



# Addressing student and schooling problems: Not another project!

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## *Child safety should be embedded in the missions of schools*

*To eliminate disparities, we must know enough (research); do enough (deliver the outcomes); care enough (commitment); and persevere enough (don't get discouraged).* – David Satcher, Director, Morehouse School of Medicine, National Center for Primary Care

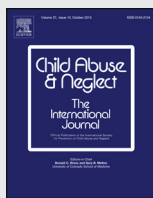
Advocates arguing for schools and communities to expand their role in addressing child and adolescent problems constantly compete with each other. Competing agenda are seen, for example, in discussions of broadening the focus of student and learning supports, promoting whole child development, increasing the focus on mental health in schools, ways to facilitate

social emotional learning, and how to ameliorate specific problems, such as child abuse and neglect.

Those advocating for specific problems usually propose special initiatives. By limiting their focus to a specific problem, such initiatives often work against efforts to address a fuller range of factors causing problems for many youngsters and their schools. This state of affairs raises fundamental public education, public health, and civil rights concerns.

This article is based on our many years working with schools and communities. Our intent is twofold: first, we underscore the need to avoid the *specific problem trap*; then we highlight new policy and practice frameworks

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 DIRECTIONS

for a unified and comprehensive approach to addressing student and schooling problems.

## The Specific Problem Trap and Schools

Advocacy for schools to do more about addressing any specific type of problem constitutes lobbying for a special initiative. Schools are constantly confronted with requests and mandates for *another initiative* (e.g., another pilot project; another program to address a specific learning, behavior, or emotional problem). Advocacy for doing more follows any event that increases public concern about matters such as violence at schools, child maltreatment, trauma, bullying, and other mental and behavioral health problems.

Schools are stretched thin by the many programs already underway. As a result, a common reaction of administrators is: *Enough – we can't take on another thing!*

Negative reactions aside, the flow of proposed special initiatives is constant. Moreover, the irony is that when extramural funds are attached, budget-starved schools find special initiatives almost irresistible. Increasingly, however, concerns are being raised that such funding can have pernicious systemic effects. For example, the constant quest for extramural funding of relatively small projects tends to redirect staff attention away from system building and providing supports that can benefit all students.

Thus, although advocacy for addressing a specific problem in schools may be well-intentioned, policy research shows that increasing attention to a specific problem tends to reduce attention to other concerns – especially when budgets are tight. Moreover, each new initiative focused on a special problem

usually is implemented in an ad hoc, piecemeal manner. This approach increases the level of fragmentation in an already disjointed strategy for ameliorating problems at school, home, and in the community. Even worse, this type of systemic tinkering contributes to the ongoing marginalization of efforts to develop a unified, comprehensive, systemic, and equitable approach to addressing a full range of psychosocial and mental and physical health concerns. When the aim is to transform schools into settings that maximize equity of opportunity for success at school and enhanced well-being, the focus must be on fundamental changes that enable emergence of a school climate that is safe, welcoming, supportive, and nurturing.

## The School's Role in Addressing Child Abuse and Neglect

Children who are abused and neglected represent yet one more designated group for whom schools have a variety of roles to play. Reporting child abuse, of course, is a mandate for school personnel. Mandates aside, school staff are concerned about child maltreatment because it is among a wide range of problems that are potential barriers to learning and teaching. As expressed in the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect's 2003 report entitled, "The Role of Educators in Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse and Neglect," everyone wants schools to improve as advocates for the right of children and adolescents to be safe and secure. Awareness and action, of course, are different considerations, and what schools do to address the many ways children and adolescents are maltreated and resultant trauma leaves much to be desired.

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