizations to consider inclusion of highly skilled behavioral health providers to meet the needs of students and families better; far too many students and their families are falling through the cracks of our

educational system because our schools cannot offer the appropriate level of support, nor have the appropriate personnel to meet their needs.

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