

Combating violence in school systems with mental health care



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On April 20, 1999, two high school seniors entered their school and opened fire on students and teachers. The nation was stunned into silence. This ignited a twenty-year debate on how to keep students safe while they are on school campuses. Since 1999 there have been on average 10 school shootings a year. In 2017, a total of 65 school shootings were reported. (wike) According to a CNN report nationally there are more “ resources officers (27, 000) employed by the Public-School system then there are social workers (23, 000).” (US) The disturbing trend toward using punitive measures to end school violence is not working. Even though there are more resource officers in our schools than ever before, there has been a massive increase of school violence since the tragedy at Columbine High School. Politicians looking for a sound bite have called “ increased security” the answer to the overwhelming problem of school violence, but these measures do little to address the underlying problem facing our schools. Current research is showing this so-called solution is doing more harm than good by criminalizing student behavior and leading to more juvenile arrests, especial in low income and minority student populations. (Theriot) Instead of policing behavior problems by adding more resource officers, it’s time to start addressing the reasons behind school violence and explore positive changes in our school systems by adding the recommended amount of 1 school social worker or school counselor to every 250 students to build and maintain connections with the students. (Troubling) Kenneth Trump, president of the National School Safety and Security Services was quoted as saying “ Too often when we talk about school safety, people are looking for some sort of checklist that they can go through to determine who the next killer is but the reality is that the key is knowing individual students, having relationships,

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and recognizing changes in behavior... Schools must consider school counselors and their relationships to students as critical components in safety issues.” (School)

It is important to understand mental illness does not create school shooters. In an interview with NPR, Psychologist John Van Dreal, director of safety and risk management for Salem-Kiser public schools in Oregon, has sadly had to navigate through a school shooting in his career. He is quick to point out that only a small percentage of kids with mental issues go on to become school shooters. In almost every school shooter, they have found kids that have felt excluded, socially left out and rejected. (Chatterjee) It would be inaccurate to conclude mental health issues are a precursor for gun violence, but there is a distinct commonality among school shooters that point to a mental health connection. Almost every school shooter had signs of depression years before they actually walked into their schools with guns, in almost every situation there were signs years before that there were problems. (Hobbs) It's time to acknowledge the underlying facts surrounding students in our public-school system. The CDC suggests that almost 20% of students in the United States struggle with mental health issues from anxiety and depression to substance abuse issues and even suicidality. (Mental) The Adverse Childhood Experiences suggests that 1 in 5 school children have experienced three or more traumatic stressors, such as abuse, neglect, violence at home or exposure to parental drug use or mental illness. (Seaton) 56% of elementary school students have reported witnessing someone being beaten up. 87% of students report witnessing someone being slapped or punched at school in the past year. 44% of middle school

students report they were threatened while at school. (Flannery) Even with the addition of resource officers, these statistics don't show school as a safe for students. There are disturbing underlying mental health issues that face students in our school system that must be addressed.

School counselors and school social workers are highly skilled professionals able to address mental health issues, violent and stressful home environments, and also the physical, mental, and the emotional disabilities facing the youth in our schools. The major benefit of adding the recommended 1 School social worker or licensed school counselors per every 250 students would be the early detection and intervention of emotional distress and mental illness, integrating existing family and community resources into the school itself, and facilitating a multi-disciplined approach to mental health services in the schools. However, there is also a severe lack of funding and support for mental health programs in the school system. There is a distinct stigma facing students that may need emotional and mental health issues addressed and for parents there is a very real fear of having their child labeled and inappropriately medicated to address behavior issues.

Early detection and intervention are paramount when preventing or treating any mental illness or when dealing with emotional distress. In any given elementary school class room with twenty-five students, roughly 5 of those students will be struggling with issues that adults are struggling with, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and substance abuse. Yet, nearly 80% of children who need mental health services will not receive them. (Child) The preschooler who seems unusually angry over little things, could be referred <https://assignbuster.com/combating-violence-in-school-systems-with-mental-health-care/>

to a school social worker for evaluation. Using counseling and behavior modification, a school social worker or counselor would be trained to identify why the child is acting out and help teachers and parents effectively manage the issue, all without leaving the school building. The middle school girl who burst into tears at the slightest correction would be able to talk to a known and trusted faculty member trained to listen and if needed be able to direct the family to needed community resources for anxiety and depression. According to NAMI many mental health conditions start in adolescence. Half of people living with mental illness experience onset by age 14. This number jumps to 75% by age 25. One in five youth live with a mental health condition, but less than half of these individuals receive needed services. Undiagnosed, untreated or inadequately treated mental health conditions can affect a student's ability to learn, grow and develop. Schools provide a unique opportunity to identify and treat mental health conditions by serving students where they already are. (nami)

There are multiple community resources available, but access can be frustrating and time consuming for parents and students. Columbia University has listed the following as the biggest impacts of mental illness on school success and academic achievement: Poor attendance, perceived incompetence, concentration, and poor academic achievement/grade completion. Teachers College at Columbia University's study on school based mental health centers also showed that school based mental health users initially had "significantly lower GPA's at the start of the study and had a steeper increase in GPA over the five semesters" than Non-SBMH users (Anderson). According to the School Social Worker Association of America,

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school social workers are extensively trained to connect students with the community-based resources already in existence. NAMI advocates for the services and supports the schools need to provide school based mental health services. These programs bring trained community mental health resources into the school themselves. (nami) School social workers are the bridge that link the families in need to the resources in the community. They provide access to services and supports and help reduce isolation and confusion experienced with youth who struggle with mental health conditions and their families.

