Addressing Barriers

to Learning *Vol. 23, #3*

SPECIAL EDITION

Announcing a New Book

Improving School Improvement

I n keeping with our efforts to make resources free and accessible, this new resource has been placed online at **http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html** .

This issue of the Center's quarterly ejournal highlights the contents.

The preface:

In opening this volume, you might be thinking:

Is another book on school improvement really needed?

Clearly our answer is yes. Our analyses of prevailing school improvement legislation, planning, and literature indicates fundamental deficiencies, especially with respect to enhancing equity of opportunity and closing the achievement gap.

Here is what our work uniquely brings to policy and planning tables:

(1) *An expanded framework for school improvement* – We highlight that moving from a two- to a three-component policy and practice framework is essential for closing the opportunity and achievement gaps. (That is, expanding from focusing primarily on instruction and management/government concerns by establishing a third primary component to improve how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.)

(2) *An emphasis on integrating a deep understanding of motivation* – We underscore that concerns about engagement, management of behavior, school climate, equity of opportunity, and student outcomes require an up-to-date grasp of motivation and especially intrinsic motivation.

(3) *Clarification of the nature and scope of personalized teaching* – We define personalization as the process of matching learner motivation and capabilities and stress that it is the learner's perception that determines whether the match is a good one.

(4) *A reframing of remediation and special education* – We formulate these processes as personalized special assistance that is applied in and out of classrooms and practiced in a sequential and hierarchical manner.

(5) *A prototype for transforming student and learning supports* – We provide a framework for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system designed to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students and families.

(6) *A reworking of the leadership structure for whole school improvement* -- We outline how the operational infrastructure can and must be realigned in keeping with a three component school improvement framework.

(7) *A systemic approach to enhancing school-community collaboration* – We delineate a leadership role for schools in outreaching to communities in order to work on shared concerns through a formal collaborative operational infrastructure that enables weaving together resources to advance the work.

(8) *An expanded framework for school accountability* – We reframe school accountability to ensure a balanced approach that accounts for a shift to a three component school improvement policy.
(9) *Guidance for substantive, scalable, and sustainable systemic changes* – We frame mechanisms and discuss lessons learned related to facilitating fundamental systemic changes and replicating and sustaining them across a district.

The frameworks and practices presented are based on our many years of work in schools and from efforts to enhance school-community collaboration. We incorporate insights from various theories and the large body of relevant research and from lessons learned and shared by many school leaders and staff who strive everyday to do their best for children.

Our emphasis on new directions in no way is meant to demean current efforts. We know that the demands placed on those working in schools go well beyond what anyone should be asked to do. Given the current working conditions in many schools, our intent is to help make the hard work generate better results. To this end, we highlight new directions and systemic pathways for improving school outcomes. Some of what we propose is difficult to accomplish. Hopefully, the fact that there are schools, districts, and state agencies already trailblazing the way will engender a sense of hope and encouragement to those committed to innovation.

It will be obvious that our work owes much to many. We are especially grateful to those who are pioneering major systemic changes across the country. These leaders and so many in the field have generously offered their insights and wisdom. And, of course, we are indebted to hundreds of scholars whose research and writing is a shared treasure. As always, we take this opportunity to thank Perry Nelson and the host of graduate and undergraduate students at UCLA who contribute so much to our work each day, and to the many young people and their families who continue to teach us all.

Respectfully submitted for your consideration,

Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor

> *Our current school system follows a one-size-fits-all model that does not account for differences in backgrounds, assets or opportunities. And so we tend to overlook strategies that are responsive to the differentiated characteristics of families, communities and schools. My concern is that an exclusively instructional focus optimizes teaching and content, but if the students aren't present and able to concentrate then we'll never be able to truly support all children on their path to realizing their full academic potential, which is the aspirational goal of education reform. In other words,* **instruction alone is not enough to help all students succeed.**
>
> Paul Reville, former Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts & Founding Director, Harvard Graduate School of Education's Education Redesign Lab (posted at http://edublog.scholastic.com/post/instruction-alone-not-enough-help-all-students-succeed)

