

# Addressing Barriers to Learning

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## Improving How Schools Address Barriers to Learning & Teaching: Escaping Old Ideas and Moving Beyond Current Trends

**T**o paraphrase a quote about change:  
*For new ideas to succeed, decision makers and planners need to escape old ideas.*

For some time, old ideas and ad hoc activity have dominated school improvement efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching. This has resulted in a great deal of tinkering and the introduction of a variety of special initiatives.

Unfortunately, rather than significant improvements, the efforts have mostly exacerbated the long-standing marginalization and fragmentation of how schools provide student and learning supports. And a counterproductive competition for sparse resources has been perpetuated.

The results of all this are seen in the wide-spread failure to *effectively* address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. This failure undermines the aim of enhancing equity of opportunity for all youngsters to succeed at school and beyond.

Needed is a fundamental transformation of all activity intended to address barriers to learning and teaching. The goal is to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice. Moving forward with such a transformation requires escaping the old ideas and piecemeal strategies that continue to dominate school improvement planning (e.g., ESSA planning). It also requires embedding and evolving current trends aimed at meeting priority concerns.

### Ideas to Escape and Current Trends to Evolve

Too often, discussions of student and learning supports mainly focus on *services* and how to coordinate them better. The current trend toward multitiered systems of support has highlighted the need to pay more attention to prevention and early intervention. So have the widespread calls for safe schools and improving school climate. And the recent emphasis on whole child and whole school has increased interest in social emotional learning (SEL) and community schools.

*Our focus here is to highlight the importance of evolving current thinking about these matters in order to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.*

### Think Beyond Services

The number of students in many school districts encountering barriers to learning is so great that the need cannot be met by focusing student supports *primarily* on direct services (one-on-one interventions, wrap-around services).

Much greater attention must be given to classroom and school-wide interventions that can reduce learning, behavior, and emotional problems and thus decrease the numbers needing specialized services.

See: *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* –  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

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## Beyond Better Coordination-Integration-Co-location of Interventions

Over the last few decades, the fragmentation of school and community practices for supporting families and their children has been the focus of many initiatives and policy reports. These have generated terms such as school-linked services, integrated services, one-stop shopping, wraparound services, seamless service delivery, coordinated school health, co-location of services, integrated student supports, full-service schools, systems of care, and more. While well-intentioned, such a limited focus has little chance of enhancing equity of opportunity on a large-scale for students across the country. Moreover, as practiced, serious unintended negative consequences for schools have been observed.

The type of *transformation* needed in how schools address barriers to learning requires

- first coalescing all student/learning supports into a primary and essential component of school improvement policy
- then developing the component into a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports that weaves together school and community resources with a view to filling critical intervention gaps and enhancing home and community engagement with the school.

See: *School Improvement Policy Needs to Move from a Two to a Three Component Guiding Framework*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/why3comp.pdf>

## Beyond Current Conceptualizations of MTSS

A growing trend, fueled by federal legislation, is widespread adoption by states/districts/schools of some form of multitiered system of support (usually referred to as MTSS, although some places use other acronyms). In ESSA, for example, a schoolwide tiered model is referenced for preventing and addressing behavior problems. The tiered model is defined as "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data based instructional decision making." The legislation presents the tiered framework (including use of early intervening services) and specific approaches such as positive behavioral intervention and supports as strategies for enabling children with disabilities and English learners to meet challenging state academic standards and stresses coordination with similar activities and services carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

It is important to understand that current discussions of MTSS do not account for its serious limitations as a framework for student and learning supports. Among our concerns are:

- MTSS is an inadequate depiction of a continuum of student/learning supports (e.g., it simply delineates *levels* of school interventions, rather than conceptualizing a *continuum of intervention subsystems* and *the importance of weaving together school and community resources* at each level)
- it does not clarify that each tier is essential to reducing the number of students needing special assistance and how the continuum applies the principle of using the least intervention necessary and the role of response to intervention
- it does not systematically organize the arenas of intervention that schools pursue each day in addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and does not cross reference these arenas with the continuum of intervention subsystems.

Evolving away from MTSS's limitations is critical.

