

Schools need collaboration, not packaged solutions, for best mental health programs

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Melissa Maras is an assistant professor of school psychology in the Department of Educational, School and Counseling Psychology. Credit: MU News Bureau

Top researchers throughout the country have developed mental health programs to address many of the most profound issues facing schools, including students' disruptive and aggressive behavior, anger outbursts, anxiety, and suicide. However, according to University of Missouri researchers, many schools lack the capacity to access and fully adopt these programs. This lack of capacity hurts schools, students and families.

In a recent publication, Melissa Maras, assistant professor of [school](#) psychology in the Department of Educational, School, and Counseling Psychology in the MU College of Education, and Joni Splett, a doctoral

student, suggest the gap between research and practice in school mental health remains the primary barrier to helping schools meet the growing mental health needs of their students.

Experts in school mental health agree that a large investment of money, time and training has been made to develop and disseminate school mental health programs that have been tested and proven to work. Yet, in developing these "Evidence-based Practices" in school mental health, researchers have not given enough consideration to the unique context of schools, leaving many schools unable to capitalize on new ideas and scientific evidence, Maras said.

"Every school is unique, with a distinct culture and different set of needs and resources," says Maras. "Too often researchers are ready with the solution before they really know what the problem is. What schools really need is help sorting through everything they're already doing to figure out what's working and what's not, and that can be difficult."

In their article, "Closing the Gap in School Mental Health: A Community-Centered Model for School Psychology," published recently in *Psychology in the Schools*, the MU researchers offer an alternative to the dominant "Research-to-Practice" model in school [mental health](#). The "Community-Centered Model" emphasizes improving practices that are already being used in school while easing the transition to best practices.

As schools face increased accountability measures and decreased financial resources, collaboration between schools and researchers will need to be more complementary, Maras said.

"We need to start by asking schools and communities what they need from science and then partner with them to help them evaluate their innovative home-grown solutions and identify, implement, and sustain new programs," Maras said.

"We believe schools know what's best for their students" says Splett.
"Our job is to help them improve what they're already doing and work with them to implement new programs and practices in a way that makes sense."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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