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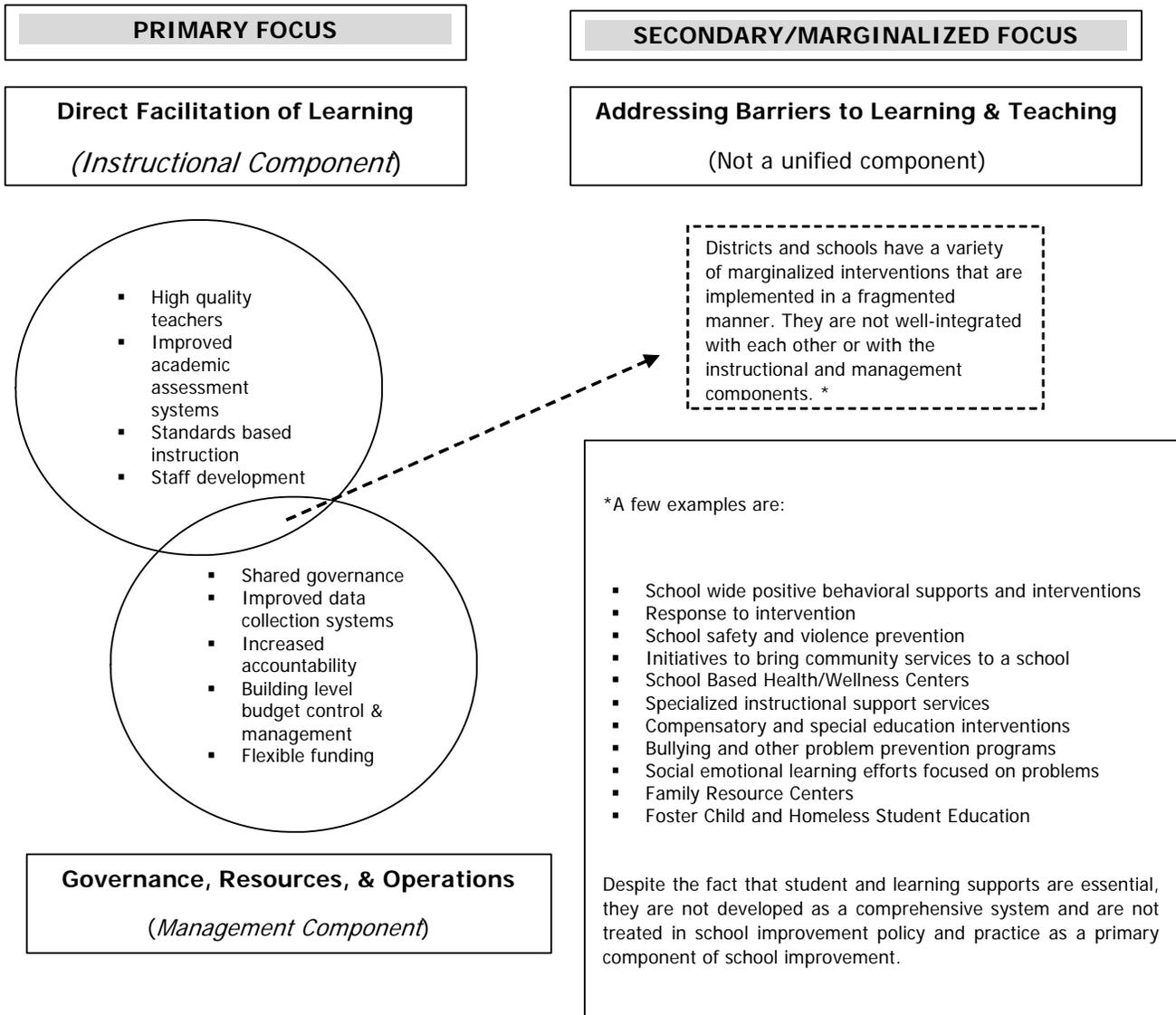16. Toward Substantive and Sustainable Systemic Change

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Appended: Active, Engaged Learning Practices

Introduction: Expanding School Improvement Policy:
Moving from a Two- to a Three-Component Framework