See: *Prototype Guide for Reframing Fragmented Student and Learning Supports into a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable Learning Supports System*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/reframing.pdf>

## Need to Evolve Understanding about Safe Schools, School Climate, and Community Schools as *Emerging States*

It is not enough for stakeholders to say they want to educate the total child, ensure equity of opportunity for all students, reduce the achievement gap, increase graduation rates, have safe and drug free schools, have a positive school climate, turn all schools into community schools, etc., etc. Because they are not understood as *emergent qualities*, such ideals often generate ineffective practices and become buzzwords rather than

generating significant improvements. The desired outcomes can only emerge from transformative efforts to coalesce and improve instruction, student/learning supports, and school management/governance.

We recognize that some current initiatives are helping to enhance safer schools, generate somewhat more positive school climates, and encourage school-community collaborations. Examples include calls for addressing a myriad of mental and physical health concerns (e.g., MH education, violence and other prevention programs, trauma-informed schooling, student and family wellness centers) and moves to enhance how schools promote social and emotional development (e.g., SEL). *However*, the reality is that *emergence* of the full degree of desired system change requires that all such activity be systemically prioritized, adapted to ensure fit, and embedded into a continuously developing unified, comprehensive, and equitable school improvement plan (with realistic accountability indicators and timelines).

See: *Improving School Improvement* – [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

### **Need to Evolve Understanding that Student Problems Generally are Multifaceted and Require More than Discrete Initiatives**

While some barriers to learning are the result of significant individual disabilities and disorders, external factors are responsible for the majority of learning, behavior, and emotional problems. All too familiar is the litany of interfering factors (e.g., inadequate school readiness; violence; youth subcultures that promote criminal acts, bullying, sexual harassment, interracial conflict, vandalism; frequent school changes; and a host of problems confronting immigrants and poverty laden families).

Students who only experience one type of problem are rare. For example, an adolescent referred for misbehaving or using drugs often is truant, has poor grades, and is at risk of dropping out. Misbehavior is associated with learning and emotional difficulties; learning and behavior problems become overlaid with emotional reactions; emotional problems can lead to and exacerbate behavior and/or learning problems.

Diverse school and community resources are attempting to address complex, multifaceted, and overlapping student problems. Unfortunately, at schools interventions usually are developed, organized, and function in relative isolation of each other, with practitioners spending their time working directly with specific interventions and targeted problems. For example, screening of students is frequently advocated for problems such as depression, potential violence, dyslexia, etc. When students experience problems, the trend is to refer the individual directly for assessment and special assistance, perhaps even assignment to alternative programs. When problems are severe, pervasive, and/or chronic, students are referred for a possible special education diagnosis (e.g., most often learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). In some schools and classrooms, the number of referrals is dramatic. And the need to label students in order to obtain special, categorical funding and/or reimbursement from public/private insurance often skews practices toward discrete interventions.

The reality is that schools require and staff need time to develop a comprehensive and cohesive system to address the multifaceted learning, behavior, and emotional problems manifested widely by so many students.

See: *Common Psychosocial Problems of School Aged Youth: Developmental Variations, Problems, Disorders and Perspectives for Prevention and Treatment*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/psysocial/entirepacket.pdf>

### **Escape the Myth That Teachers Can Do it by Themselves**

Every school improvement effort calls, often unrealistically, for enhancing what teachers know and are expected to do. The reality is that, in too many schools, teachers are confronted with teaching conditions and classroom dynamics that are beyond one individual's ability to cope effectively. When teachers go into their classroom and shut the door, they are deprived of essential support and learning opportunities. Too often, negative classroom dynamics and the isolation from colleagues lead to feelings of alienation and "burn out." And, students are cut off from resources and experiences that can enhance learning and prevent problems.

Opening school doors is essential to enhancing collaboration for support and learning. It allows for in-classroom consultation, mentoring, and use of a variety of expert assistance; it enables drawing on the resources and talents of volunteers, family members, and the community-at-large. The resultant supports and on-the-job learning are especially important for preventing commonplace learning, behavior, and emotional problems and for responding quickly when problems appear. Effective collaborations are seen as key to fostering the emergence of a caring climate, a sense of community, and overall teaching effectiveness.

