

## **2009 National School Psychology Week Capitol Hill Briefing:**

### ***Positive School Climate, Student Wellness, and Improved Academic Achievement: Bringing Out the Best in Students and Schools***

#### **Selected Supporting Research and Policy Recommendations**

##### **Leadership**

No concerted federal presence or clear national leadership currently exists to advance the use of prevention and promotion approaches to benefit the mental health of the nation's young people. Infusing a prevention focus into the public consciousness requires development of a shared public vision and attention at a higher national level than currently exists.

**Recommendation:** The federal government should make the healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development of young people a national priority, establish public goals for the prevention of specific MEB [mental, emotional, and behavioral] disorders and for the promotion of healthy development among young people, and provide needed research and service resources to achieve these aims. (13-1) ...

**Recommendation:** The White House should create an ongoing mechanism involving federal agencies, stakeholders (including professional associations), and key researchers to develop and implement a strategic approach to the promotion of mental, emotional, and behavioral health and the prevention of MEB disorders and related problem behaviors in young people. The U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Justice should be accountable for coordinating and aligning their resources, programs, and initiatives with this strategic approach and for encouraging their state and local counterparts to do the same. (13-2) (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2009, p.5)

- "Reviews of research suggest that successful school leaders influence student achievement in several important ways, both through their influence on other people or features of their organizations, and through their influence on school processes" (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005, p. 5).
- "If you attempt to implement reforms but fail to engage the culture of a school, nothing will change" (Credited to Seymour Sarason, National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2009, p. 5).

##### **School Climate**

- Several aspects of school climate and connectedness are positively related to student achievement, and positive change in school climate and school connectedness is related to significant gains in student scores on statewide achievement tests (Spier, Cai, & Osher, 2007; Spier, Cai, Osher, & Kendziora, 2007).
- Changing a school's climate and connectedness for the better is associated with increases in student performance in reading, writing, and mathematics, regardless of whether a school starts with high or low school climate and connectedness or high or low achievement scores (Spier, Cai, & Osher, 2007; Spier, Cai, Osher, & Kendziora, 2007).
- Adults tend to underestimate the problem of bullying in schools and overestimate how safe students feel (Garrity, Jens, Porter, & Stoker, 2002).
- In 2005, 65% of teens were verbally or physically harassed or assaulted because of their appearance, sexual orientation, gender, race/ethnicity, disability, or religion (Harris Interactive, Inc., 2005).
- A 2005 survey revealed that 53% of teachers see bullying and harassment of students as a serious problem at their school (Harris Interactive, Inc., 2005).

- Frequent exposure to victimization or bullying others is associated with high risks of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts; even infrequent involvement in bullying behavior is related to increased risk of depression and suicidality, particularly among girls (Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007).
- Victims of bullying and harassment may experience negative impact in the areas of academics, social-emotional development, and even their health (Garrity et al., 2002).
- Whole-school interventions using positive behavior support have been shown to decrease behavior problems while improving academic performance, as measured by standardized tests in reading and mathematics (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005).
- Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of positive behavior support in reducing problem behaviors and improving academic performance (Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002).
- Interventions that foster students' engagement in school have been shown to reduce high school dropout (Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998).
- Increasing students' engagement and sense of community in the school produces reductions in problem behaviors, increased associations with prosocial peers, and better academic performance (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004).
- Interventions to increase students' bonding to school promote academic success by reducing barriers to learning (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004).

### **Wellness**

- The authors of a comprehensive review of positive youth development programs concluded that they produce positive behavior outcomes and prevent youth problem behaviors (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002).
- Resilience results from positive social relationships, positive attitudes and emotions, the ability to control one's own behavior, and feelings of competence (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004).
- Low levels of resilience assets in schools contribute to lower academic achievement by students, both in low- and high-performing schools (Hanson, Austin, & Lee-Bayha, 2004).
- A relatively small number of global factors are associated with resilience, including connections to competent and caring adults in the family and community, cognitive and self-regulation skills, positive views of self, and motivation to be effective (Masten, 2001).

### **Family-School Partnerships**

- Home-school collaboration leads to improved student achievement, better behavior, better attendance, higher self-concept, and more positive attitudes toward school and learning (National Association of School Psychologists, 2005).
- Research in the past two decades has demonstrated the power of family-school partnerships to positively impact children's school success, and these partnerships are essential to meeting the new accountability demands placed on schools (Christenson, 2004).
- Consultation has been found to yield positive results such as remediating academic and behavior problems for children in school settings; changing teachers' and parents' behavior, knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions; and reducing referrals for psychoeducational assessments (MacLeod, Jones, Somer, & Havey, 2001; Reddy, Barboza-Whitehead, Files, & Rubel, 2000).

### **Positive Impact of School Psychological Services**

- School staff rate the services provided by school psychologists as very important, including assessment, special education input, consultation, counseling, crisis intervention, and behavior management (Watkins, Crosby, & Pearson, 2007).
- Special education teachers see the work of school psychologists in individualized education program meetings as helpful and important (Arivett, Rust, Brissie, & Dansby, 2007).
- Interventions that strengthen students' social, emotional, and decision-making skills also positively impact their academic achievement, both in terms of higher standardized test scores and better grades (Fleming et al., 2005).
- Students who receive social-emotional support and prevention services academically achieve more in school (Greenberg et al., 2003; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004).

- Services provided by school psychologists support virtually every area of the lives of students, from school safety to academic achievement (Bear & Minke, 2006; Brock, Lazarus, & Jimerson, 2002).
- The intervention strategies employed by related services personnel produce substantial positive impact on special education outcomes (Forness, 2001).
- Expanded school mental health services in elementary schools have been found to reduce special education referrals and improve aspects of the school climate (Bruns, Walrath, Glass-Siegel, & Weist, 2004).
- Prevention and early intervention programs targeting at-risk students reduce special education referrals and placement, suspension, grade retention, and disciplinary referrals (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000).
- School mental health programs improve educational outcomes by decreasing absences, decreasing discipline referrals, and increasing test scores (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003).

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