# COVID-19 is Killing District/School Budgets:
# What to Do and Not to Do about Student/Learning Supports

With tightening budgets comes reductions in force. Given prevailing policy priorities, a disproportionate number of lay-offs soon will occur for student/learning support personnel. In the process of decision making, a sad, poignant, and counterproductive competition will be evident as representatives of school counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and other support staff argue about who is most needed.

A particular irony is that the cuts will come at a time when re-opened schools will be confronted with an increased number of students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems and the difficulties many students and staff will experience transitioning back.

## Rethinking the Framework for Budget Plans

In the past, budget decision makers have approached the dilemma of who to keep in terms of what mandates must be met, how to best deal with attendance and other student problems, how to handle academic considerations, and other specific concerns. *There is a better way.*
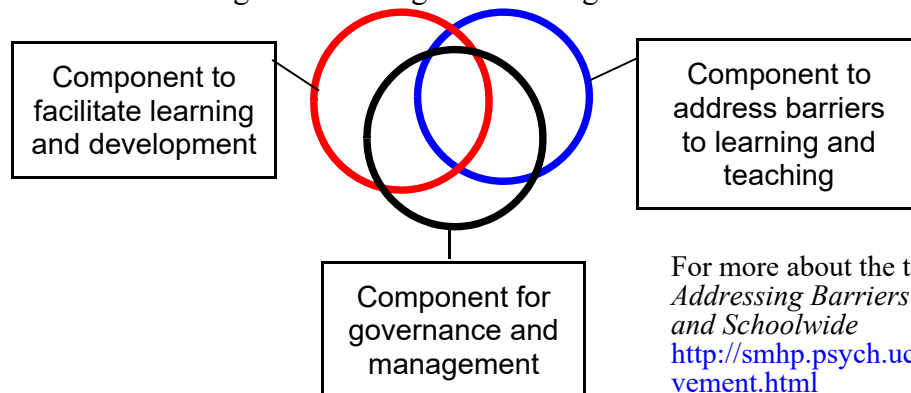
### Escaping Old Thinking

No single program or service can address a school's needs for student/learning supports. And the competition for resources resulting from separate advocacy for specific types of support professionals, programs, and services tends to make a bad approach even worse. Specifically, it contributes to the ongoing marginalization and resultant fragmentation of efforts to address factors contributing to the opportunity and achievement gaps. And the realities are that relatively few students are helped, and old thinking when cutting the budget will ensure even fewer are assisted.

For schools to function effectively, staffing must include a critical mass of student/learning support personnel. However, their traditional roles and functions must be modified. Such staff can play an enhanced role in developing ways to increase equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond. For this happen, new frameworks are required as budget decisions are made about imminent reductions in force.

### Using a Three Component Framework for Budget Decisions

District and school budget priorities *primarily* have emphasized two components of school functioning, namely instructional and management/governance concerns. While these two components are critical, they clearly are insufficient for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. That is why some attention is always given to student/learning supports. But these supports generally are a *secondary* set of concerns. And, because of the lower priority, budget decision making attends to such interventions in a marginalized, ad hoc, and piecemeal manner.

Correcting the situation requires a three component policy framework to guide budget making. The third component identifies efforts to directly address barriers as primary and essential and thereby elevates the priority of such efforts in making budget decisions. As highlighted below, the third component provides a unifying concept for pursuing a wide range of interventions in addressing factors interfering with learning and teaching.



Component to facilitate learning and development

Component to address barriers to learning and teaching

Component for governance and management

For more about the three component framework, see *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

**Reframing Student/Learning Supports Intervention**

With a view to framing how student learning, behavior, and emotional problems are approached at schools, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) endorses a multi-tiered support system (MTSS). Now that adaptation of some form of MTSS is so widespread, it is time to expand the framework to improve the role of schools in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. These are fundamental concerns in enhancing school safety, enabling academic, social, emotional, and physical development, and addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Expanding the MTSS framework involves (1) reframing the continuum and (2) organizing interventions into a cohesive set of common-purpose domains designed to support learning and teaching. Such an expanded framework is intended to promote student and staff well-being, enhance school climate, and yield safe and caring schools.

(1) *Reframing the continuum.* A widely advocated way to outline the continuum of interventions is in terms of levels of focus. Another way to conceive the levels is in terms of what they aim to do and as an interrelated and overlapping continuum of braided school and community subsystems. The subsystems focus on promoting effective schooling and whole child development, preventing problems experienced by schools, teachers, and students, quickly addressing problems as they arise, and providing for students who have severe and chronic problems. Each subsystem is seen as weaving together a wide range of school and community resources.

*(2) Organizing the interventions into a cohesive set of common-purpose domains designed to support learning and teaching.* Mapping interventions using only a continuum tends to generate "laundry lists" of programs and services at each level. Thus, in addition to the continuum, it is necessary to organize interventions cohesively with respect to their intent to address basic concerns that schools actually are confronted with each day. In organizing the activity, it becomes clearer what supports are needed in and out of the classroom so that teachers can enable the learning of students who are not doing well as well as address barriers to learning and teaching such as lack of a safe learning environment.