See: *Improving School Improvement* – [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

## Escaping the Temptation of Pernicious Funding

Not surprisingly, the trend for some time in trying to find “extramural” funds for student and learning support has been to reach for and accept whatever is around. Increasingly, however, concerns have been raised that some sources of funding can distract from and distort development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable student/learning support system. A major example is “projectitis” – the pursuit of extramural funding for relatively short-term, small projects that end up redirecting staff attention away from system building. Another example is relying on Medicaid funding for school-based services which ends up redefining the roles of some school support staff by turning them mainly into providers of fee-based clinical services.

Extramural funding can be helpful if it is used to unify and develop student and learning supports. It can be pernicious when it pulls time and attention away from the need for system transformation.

See: *About ESSA and Funding Stream Integration* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fundinginteg.pdf>

## Moving Forward in New Directions

No single program, service, or special initiative can address the range of factors interfering with equity of opportunity to succeed at school for the large number of students affected. The reality is that existing student support services effectively help only a small proportion of the many students who manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems. And the competition for resources resulting from separate advocacy for such activity contributes to the continuing marginalization and resultant fragmentation of such endeavors.

The current unsatisfactory state of affairs underscores the need for transformative changes. The time has come for escaping the systemic problems that arise from pursuit of separate, narrow agenda for student and learning supports. While districts can and do build a few islands of excellence (demonstrations, pilots) and “Cadillac models,” the scale of need (e.g., over 90,000 schools in the U.S.A.) calls for moving widely and quickly in fundamentally new directions.

## About New Directions

For many years, our Center’s policy analyses have stressed that all narrow agenda for student and learning supports, including endeavors to expand mental health in schools, need to be embedded into a unifying concept such as Learning Supports and fully integrated as a primary and essential component of school improvement policy and planning. By coalescing all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, policy makers can

- avoid the unrealistic and often inappropriate call for more and more one-on-one direct services
- counter the mistaken view that co-locating community services on school campuses can ever be a sufficient approach to filling critical intervention gaps at schools and for enhancing community and home engagement
- better address classroom, school wide, and community interventions that can reduce the need for one-on-one services
- facilitate the weaving together of school, home, and community resources to reduce nonproductive competition for sparse resources, gain economic benefits, and enhance outcomes
- enhance coordination and cohesion of all resources (school, community, family) intended to support young people and achieve economies of scale.

*Needed: A Policy Shift.* Current school improvement planning is guided primarily by a two component school improvement framework; that is, the focus primarily is on (1) instruction and (2) governance/management. Some plans also are made for ways to address concerns about safety and specific problems that can interfere with students learning and teachers teaching. However, as stressed above, the focus on such concerns has long been marginalized, and this has and continues to produce ad hoc, piecemeal, and counterproductively fragmented and competitive initiatives, programs, and services.

The predominantly two component approach has worked reasonably well in schools where most students are motivated and able to perform up to expectations. However, the two component emphasis, plus existing student/learning supports, is grossly insufficient in schools where large numbers of students are not doing well. Substantial improvement in all “low performing” schools requires policy for development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable third component that is pursued as a primary and essential support system.



The third component becomes the umbrella under which all efforts and resources to address barriers to learning and teaching are woven together to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of interventions. When the three components are fully interconnected with each other and well integrated into school improvement policy and practice, they provide an essential foundation for promoting whole student development, enabling equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school, and enhancing school climate.

For district policy statements and a prototype for state legislation, see *Section A-3 of the Center's System Change Toolkit* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaidsA.htm>.

*Making it Happen.* Development of a system that transforms and sustains how schools address student/learning supports cannot be accomplished without a well designed strategic plan for systemic change and personnel who have the capacity to effect the changes. The initial means for operationalizing the third component comes from redeploying and weaving together existing school and community resources (including the frequently untapped human and social capital that students and families can provide).

See examples and guides in *Section A-4 of the System Change Toolkit* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaidsA.htm>.

