The Bureaucratic, Legislative, and Administrative Whirlwinds to Compose a Nationwide Guide for School Board Members to Use to Implement Good Mental Health in Schools

Initially, I applied to become a School Health Program Intern for the National School Boards Association (NSBA) through the Virtual Internship Program to do research on the effects of the economic crash of 2008 and financial difficulties posed by it on the health of students and staff in schools nationwide. After accepting the position – honestly, it felt miraculous that someone as inexperienced as I would get such a honor and be assigned such a important task – my supervisors decided that it would be too difficult for me to do the research project as described above. They did not think that school board members would be able to relay much about this complex – yet simple – relationship between stress and health as a result of financial instability, since school board members engage with students and staff on a limited basis.

Additionally, the Newtown shooting incident and generally, the lack of mental health services and support in contemporary society became a greater calling for the National School Boards Association to use its funds from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for. All of this change occurred over winter break and my supervisors took me down their office in Alexandria, Virginia to go over this new plan. I did not know until I went there that I would be composing a guide for school board members on how to implement good mental health services and support in schools nationwide. Due to my lack of official experience, I was already overwhelmed but still excited by the original project and this sudden change did throw me off a bit. Despite that, I am glad that I have the opportunity to make such a difference for students
across the nation through the empowerment and education of school board members, who are responsible for the bureaucratic and administrative part of setting up and running schools as efficiently as possible to foster higher academic achievement.

After my supervisors and I collectively designed the new plan to advocate for good mental health in schools through such a guide – as well as determine deadlines to keep things organized – I remember and still feel a bit frustrated about how difficult it is to motivate school board members to promote good mental health in their schools. Based on advice and our plan, I would have to advocate for mental health through the lens of it promoting higher academic achievement and elaborate plenty on the evidence of this claim in the guide. To my supervisors and I, it intuitively makes sense that the good mental health of students in schools is vital for their higher academic achievement, as a result of increased focus and general better well-being. We all feel strongly about this even it did not yield much higher academic achievement or any at all from an ethical standpoint: the health of our students are important, whether that yields benefits or not.

Yet, unless the higher academic achievement part is continuously highlighted throughout the guide, school board members will not even bother with the mental health of their students for the most part. I found this ethical dilemma quite troubling and still do, but I try to understand that since school board members have limited funds and other resources, they have to prioritize to achieve their goals. As leaders of educational institutions, school board members’ primary concern and goal is yield higher academic achievement amongst their students. Now that I am composing the guide that is due in late May and will be released in early July, I am continuously running into bureaucratic, legislative, and administrative issues regarding school board members. I have to write in a certain style and be mindful of what to include versus what to exclude. This
makes the work a bit tedious, but if this is what I must do to appeal to school board members to make their schools a safer, healthier, happier, and more supportive environment for students to succeed and thrive in, then I will continue to deal with it for this vital and greater good. As a future physician, patient advocate, and human rights activist, I am sure that I will need to be able to deal with such issues effectively without allowing it to impede upon my motivations, aspirations, and work. The most frustrating aspect of this internship though, has been the fact that the National School Boards Association’s new Executive Director felt that the School Health Program had no significant value for school board members and decided to slash it out by the end of this May. This is despite the fact that many school board members disagree and this program is funded independently through the CDC, not through NSBA’s funds at all, therefore, making it a free additional program for NSBA.

While this is frustrating, this also serves as increased motivation and push for me to pursue my career plans. I believe that prevention is the key to better health and that a multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary approach involving schools, health professionals, and others can only benefit students in multiple ways. The fact that 20% of the U.S. population is in public schools at any given time – except the summers - and that many kids go through the public school system to prepare for their future adulthood shows the importance of high quality education coupled with good health of students so that they can actually partake in such education for their betterment. This experience has developed my interest in pursuing psychiatry and mental health advocacy as a potential future career in medicine, public health, and human rights by introducing me to it without any expectations. The skills, connections, resources, and lessons I have gained and will continue to gain as I finish up this guide will only continue to aid me in my future career pursuits so, despite the whirlwinds, I am having an invaluable experience for my future.