As illustrated in Exhibit 1, 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, the focus on such concerns has and continues to be marginalized, and this has and continues to produce ad hoc, piecemeal, and counterproductively fragmented and competitive initiatives, programs, and services.
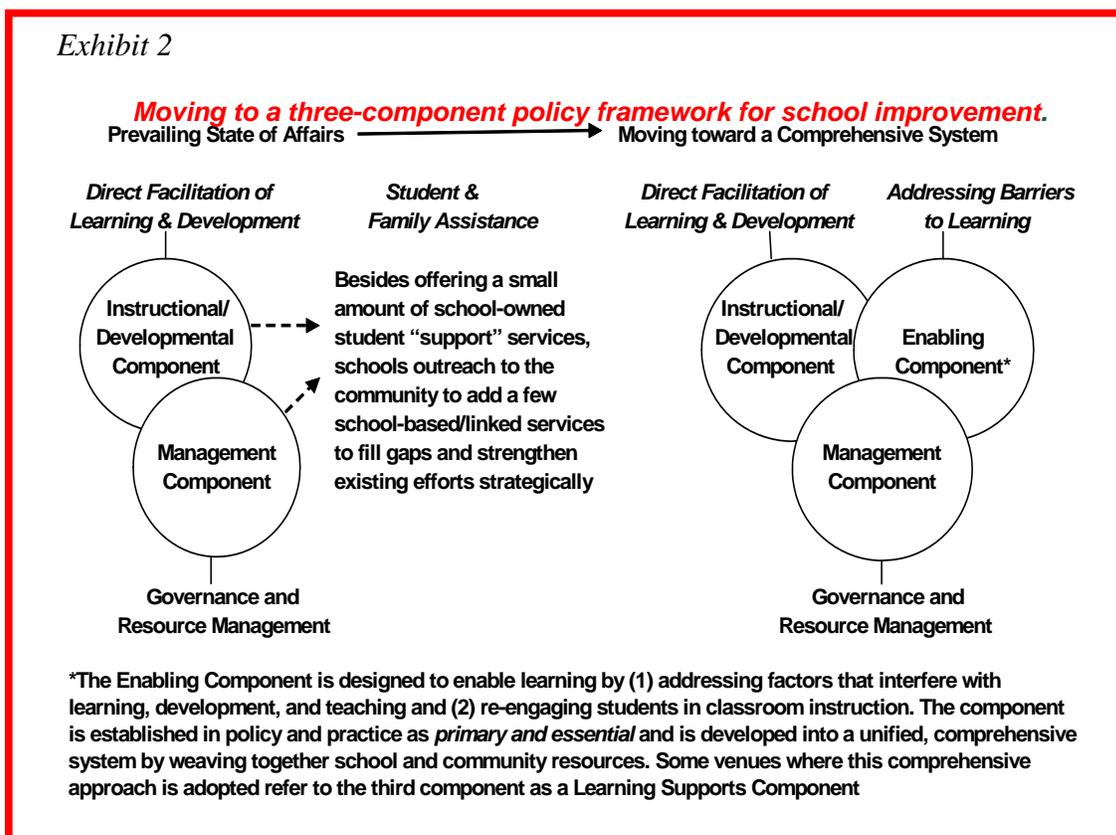
Exhibit 1

Prevailing two-component framework shaping school improvement policy.

PRIMARY FOCUS	SECONDARY/MARGINALIZED FOCUS
Direct Facilitation of Learning *(Instructional Component)*	**Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching** (Not a unified component)

- High quality teachers
- Improved academic assessment systems
- Standards based instruction
- Staff development

- Shared governance
- Improved data collection systems
- Increased accountability
- Building level budget control & management
- Flexible funding

Governance, Resources, & Operations

(Management Component)

Districts and schools have a variety of marginalized interventions that are implemented in a fragmented manner. They are not well-integrated with each other or with the instructional and management components. *

*A few examples are:

- School wide positive behavioral supports and interventions
- Response to intervention
- School safety and violence prevention
- Initiatives to bring community services to a school
- School Based Health/Wellness Centers
- Specialized instructional support services
- Compensatory and special education interventions
- Bullying and other problem prevention programs
- Social emotional learning efforts focused on problems
- Family Resource Centers
- Foster Child and Homeless Student Education

Despite the fact that student and learning supports are essential, they are not developed as a comprehensive system and are not treated in school improvement policy and practice as a primary component of school improvement.

While adopting a three component school improvement policy framework will benefit any school, the predominantly two component approach has worked in schools where most students perform up to expectations. However, it is grossly insufficient in schools where large numbers of students are not doing well. Substantial improvement in "low performing" schools requires a unified and comprehensive third component that is pursued as a primary and essential system.