The process must be guided by a carefully defined and broad intervention framework and a dedicated operational infrastructure designed to develop, implement, and sustain system transformation. A major emphasis is on facilitating school-community collaboration in ways that (a) minimize counterproductive competition for sparse resources and (b) redeploy and integrate resources to fill critical gaps in keeping with high priority needs (e.g., see *Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf>).

*Learning from Early Adopters.* For a look at lessons learned from pioneering efforts at state, district, and school levels, see *Where's it Happening - Trailblazers* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>. Of special interest, see the statewide work in Alabama (e.g., their design document and capacity building activity). All the places listed, even those that only flirted with changes, have and continue to teach us about the do's and don't's of system change related to transforming student/learning supports in ways that embed and evolve current activity into school improvement.

For a look at how the work is traveling, here's a link to a Canadian summary developed by EENet and the Performance Measurement and Implementation Research (PMIR) team, which are part of the Provincial System Support Program (PSSP) at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). The summary's intent is to support the selection of an evidence informed intervention by Ontario's Systems Improvement through Service Collaboratives (SISC) initiative. <https://eenet.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/Comprehensive System of Learning Supports.pdf>

## Concluding Comments

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;  
transforming student and learning supports  
is fundamental to enabling equity of opportunity.

Few will argue against the need to end the marginalization of student/learning supports. Escaping old ideas is a first step forward. The next step is to coalesce and evolve current efforts and weave school and community resources into a primary component of school improvement policy. The aim is to transform what exists into a unified, comprehensive, equitable approach that addresses barriers to learning and teaching and re-engages disconnected students.

*To do less is a recipe for maintaining widespread inequities of opportunity.*

## Hot Topic – More Police on School Campuses?

Note: The Center's website devotes a section to *Hot Topics & Issues and Commentaries* that are relevant to Center concerns. See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/hottopic.htm>.

The following is a recent contribution written by Allegra Collins, an undergraduate at UCLA:

In the aftermath of a school shooting in America, school and student safety is propelled to the forefront. Each event leads to new ideas being put forth to make sure that every student who goes to school makes it safely home.

One potential solution that gains a lot of support from anti-gun control advocates is to place more armed police officers at schools. The idea is that the officers would serve to not only neutralize threats and attacks on campus but also to serve as another kind of school administrator to aid with on-campus issues, such as common disciplinary issues.

Advocates believe that the presence of officers would act as a deterrent to crime on campuses. Additionally, advocates of this solution argue that students may feel more comfortable telling a police officer about any threats to the school...

While advocates of placing police officers in schools believe more police will make students feel safer, not much attention is given to how this solution would make students of color feel. With growth of the Black Lives Matter movement and the recent criminalization of immigrants in this country, the attitudes towards and perceptions of police officers held by black and brown people have changed.

People of color are wary of police officers. Many fear that they may be racially profiled leading to their safety being compromised. This attitude could affect how minority students perceive police presence at their schools. The black students who survived the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida made a statement saying that "the increase [in] police presence at Stoneman Douglas made the [school] building feel like a prison for students." Some students even felt that their school was not made safer by having police officers at every entrance. This concern shows that what seems like a perfectly plausible solution to curbing gun violence in schools can actually have the effect of causing fear and anxiety among a particular group of students.

Additionally, police officers may be adding to the phenomenon of seeing students being funneled into the criminal justice system at younger ages because of their duty to report crime and uphold the law. Before police officers are placed at the front entrance of every school in America, more time needs to be taken to examine how their presence affects the mental health of minority students.

*A Personal Note:* When I was younger, I had positive views of police officers. I knew them as people I could count on whenever I felt unsafe. However, as I grew up my view began to change. I got a better understanding of the injustices that black and brown people experience in the judicial system.

Too many minorities, especially black men, find themselves affected by a judicial system that is not built to protect them. Black men find themselves lost in the prison system, and when they return to society they are treated worse than they were in prison. It does not even take going to jail to feel the effects of this system.

For me, I become nervous every time I see a police officer. As a black woman, what is usually a simple traffic stop for a white person fills me with terror. Seeing police officers or security in stores puts me on edge because I have a lingering feeling that I am being watched a little bit more than other customers. I am even more afraid for my younger brother. At 6'4" he can look physically intimidating. My biggest fear is for him to encounter a police officer and, because of his size, be perceived immediately as a threat...

