Enhancing Collaboration within and across Disciplines to Advance Mental Health Programs in Schools

NANCY RAPPAPORT, DAVID OŞER, ELLEN GREENBERG GARRISON, CORINNE ANDERSON-KETCHMARK, and KEVIN DWYER

Schools across the country are increasingly utilizing the expertise of multiple disciplines to enhance the mental health of their students and address barriers to learning through the provision of a range of services in schools. School mental health providers, including nurses, counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, special educators, and their clinical partners—psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychiatric nurses—have a unique opportunity to address the mental health needs of students. The continuum of mental health services offered support, primary prevention (e.g., universal interventions targeting bullying, abuse, and violence), early intervention (e.g., counseling for students whose behavior indicates that they are at risk), and intensive treatment for students with severe and/or chronic problems (e.g., proven therapies, crisis intervention, and wraparound supports). Collaboration is critical to avoid competition for scarce resources, fragmentation of services, needless duplication of effort, and the potential isolation of...
service providers. To ensure more comprehensive, cost-effective, and accessible services, collaboration must involve concerted efforts by all stakeholders.

Collaboration to enhance overall student adjustment and academic performance arises between and among mental health professionals in several contexts. First, it occurs between and among various school-hired mental health personnel working in the school setting. Second, if systems are to coordinate family-friendly services, collaboration can take place between and among school-hired personnel and mental health professionals offering services in the community. And third, collaboration can increasingly be found in school settings among school-hired and community-based mental health professionals working with other educators, families, and clinicians in school health clinics, or as adjunct school staff members in intensive special programs. For those community mental health professionals working within the school, the overall degree of collaboration with school-hired personnel and with students and their families may vary as a function of how well integrated they are into the school's culture and daily operations and how well they align their services to the school's existing services.

This chapter presents collaboration as a vital tool for effective mental health service delivery in school settings. It describes the critical components of collaboration, including the involvement of school administrators, educators, and school- and community-based mental health personnel, and most importantly, of the students and their families. Attention is also directed to the need to recognize and overcome potential obstacles to collaboration and to address such critical issues as school policy, educational leadership, and school culture.

**CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION**

Although collaboration is generally accepted as a useful and laudable goal, realizing effective collaboration is not easy. Collaboration, when successfully implemented in schools, comprises more than its building blocks of cooperation and coordination. It involves altering the means by which mental health practitioners and schools traditionally do business. To ensure the implementation of effective collaborative relationships in school settings, those involved need to engage in the following four tasks: (1) Define mutually agreed upon goals that provide incentive for the investment of effort in the collaborative process. (2) Decide on an overall strategy that integrates services and accept shared responsibilities for designated activities. (3) Create a working environment that fosters accountability for actions and outcomes. (4) Where possible, shift from separate funding sources to viable integrated mechanisms for the allocation of financial resources to support collaborative strategies.

A critical component of successful interdisciplinary collaboration is a capacity to appreciate and build on the competencies of the individual disciplines involved. Professionals from different disciplines bring unique frames of reference, as well as different backgrounds, priorities, expectations, and clinical responsibilities. They may have different ways of conceptualizing students' strengths and difficulties, which, taken together, provide a comprehensive view to guide interventions. Ideally, early on in the collaborative process, school teams can devote time to understand the function of each participant, clarify roles, and understand professional paradigms. They also need to understand one another's technical