Exhibit 2 graphically illustrates a shift from a two- to a three-component framework. 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.

Exhibit 2

Moving to a three-component policy framework for school improvement.

Prevailing State of Affairs ⟶ Moving toward a Comprehensive System

Direct Facilitation of Learning & Development

Student & Family Assistance

Direct Facilitation of Learning & Development

Addressing Barriers to Learning

Instructional/ Developmental Component

Besides offering a small amount of school-owned student "support" services, schools outreach to the community to add a few school-based/linked services to fill gaps and strengthen existing efforts strategically

Management Component

Governance and Resource Management

Instructional/ Developmental Component

Enabling Component*

Management Component

Governance and Resource Management

*The Enabling Component is designed to enable learning by (1) addressing factors that interfere with learning, development, and teaching and (2) re-engaging students in classroom instruction. The component is established in policy and practice as *primary and essential* and is developed into a unified, comprehensive system by weaving together school and community resources. Some venues where this comprehensive approach is adopted refer to the third component as a Learning Supports Component

About the Three Components

When the three components are fully interconnected with each other and well integrated into school improvement policy and practice, they provide the essential foundation for promoting whole student development, enabling equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school, and enhancing school climate. Here is a brief sketch of each.

Instructional Component. Society's interest in public education remains that of having schools play a role in (1) socializing the young, (2) ensuring the economic viability of the country, and (3) preserving the prevailing political system. These aims shape school curricula, with special initiatives introduced when policy makers become convinced of specific needs and benefits. One example of a current special initiative is the focus on enhancing curricula related to STEM – science, technology,

engineering, and math (with some advocacy for increasing this initiative to include the arts -- turning the acronym into STEAM). Another example is the increasing emphasis on developing the whole child, with a particular focus on social and emotional learning and character education.

The process of facilitating learning at school takes place throughout the school day in the classroom and in other school venues. It involves broadband teaching practices, classroom management, and strategies for accounting for individual differences, often referred to as differentiated instruction. Currently, concerns for differentiated instruction are stressing the term personalized learning.

Addressing Barriers to Learning/Teaching Component. Even the best instruction is insufficient to ensure all students succeed at school. Providing every student with equity of opportunity to succeed certainly requires higher standards and greater accountability for instruction, better teaching and classroom management, reduced school violence, etc. And it also requires an effective system for *directly* addressing barriers to development, learning, and teaching.

A transactional view of the causes of human behavior emphasizes that both *external* and *internal* factors can interfere with learning and teaching. Addressing such factors requires not only good teaching but a system of supports that directly counters interfering factors. Such a system encompasses a range of specific supports in the classroom and schoolwide and sometimes at home and/or through community agencies. This component involves all school staff and collaboration with family members and community resources focused on preventing problems, implementing personal assistance, and, as necessary, providing specialized interventions. So, while teachers are a core focus, this component highlights that they can't and shouldn't be expected to act alone in addressing barriers to learning/teaching.

Management/Governance Component. The emphasis in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on devolving the federal role in education is the latest shift in governance and management of resources. The devolution is increasing state and district exploration of how to improve policy, allocate and redeploy resources, enhance whole school improvement and accountability, support implementation-to-scale, and sustain innovations.

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In appreciating each of the three components, it is essential not to lose sight of the whole. The aims are whole school and whole student development. To these ends:

- the three components must be fully interconnected and well integrated into school improvement policy and practice;

- concerns about whole student development, equity, and school climate all must be understood and pursued as qualities that *emerge* from the effective implementation, over time, of all three components at a school;

- effective implementation must be pursued through major reorganization of school infrastructure to operationalize each of the three components as primary and essential;

- district, regional, state, and federal efforts to support school improvement must be redesigned to ensure schools have the capacity to make the substantive systemic changes involved in moving to a sustainable three component school improvement approach.

Introductions to Parts 1-4.

Part I

Good Schools and Classrooms

Schools are expected to do their best for *all* students. This, of course, reflects our society's commitment to equity, fairness, and justice. Ultimately, this translates into school improvement efforts that stress applying the best practices known to date.