Unfortunately, this is a reality for many black and brown people in America. We are taught to expect to be perceived as a threat because of the color of our skin. We learn, either through personal experience or through others, that the "system" does not always protect us. There can be very little reprieve from a life of constant fear. For me, I felt safe at school. I felt that school was the one place I could go and not feel the weight of being a black woman in America anymore. I personally do not know what I would have done if I did not have that one space to feel free. Every student should be able to experience the freedom that I did in school. This simply cannot happen when SROs are in every school.

For more on this topic, see also the School Practitioner Community of Practice & Exchange discussion about *School Resource Officers* [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhpractitioner/practitioner\(10-17-18\).pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhpractitioner/practitioner(10-17-18).pdf)

**Please share your thoughts on all this.**

Send your responses to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

## Bringing Empirically Supported Prototypes/Practices to Schools

A key facet of translational research is bringing what is learned under “laboratory” conditions into common use and, reciprocally, to have practical applications inform laboratory work. Empirically supported prototypes brought to schools are one example of the importance of translational research.

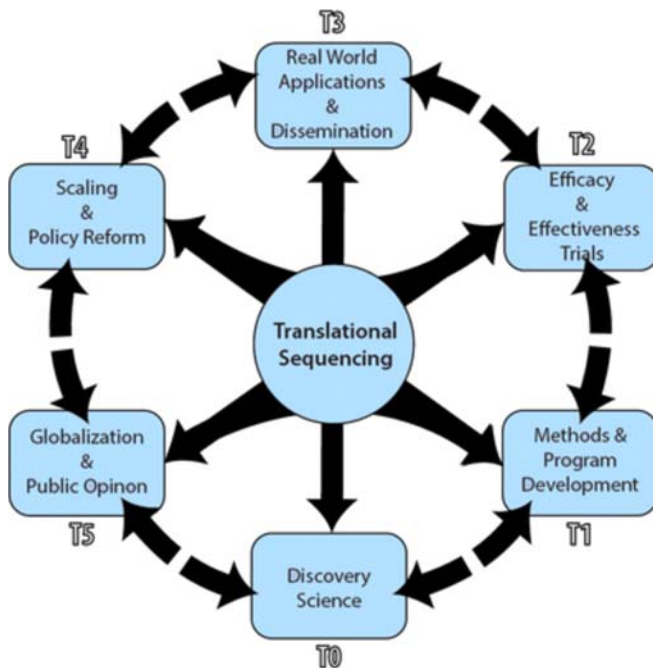
With specific respect to psychological and other intervention applications, the National Institute of Health defines translational research as “applying ideas, insights, and discoveries generated through basic scientific inquiry to the treatment or prevention of human disease.” Researchers directly concerned with translational efforts include those involved with implementation science developmental/experimental psychopathology, psychosocial and educational interventions, system transformational research, and public health policy and practice.

### Challenges and Stages of Translational Research

In 2016, *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, Volume 6, Issue 1 provided an important set of articles designed to highlight “four major translational challenges: (1) demonstrating the utility of basic science findings for prevention; (2) formulating recommendations for the transfer of scientific information across the spectrum of translation, i.e., from basic research on ‘mechanisms of behavioral change’ for practice and policy impact; (3) confronting the real-world challenges in applying a translational approach with recommended innovations to overcome existing obstacles and (4) coming full circle to develop methods and processes for effective prevention programs to be self-sustaining and use back-translational evidence to inform basic sciences” (Fishbein, 2016).

To provide “a more refined, interpretable, and consensual model of translational prevention science,” Diana Fishbein and her colleagues (2016) offer a “full translational spectrum of prevention science and provide six basic stages of translational research.”

As their graphic illustration indicates, the stages extend “from the basic sciences – taking a multi-level systems approach, including the neurobiological sciences – through to globalization” (see below). The authors suggest that “The application of a wide perspective of translation research from basic scientific discovery to international policy change promises to elicit sustainable, population-level reductions in behavioral health disorders.”