To improve efforts along the continuum, pioneering efforts have begun to coalesce programs and services into six domains of classroom and schoolwide intervention. These trailblazers define and organize basic interventions domains for school improvements that promote academic, social, emotional, and physical development and address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

The six domains encompass daily efforts in classrooms and schoolwide to address student and schooling problems and promote general well-being (e.g., enhance school climate, yield safe and caring schools, improve student outcomes). The six domains encompass efforts to effectively:

- *Enhance regular classroom strategies to enable learning* (i.e., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems; includes a focus on prevention, early intervening,and use of strategies such as response to intervention and social emotional learning),

- *Support transitions* (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions),

- *Increase home and school connections and engagement,*

- *Respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises*,

- *Increase community involvement and support* (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers), and

- *Facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed*.

The continuum of interventions and the six domains provide a comprehensive and multifaceted intervention framework to guide and unify efforts to improve how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. The resultant matrix is shown in Exhibit A and includes a specific example in each cell to illustrate a variety of student/learning supports.

Clearly, the intervention arenas can be conceived in other ways. The points for emphasis here are that (1) the many activities that schools pursue along the intervention continuum can and need to be further organized and (2) interventions for specific initiatives such as enhancing school safety should be embedded into a unified system of student/learning supports.

For more on this, see
> *Moving Beyond the Three Tier Intervention Pyramid Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Student and Learning Supports*
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/threetier.pdf

## Implications for Staffing

Adopting a three component framework for making budget decisions and framing a unified system of learning supports underscores the need for a critical mass of personnel to staff the component. Planning and implementation involve some reworking of the operational and organizational infrastructure for a school, a family of schools, the district, and for school-family-community collaboration.

At its core, reworking infrastructure and redefining the roles and functions of student/learning support staff is intended to correct the lack of high level administrative leadership and create a leadership team at district and school levels dedicated to unifying and building a system that ends the fragmentation and marginalization of student and learning supports.

For more on this, see
> *Reframing the Roles and Functions of Student Support Staff*
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/studentsupport/toolkit/aide.pdf
> *Key Leadership Infrastructure Mechanisms for Enhancing Student & Learning Supports*
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf

## Concluding Comments

Budget decisions are being made now. Rather then wait to react as disproportionate reductions in force increase educational inequities, student/learning support staff, teachers, administrators, and all other concerned stakeholders need to be proactive in advocating for new thinking. The first step is to get budget decisions makers to adopt frameworks that elevate priorities related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

What lies ahead as schools re-open will certainly require innovation in order for schools to cope effectively. Student/learning supports will be needed more than ever.

To meet the challenges, planners must focus on redeploying whatever school resources are available for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and then weave in whatever the community can add to help fill gaps. And with the challenges comes the opportunity to (1) bring together the fragmented set of interventions into a unified system and (2) rework the operational and organizational infrastructure in ways that lay the foundation for developing the system into a comprehensive and equitable approach in coming years as budgets increase.

**More about Budgeting for Student/Learning Supports**

*Rethinking District Budgets to Unify and Sustain a Critical Mass of Student and Learning Supports at Schools*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/financebudget.pdf

*Cut-Backs Make it Essential to Unify and Rework Student/Learning Supports at Schools and Among Families of Schools* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/cutbacks.pdf

*Balancing Cut-backs at Schools is Essential to Ensuring Equity of Opportunity*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/cut-backs.pdf

*ESSA Funding and Funding Integration* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fundinginteg.pdf

# Exhibit A

## Expanding the MTSS Framework*

**Integrated Intervention *Continuum* (levels)**

| **Categories of Classroom and School-wide Student and Learning Supports** | *Subsystem for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems* | *Subsystem for Early Intervention* | *Subsystem for Treatment ("System of Care")* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Classroom-based learning supports* | (e.g., personalized instruction) | (e.g., special assistance in the classroom provided as soon as a problem arises) | (e.g., special assistance in the classroom provided as soon as a problem arises) |
| *Supports for transitions* | (e.g., welcoming newcomers & providing social/academic supports) | (e.g., when problems arise, using them as teachable moments to enhance social-emotional development and learning) | (e.g., personalized supports for students returning to school from incarceration) |
| *Home involvement & engagement* | (e.g., outreach to attract and facilitate participation of hard-to-reach families) | (e.g., engaging families in problem-solving) | (e.g., support services to assist family in addressing basic survival needs) |
| *Community involvement & collaborative engagement* | (e.g., outreach to recruit volunteers) | (e.g., developing community links and connections to fill critical intervention gaps) | (e.g., outreach to reengage disconnected students and families) |
| *Crisis response/ prevention* | (e.g., promoting positive relationships) | (e.g., immediate response with physical and psychological first-aid) | (e.g., referral for follow-up counseling ) |
| *Student & family special assistance* | (e.g., enhancing coping & problem solving capability) | (e.g., providing consultation, triage, and referrals) | (e.g., ongoing management of care related to specialized services) |

Accommodations for differences & disabilities

Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., Special Education & School-Based

*The specific examples inserted in the matrix are meant to illustrate interventions that can address barriers to learning and teaching. For a fuller array of examples of student/learning supports that can be applied in classrooms and schoolwide, see the set of surveys available at  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/surveys/set1.pdf