Yet, if the commitment to ensuring equity, fairness, and justice is to be meaningful, it cannot be approached simplistically. As Jeanie Oakes has lamented:

> *Popular reforms over the past three and a half decades have done little to close opportunity and achievement gaps, and some reforms actually increase those gaps.[1]*

For schools, school improvement starts with designing instruction in ways that account for a wide range of individual differences and circumstances. But, the work can't stop there if we are to assure all students an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. Administrators, teachers, and all student and school support staff must be prepared to design schools to promote positive development, prevent problems, and accommodate and assist with the various learning, behavior, and emotional styles and problems that are encountered each day. Such preparation involves considerably more than most school staff will have learned to do before being hired.

Fortunately, good policy makers, administrators, teachers, and student support staff are continuing learners. They are keenly interested in what others have found works. As a result, most end up being rather eclectic in pursuing their daily functions.

Thoughtfully put together, an eclectic set of practices can be a healthy alternative to fads, fancies, and dogmaticism. But care must be taken to avoid grabbing hold of almost every new idea. This is naive eclecticism and can result in more harm than good.

The way to avoid naive eclecticism is to build one's approaches on a coherent and consistent set of

- underlying concepts
- practice guidelines that reflect these concepts
- best practices that fit the guidelines
- valid scientific data as they become available.

Each of these considerations guide our discussion of good schools and classrooms. The aim in Part I is to synthesize and reframe what currently are seen as good directions for school improvement.

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[1]Jeannie Oakes (2018), Public scholarship: Education research for a diverse democracy. *Educational Researcher, 47,* 91-104.

Part II

Moving toward Personalized Instruction and Special Assistance

An emerging focus for school improvement is personalized instruction. The term has been widely embraced by policy makers and education reformers.

Unfortunately, definitions of the concept substantively differ and preparation for most school personnel has not included an in-depth focus on how to operationalize the practice. Discussions of personalization often leave the impression that the process is mainly about incorporating technological innovations. For the most part, discussions also fail to place personalized instruction within the context of other conditions that must be improved in classrooms and schoolwide to enhance student learning and performance. A growing concern is that personalized instruction is becoming just another buzzword in the school improvement lexicon.

In Part I, we introduced the concept of the match as applied to teaching (meeting learners where they are). This also is widely referred to as the problem of "fit." Formal teaching strives to design instruction that is a close enough fit to engender good learning. Current school improvement efforts view personalized instruction as the best way to approximate a good match.

Of course, even in the best classrooms, there are serious mismatches for some students, which results in them not learning what they are taught. As is widely recognized, many factors can produce a poor fit. Indeed, the possibilities are so extensive it is hardly surprising that there are frequent occasions when learning and teaching are problems.

When a teacher finds it difficult to create an appropriate match for any given student over many days, significant learning problems develop. With learning problems comes an emotional overlay and often behavior problems. It doesn't take long before it is evident that a student needs some special assistance.

Part II (a) presents a framework for improving classroom learning that emphasizes a broad and psychological conception of personalized instruction, (b) outlines practices for operationalizing such instruction, and (c) highlights a framework for improving special assistance. The discussion underscores why school improvement must pursue both the instructional and learning supports components as high priorities.

Part III

# New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

While good teaching is the foundation for learning at school, personalized instruction alone cannot ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to meet expectations. Many barriers to learning and teaching interfere with equity of opportunity for school success. To address such barriers, schools, districts, regional units, and state departments allocate a significant amount of resources.

A major part of these resources is embodied in specialized student and learning support personnel. This includes, *but is not limited to,* the Specialized Instructional Support Personnel designated in the Every Student Succeeds Act. The legislation's list of such personnel encompasses school counselors, school nurses, psychologists, school psychologists, social workers and school social workers; occupational and physical therapists; art, dance/movement, and music therapists; and, speech-language pathologists, and audiologists. Other personnel involved in efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students include administrators, staff for federal "title" programs, those involved in special projects and initiatives, special education staff, paraprofessionals, volunteers, community professionals collocating at schools, and students and their families.

Unfortunately, the considerable activity performed by the various entities usually is developed and implemented in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner and plays out in fragmented, unsystematic ways. In great part, this reflects the marginalization of the work resulting from the prevailing two component approach to school improvement.