From: The full translational spectrum of prevention science: facilitating the transfer of knowledge to practices and policies that prevent behavioral health problems. *Transl Behav Med.* 2016;6(1):5-16. doi:10.1007/s13142-015-0376-2  
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As the authors stress:

“This approach involves the proactive building of an empirical basis for practices and policies in that the science (1) incorporates neurogenetic mechanisms and interacting contextual factors; (2)

recognizes early onset warning signs that underlie behavioral problems and later pathological outcome(s), (3) applies a transactional method to determine the developmentally and culturally appropriate intervention or policy to enhance protective mechanisms thereby reducing exposure to and impact of liability factors, and (4) is sensitive to adaptation across time and context.”

They clarify:

“This translational process is neither linear nor circular; rather, each type, while primarily occurring as a stage in a progression (T0—T5), also may inform all of the other types. Back-translation – addressing outstanding questions to earlier phases in the translational process – applies at all stages. In brief, the stages are as follows:

- Type 0 captures the phenomenon of discovery in the basic sciences and the translational step is the development of an applied theory.
- Type 1 refers to the transfer of knowledge from the basic sciences to the applied sciences with the translational outcome being applied methods and program development.
- Type 2 translation embraces the applied strategies generated by T1 and aims to facilitate, in part, preparation for testing and establishing evidence-based or scientifically-validated interventions.
- Type 3 translational moves practices developed through T2 research beyond the academic research environment where efficacy studies are conducted and into clinical and community settings (where effectiveness and implementation studies occur) with a goal to reduce individual- and population-level behavioral health disorders.
- Type 4 translation formally acknowledges and categorizes the extant research base to understand how to move efficacious prevention programs into a stage in which they are effective in clinical, non-research-oriented contexts and subsequently become self-sustaining in terms of fiscal subsidization, professional servicing, and infrastructure.
- Type 5 translation takes results at the local and national levels to alter our universal understanding of the key determinants of health and well-being and reform social systems to become more responsive to human needs based on sound and well-tested scientific evidence, taking into account global political, economic, and cultural variations.

Back-translation, an iterative part of the process, incorporates bidirectional exchange with earlier stages, as needed, so that there are constant modifications and refinements, allowing for continuous evaluation of outstanding questions.”

### **Some Additional Matters to Think About in Bringing Prototypes to School**

Based on our work with schools, we would point out the following as matters that often are given short shrift in the way translational research is discussed.

In its emphasis on treatment or prevention of human problems, the work tends to deemphasize a reciprocal determinist view of etiology and mainly stresses person-oriented interventions. As a result, the full range of primary instigating factors are not discussed and consequently neither are a full continuum of person and environment/institutional interventions. These short-comings have major implications for intervention research, practice, and policy and its translation.

With respect to addressing youngsters’ learning, behavior, and emotional problems, for example:

During the first stages of translational research (i.e., the discovery, developmental, efficacy and effectiveness stages),

- most of the work has been shaped by models stressing person-pathology;
- this has shaped many of the interventions that have been developed and researched (e.g., empirically supported treatments).



As a result, many of the prototypes brought to schools for effectiveness trials are extremely limited (e.g., designed to help only a few students). And sometimes, they are ill-advised (e.g., they may contribute to the continuing marginalization, fragmentation, and counterproductive competition for sparse resources that dominate school efforts to address the many students who experience learning, behavior, and emotional problems).

Even more importantly, such translational activity tends to perpetuate a limited focus on *improving* specific practices, rather than encouraging the type of comprehensive *transformation* that is essential for substantive, scalable, and sustainable school improvement in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

From this perspective, we stress that translational researchers have an ethical responsibility to avoid doing harm to the people and places where they carry out their research, and they need to evaluate what's involved in replicating the practice and sustaining it over time. This calls for gathering data not just on positive outcomes, but on such matters as the nature and scope of organizational disruptions, costs of capacity building (e.g., training staff), and costs of ongoing implementation and sustainability.

### What Schools Should Ask

In making decisions about bringing in any empirically-supported (science-based) practice for addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems, school decision makers should ask:

- How does what is being proposed fit into a school's efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and its efforts to re-engage disconnected students?
  - >Fit with current school priorities?
  - >Fit with existing accountability demands?
  - >Fit with current efforts to address barriers to learning/teaching?