School social workers and school counselors also are the key components of a Multi-tiered System of Support approach to meeting student's needs. MTSS is defined as “ the practice of providing high quality instruction and interventions matched to a student's need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals and applying child response data to important educational decisions.” (Positive) These are just fancy words meaning creating an educational plan that meets each student's individual needs. Gone are the days of every student in the classroom having a common background or similar family and social structures. Today's class room is made up of children from radically different socioeconomic backgrounds. These are not one room school houses that serve a community of like-minded families. The days of one size fits all education are over.

School social workers and school counselors are uniquely trained and qualified to coordinate a more individual approach to education. Students with untreated mental health issues have a harder time in school and social situations. They consistently score lower on tests and have a greater risk of

dropping out. School social workers coordinate and implement a multi-tiered system of support for students, linking students to the resources needed to help them succeed. Including but not limited to mental health services, academic support, and even health care.

One of the major difficulties' schools are facing is a severe lack of funding. For the fiscal year of 2018 the omnibus spending bill was passed by congress. Including 1. 1 billion in funding for " Student Support and Academic Enrichment" (SSAE) grants which was more than the \$400 asked for in 2017. The SSAE is a flexible block grant program introduced in the " Every Child Succeeds" Act of 2015. This grant replaced several targeted grants programs including one for elementary and secondary counseling programs. The SSAE grant was flexible enough to cover the lost grants. However, The Education Departments fiscal year 2019 budget proposal eliminates the SSAE grants. All programs funded with the SSAE grant will be eliminated. The stated purpose of the SSAE was to improve school conditions for student learning. This allowed for money to be used to fund mental health programs. But even these funds wouldn't cover the funds needed to address the problems of school counselors or social workers being spread too thin. In California alone doubling the amount of school counselors or social workers would only bring the ratio 380: 1. Currently the nation average is 482: 1 and Arizona's ratio is currently at 924: 1. (Troubling) However, can we afford not to spend the money to address the underlying issues facing our students? Every year the United States spends more than \$6 billion on the juvenile justice system. Per year the cost per inmate in a juvenile detention center inmate is \$88, 000, the public-school system only

spends \$20, 000 per student. A better use of that money would be to invest in programs that support mental health in our schools and hopefully stop the pipeline from school to juvenile detention and then on to the prison system.

There is also a distinct negative stigma that kids who misbehave are “ bad” and the rejection of anyone out-side of social norms are standard practice.

The first response is to punish rather than understand. This makes asking for help very difficult for any student, but especially difficult for the students that need it the most. According to an MIT report, “ our educational system punishes, suspends and expels children with mental disorders at double or more the rate of their peers.” (Sweeney) The largest disparity is with black or brown minority teenage boys, who largely become the population for the juvenile detention centers instead of the college students. Once a juvenile enters the juvenile detention system, they are 40% more likely to be in the prison system by the age of 25 and virtually none of these students graduate high school. Locking them into a lifetime of underachievement. (Nelson) This is a heartbreaking yet very real problem faced by students in our public-school system. The trend of zero tolerance has doubled the amount of out of school suspensions. The gun free school act passed in 1994 mandated a yearlong suspension. However, the definition of “ weapon” is very broad. Students have been expelled for finger guns and chewing a pop tart into a gun shape, and even bring a camping fork from cub scouts to class. School districts have also adopted the policy of punishing small offences in order for the residents to feel safer. This has translated into suspensions for talking back or skipping class. Schools have also outsourced discipline to juvenile courts and the resource officers in schools. Retired Tribal Judge Trudy

Flamand told me she always had a feeling of despair when a young adult faced her in court. She knew that the first time she saw them in her court room almost always led to a second court appearance and once the youth was in the system they rarely got out. “ When a school allows a resource officer to arrest a student, they are turning that student over to the juvenile court system.” (Nelson)

Federal health officials recommended universal mental health screenings for students over a decade ago. Due to a large and vocal internet presence of parents accusing the schools of drugging their children and fervent accusations of miss-diagnoses there is a very strong opposition to any sort of mental health program in the school system (Child). There is a fast-growing internet community, with first person accounts in hand, who are very much opposed to any labels or requirements of medications (Kennedy). The disheartening truth is it happens. It's easier, takes less time and more cost effective to prescribe pharmaceuticals to manage behavior issues. But if the resource was available and they actually staffed 1 counselor or social worker per 250 students, a lot of the behavior issues could be addressed in a healthy and holistic manner without the need for medication except in the most extreme situations.

The United States has the highest rate of violence in the western world. In the twenty years since the tragedy in Columbine there has been no decrease in school violence. Instead of taking a holistic approach to addressing the issues behind school violence, there is a punitive approach to the issues facing students. The standard practice has been adding more resource officers policing the school. While this seems like a logical response it <https://assignbuster.com/combating-violence-in-school-systems-with-mental-health-care/>

doesn't address the underlying cause of the problem. " School mental health services are essential for creating and sustaining safe schools. Increased access to mental health services and supports in schools is vital to improving the physical and psychological safety of our students as well as academic performance and problem-solving skills." (School-based) By adding more school social workers and school counselors, it would allow schools to address multiple levels of issues and hopefully bring a lasting change. According to the journal of ethics for the American medical association " cooperating with counselors on site assists in mitigating the barriers to care...thus minimizing cost and travel time for the student. These school-based programs are successful when community partners come together." (school-based)

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