

Do Schools Really Care About Mental Health? A Look at Gaps in Student Support Systems

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Mental health has become one of the most pressing concerns in education today. Increasing academic demands, financial difficulties, family responsibilities, social pressures, and uncertainty about the future have contributed to rising levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among students. Educational institutions have responded by introducing counseling centers, wellness programs, and mental health awareness campaigns. While these initiatives represent positive developments, an important question remains: Do schools truly provide adequate support for students' mental health, or do significant gaps continue to exist within existing support systems? Examining these gaps is essential because student well-being directly influences academic achievement, retention, personal development, and long-term success. Mental health should therefore be regarded not merely as an individual concern but as a shared institutional responsibility.

Educational institutions increasingly recognize that learning cannot be separated from psychological well-being. Students experiencing emotional distress often struggle to concentrate, participate in classroom activities, complete academic requirements, and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Consequently, schools are expected to create environments that promote both intellectual growth and psychological resilience. According to the World Health Organization (2022), mental health is a fundamental component of overall health and significantly influences learning, productivity, and quality of life. Schools therefore play a critical role in promoting early intervention, psychological support, and positive learning environments.

Despite growing awareness, many educational institutions continue to face challenges in delivering effective mental health services. One of the most common concerns is the limited availability of guidance counselors, psychologists, and mental health professionals. In many public schools and state universities, counseling centers operate with limited personnel while serving thousands of students. This imbalance often results in long waiting periods, reduced counseling sessions, and limited opportunities for preventive mental health interventions. Students who require immediate psychological assistance may encounter delays that allow emotional difficulties to worsen before professional support becomes available.

Accessibility also remains a significant barrier. Although counseling services may exist, many students are either unaware of available resources or reluctant to seek professional help. Mental health stigma continues to discourage students from discussing emotional concerns or accessing counseling services. Some fear being judged by peers, labeled as emotionally unstable, or misunderstood by faculty members. According to Eisenberg et al. (2007), many university students experiencing mental health difficulties do not seek professional help despite experiencing significant psychological distress. These findings suggest that simply establishing counseling

services is insufficient if students do not feel comfortable or supported in accessing them.

Another important gap involves the reactive nature of many institutional support systems. Schools frequently provide assistance only after students experience severe emotional or academic difficulties. Preventive mental health initiatives often receive less attention than crisis intervention. Comprehensive mental health support should extend beyond counseling sessions to include wellness education, stress management programs, peer support networks, faculty training, and early identification of students at risk. Educational institutions that prioritize prevention can reduce the likelihood of more serious psychological problems while fostering healthier academic communities.

Faculty members also play an essential role in supporting student mental health. Because instructors interact with students regularly, they are often among the first to notice behavioral changes, declining academic performance, or emotional distress. However, many educators receive little formal preparation in recognizing mental health concerns or responding appropriately to students experiencing psychological difficulties. Oades et al. (2014) argue that promoting well-being in educational settings requires a whole-institution approach in which faculty, administrators, counselors, and students work collaboratively to support mental health. Without adequate training and institutional support, educators may feel uncertain about how to respond effectively when students need assistance.

The transition to higher education further illustrates the importance of strong support systems. Many students enter universities while simultaneously adjusting to increased academic expectations, financial responsibilities, independent living, and career uncertainty. These transitions can generate considerable psychological stress. Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) observed that mental health problems among college students have become increasingly prevalent and represent a significant challenge for higher education institutions worldwide. Similarly, Xiao et al. (2017) reported that college counseling centers have experienced a steady increase in the number of students seeking psychological services, reflecting the growing demand for institutional mental health support in higher education. Universities that fail to address these challenges risk lower academic performance, increased dropout rates, and reduced student engagement.

Beyond academic outcomes, inadequate mental health support can also affect workforce preparation. Higher education institutions are expected to develop graduates who are academically competent, emotionally resilient, and professionally prepared. Students experiencing unresolved mental health difficulties may struggle to develop the confidence, communication skills, adaptability, and decision-making abilities required in today's workplace. Consequently, investing in student mental health contributes not only to educational success but also to graduate employability and workforce readiness. Supporting student well-being should therefore be viewed as an investment in human capital rather than merely an institutional obligation.

Addressing existing gaps requires comprehensive and sustainable strategies. Increasing the number of qualified guidance counselors and mental health

professionals should be a priority, particularly in public educational institutions where student populations continue to grow. Institutions should also strengthen referral systems, improve access to confidential counseling services, and expand outreach activities that reduce stigma surrounding mental health. Regular wellness seminars, peer mentoring programs, psychological first-aid training, and digital counseling platforms can complement traditional counseling services and improve accessibility for students who may hesitate to seek face-to-face assistance.

Equally important is the integration of mental health into institutional policies and educational planning. Rather than treating mental health as a separate service, schools should incorporate psychological well-being into curriculum development, student affairs programs, faculty development initiatives, and campus leadership practices. Universities that adopt a holistic approach recognize that academic excellence and student well-being are interconnected goals rather than competing priorities.

Collaboration with external organizations can further strengthen institutional support systems. Partnerships with hospitals, mental health professionals, government agencies, and community organizations can expand available resources and provide specialized services that educational institutions may be unable to offer independently. Such collaborations encourage comprehensive care while reducing institutional limitations related to funding and personnel.

Ultimately, schools demonstrate genuine concern for student mental health not only through awareness campaigns but through sustained institutional commitment. Effective support systems require adequate resources, trained professionals, inclusive policies, and educational environments where students feel safe seeking help. As mental health challenges continue to affect learners across all educational levels, schools must move beyond symbolic initiatives toward comprehensive and accessible systems of care. Educational success cannot be measured solely by academic achievement; it must also reflect the well-being, resilience, and personal development of the students whom educational institutions are entrusted to serve.

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