And, of course, it is essential to find out:

- Will the practice improve how schools address the *many* students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems (e.g., will more than a few students be helped? how much better is the intervention than current practices)?
- Will the benefits outweigh the costs?

In evaluating potential benefits, it is essential to clarify

- What specifically does the evidence indicate is the practice's impact?

This involves critically looking at the data to determine the specific nature and scope of the reported empirical support. Putting design and meta-analyses matters aside, here are concerns to consider in looking critically at the research findings:

- >Do the reported measures (i.e., the dependent variables) account for enough of the variance in the problems the school needs to address?
- >Are any long-term positive and negative outcomes reported?
- >Any cost-benefit analyses?
- >Are the samples relevant to those the school serves (e.g., given that researchers have to work with those willing to volunteer, how closely does the sample match the school's demographics)?

### Broadening the Focus of Research

It is clear that schools present many unique barriers to effective implementation of any new practice. For the most part, researchers tend to focus on the problems of *rigorous implementation* (e.g., fidelity, quality, acceptability, etc.). While this is understandable, successful implementation in schools also requires assurance of a good fit.

Translational and implementation researchers need to expand the focus of *effectiveness* studies done under typical school/classroom conditions so that they can provide schools with answers to such matters as:

- How potent is the prototype for addressing the problems the school needs to address?
  - >Does what was measured specifically indicate that many students will benefit?
  - >How much will the school benefit in its efforts to address barriers to learning?
  - >Is there any evidence about long-term positive and negative outcomes?
- Any data on scalability and sustainability?
- What are the negative outcomes and other costs of establishing the prototype at schools?
- How much will the benefits outweigh the costs for schools?

### Concluding Comments

*To be clear:* None of the above discussion is an argument against the value of trying to use good science as one of the bases for improving schools. Our concern is that too often the “best” evidence is not good enough.

Moreover, research has just barely scratched the surface of what schools need and about the multifaceted problems that must be addressed.

And so, the future of science-based schooling clearly depends on the ability of translational researchers to broaden and deepen their studies to provide answers to the questions highlighted above and overcome the myriad of challenges arising from changing complex organizations and their cultures.

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Note: A power point related to this article is online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/powerpoint/translationalresearch.ppt>

Also see: ***Why current psychotherapies for children and adolescents may be inadequate***  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/therapy.pdf>

**What did you learn in school today?**

**I guess not enough; they said  
I have to go back tomorrow.**



## **About the Center’s Resources for Distance Technical Assistance and Coaching**

***Want resources? Need technical assistance? Coaching?***

To support efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching, the Center offers a variety of ways for you to get help.

- 1. Quick Finds offer a fast and convenient way to access Center materials – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm> .
- 2. Center Staff offers free Technical Assistance and Coaching – contact [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)
- 3. Do-It-Yourself – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/selfhelp.htm>
- 4. Community of Practice & Exchange – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/netexch.htm>

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**For those Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports**

System transformation is challenging (especially with everything else that has to be done on most days).

The transformation process involves (1) expanding school improvement policy so that student and learning supports are fully integrated as a primary and essential component, (2) reframing interventions to create a unified and comprehensive classroom and school-wide system, (3) reworking operational infrastructures to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing system development, and (4) ensuring effective implementation, replication-to-scale, and sustainability.

The Center offers free mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance by email and phone with teams that are moving this work forward. All this is done at no cost to those who are pioneering the work. Those making such systemic changes have found it particularly helpful when we work with them in preparing a design document and strategic plan for the work in ways that integrate the transformation into district and school strategic plans and implementation.\*

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\*Note: Various vendors are offering coaching for this transformation. While these can be helpful (if they can be afforded), working directly with the Center, at least at the start, can ensure that the frameworks and essential system elements are understood and systemic changes are designed in ways that ensure substantive transformation, scalability, and sustainability.

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**Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS)?  
Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange*?  
Send requests to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

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***All great  
achievements  
require time.***  
Maya Angelou

The Center for Mental Health in Schools operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

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 . . . and a host of students*