Expanding school improvement policy into a three component framework provides a path to ending the marginalization and improving outcomes. Establishing learning supports as a fundamental and primary school improvement component can help focus schools on the need to (a) unify all student/ learning supports and (b) develop the component over time into a comprehensive and equitable system.
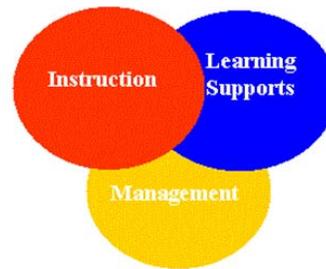
As highlighted in Parts I and II, the learning supports component overlaps the instructional component by bringing learning supports into the classroom. In doing so, it stresses a psychological approach to personalization and a sequential and hierarchical approach to special assistance.

Part III delineastes the entire component and discusses how to operationalize classroom and schoolwide supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. The discussion stresses how schools can collaborate with families and the community at large in establishing such a system.

Part IV
Moving Forward

Some time ago, Seymour Sarason cautioned:

> *Good ideas and missionary zeal are sometimes enough to change the thinking of individuals; they are rarely, if ever, effective in changing complicated organizations (like the school) with traditions, dynamics, and goals of their own.*

And John Maynard Keynes cogently stressed:

> *The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones.*

Besides needing to escape old ideas, transforming what goes on each day in schools in substantive and sustainable ways involves more than focusing on the direct implementation of a set of new ideas. The processes also require strategically facilitating and phasing in implementation. And all efforts to accomplish more than cosmetic changes necessitate enhancing understanding of systemic change and how to deal with the inevitable problems that arise.

In Part IV, we frame systemic and organizational change processes meant to help overcome old ideas and move forward with substantive and sustainable school improvement. We highlight

- major phases and considerations in transforming schools

- ways to rethink operational mechanisms for daily implementation

- processes and lessons learned in facilitating systemic transformation

Finally, given that adaptations to fit local conditions are necessary, we stress that care must be taken not to end up with a few superficial changes rather than fundamental transformation.

Concluding Comments

Do not follow where the path may lead.
Go, instead, where there is no path and leave a trail. (Anonymous)

Clearly, innovation is essential to school improvement. At the same time, it is essential not to create a new mythology suggesting that every classroom and school are unique. There are fundamentals that permeate all efforts to improve schools and schooling and that should continue to guide policy, practice, research, and training. For example:

- The curriculum in every classroom must include a major emphasis on acquisition of basic knowledge and skills. However, such basics must be understood to involve more than the old "three Rs" and cognitive development (e.g., social and emotional functioning). There are many important areas of human development and functioning, and each contains "basics" that individuals may need help in acquiring. Moreover, some individuals may require special accommodation in any of these areas.
- Every classroom must address student motivation as an antecedent, process, and outcome concern, with an emphasis on intrinsic motivation.
- To enhance the ability of teachers to enable learning, special learning supports must be implemented in the classroom, but only after personalized instruction is in place and found insufficient. Such special assistance must be designed to build on strengths and must not supplant continued emphasis on promoting healthy development.
- Beyond the classroom, schools must have policy, leadership, and mechanisms for developing school-wide enrichment programs and a continuum of student/learning supports that are organized into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.
- Families of schools (e.g., feeder schools) need to work together with respect to shared concerns and to effect economies of scale.
- School-community connections are needed to capitalize on the many ways community resources can enhance instruction, enrichment, and learning supports.

We want to conclude by stressing a simple truth: when state and district plans for school improvement don't play out in all schools and classrooms, they contribute to the opportunity and achievement gaps. School improvement planning should begin with a clear image of what a classroom and school must do to effectively engage and teach all students – with an emphasis on whole child development. Then, the focus can move to planning how a family of schools and the surrounding community can complement each other's efforts and achieve economies of scale. With all this clearly in perspective, district, regional, state, and national policy can be reoriented to the role of developing the best ways to support *school defined* systemic changes and implementation, replicate them to scale, and substantively sustain the changes.

And as Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink remind us:

> Ultimately, only three things matter about educational reform. Does it have depth: does it improve important rather than superficial aspects of students' learning and development? Does it have length: can it be sustained over long periods of time instead of fizzling out after the first flush of innovation? Does it have breadth: can the reform be extended beyond a few schools, networks or showcase initiatives to transform education across entire systems or nations?

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*The Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports is part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA.

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