

MENTAL CHECK-IN: PRIORITIZING MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS

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With the pandemic affecting the implementation of learning, a lot of students have experienced varying issues related with their physical and mental health. Reports have shown that a number of learners have experienced struggles with relation to their mental health. These reports are due to the fact that teachers and students have been separated from their immediate learning environment and that access to health care becomes difficult.

Problems about mental health have been mislooked for years because people tend to dismiss mental-health issues as 'pag-iinarte' (mere display'). However, as teachers and school leaders, it is important to prioritize the mental health conditions of Filipino learners.

Studies have suggested practical tips to strengthen the mental health status of Filipino learners. These are some of the tips and strategies that educational institutions can employ in their respective environment.

First, school leaders should include prioritizing mental health by crafting a curriculum which includes mental health lessons. Lessons about mental health and prioritizing health care can be integrated within and across subjects. In crafting the curriculum, teachers should magnify the importance of mental health for the attainment of holistic development. Basic education subjects should inculcate the importance of a good mind in studying and living in general.

Second, school leaders must create programs and training that are aimed at instilling awareness and inspiring action. One commendable school activity is mental health break which means a one-week work break where students can relax and rest. The mental health break or wellness week is commonly scheduled before important assessment and exams to give students the ample time to prepare physically and mentally. The series of programs and training that the school must undertake must come from an understanding of the school's mental health needs. This is why discussions and consultations must be made before and after the school year, with the staff depending on reliable and complete data concerning mental health.

Moreover, teachers should also be knowledgeable enough in handling mental-health related issues. They should be aware that mental-health related disorders are not diseases. Also, they should create a safe learning space where students can openly discuss and share their thoughts and feelings. The school administrators should see to it that teachers and parents are well-educated about the signs and symptoms of mental health struggles.

Third, the aim to institutionalize and prioritize mental health awareness and safety should be supported by the school mechanisms. There should be guidance counselors, psychologists, and health staff who are trained to respond to mental health issues. Students should have fair and easy access to the services and staff. They should feel that they are safe, protected, and are heard of. Students can function better when their minds are safe and well. Students have a place where they could talk to and they can consider their safe space. Teachers should be well aware of when it's time to escalate and refer the situation to a professional.

With these steps, a school can be a safe, learning environment where students can focus on learning and development. In order to achieve the Department of Education's quality of education, it is imperative that we do not only nourish the mind but also protect the hearts of our students.

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