

Addressing Barriers to Learning

Student Supports: What's in place? What's Missing?

Student/learning supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports intended to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school by addressing barriers to and promoting engagement in learning and teaching. In the wake of the pandemic, the pressure to address students' mental health and learning loss makes this year an especially critical period for improving such supports.

Schools currently devote a variety of resources to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families. Such resources include personnel, programs, services, equipment, allocated school budget, extramural funding, social capital, leadership, physical and operational infrastructure, and more. In some places, administrators tell us the expenditures related to student/learning supports account for about 25% of the resources available to a school. However, because school leaders have been so focused on direct efforts to improve instruction, too little attention is paid to making essential improvements in how schools ameliorate learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

We suggest that this summer is an opportune time for planning how schools can better use existing student/learning resources in coming years. And a good way to begin is to map and analyze what's already in place.

Mapping provides the foundation for rethinking how to deploy and redeploy such resources to achieve the greatest impact in cost-efficient ways. The focus of such mapping is on what schools have in place and any community resources that are school-based or linked.

***Mapping not only informs planning, it provides a basis
for widespread communication, sharing, and social marketing.***

As an aid, this issue of the Center's quarterly ejournal highlights how mapping and analyzing a school's student/learning supports has been done at schools working on improving such supports.

Doing the Mapping and Analysis

The first step is to establish a representative group of informed stakeholders to take on the tasks of mapping, analyzing, and recommending major improvements. While the numbers vary depending on school size, it is important to include an administrator and staff who are most responsible for, concerned, and interested in student/learning supports at the school. Some will be assigned because of their role at the school; others will want to volunteer.

In general, mapping student/learning supports encompasses structured collection about the following questions:

- (1) *What staff does a school have available to provide needed supports?*
- (2) *What do they do?*
- (3) *How are the supports organized at the school?*
- (4) *How many students need the supports and how many currently are benefitting?*
- (5) *What are the related costs?*
- (6) *What policies determine the nature and scope of the work?*

In our work, we use several data gathering tools.

- As illustrated in Exhibit 1, we start by mapping the “Who’s Who” involved with addressing barriers to learning and teaching at the school. Initial mapping of these resources focuses simply on clarifying the type of personnel, how many, and how much time they devote to the school. Schools, of course, vary in how many personnel directly provide student/learning supports to students and families. We note all staff who are regular resources for the school (e.g., including those from the district offices and from community agencies).
- Next we clarify all relevant student/learning supports carried out at the school. As illustrated in Exhibit 2, we use a framework that organizes interventions into **six domains** that span across a full **continuum**. The process we use is described at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf>.
- Then, we have several key stakeholders rate items that provide a general overview of student/learning support activities, processes, mechanisms, and effectiveness at the school. See Exhibit 3.
We also request any available data on the number of individuals at the school who are in need, how many were provided available student/learning supports in the past year, and how many were effectively helped.
- To analyze existing resources and costs, we focus on: *What percentage of the school’s budget (including whatever the community provides) goes to addressing barriers to learning and teaching?* This involves clarifying all resources currently being used related to student/learning supports at the school (e.g., facilities, equipment, physical and operational infrastructure, allocated school budget, extramural funding, social capital). As an aid, see <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/budgetmapping.pdf>.
- Finally, we collate a listing of current policies that determine the nature and scope of how student/learning supports are pursued at a school.

As noted, in addition to being an invaluable basis for improvement planning, the products of mapping are communicate widely to enhance public relations and to do the type of social marketing that conveys to concerned stakeholders the many efforts the school is making to address barriers to learning and teaching.

Interschool Mapping and Analysis

Working together, schools in a complex or family of schools (e.g., a high school and its feeders) can increase intervention efficiency and effectiveness and engender economies of scale in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. To these ends, representatives of school planning groups can be brought together to share their maps and analyses with a view to working cooperatively and in integrative ways on common concerns.

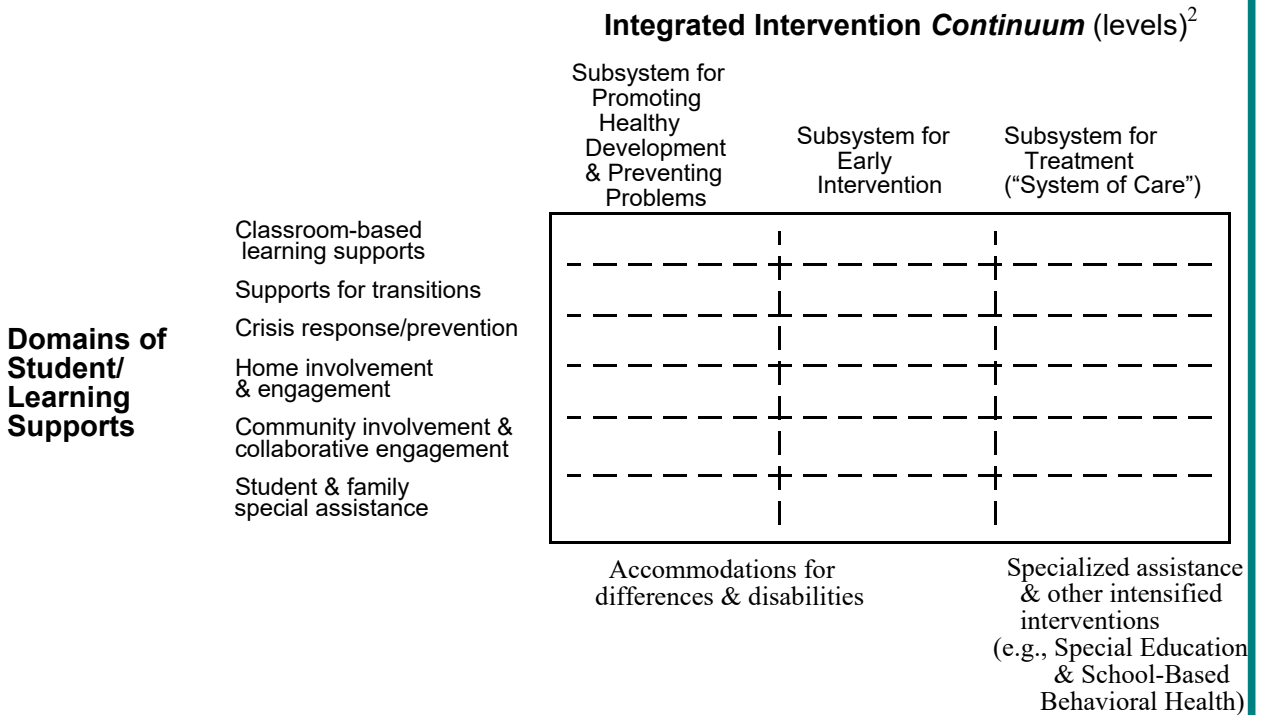
Exhibit 1

Student/Learning Supports Staff Involved with the School

	If more than one, indicate how many	Total number of hours at the school
<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative Leader for Student/Learning Supports	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Other Administrative Staff	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> School Psychologist	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> School Nurse	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Attendance Counselor	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Social Worker	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Counselor	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Dropout Prevention Coordinator	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Title I and Bilingual Coordinator	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Resource Teacher	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Special Education Teacher	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Tutor for students not doing well	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Aide for students not doing well	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Clerical help for student support staff	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> District resources providing student/learning supports	—	—
Specify Type of Staff involved	—	—
_____	—	—
_____	—	—
Community resources providing school-linked or school-based student/learning supports	—	—
Specify Type of Staff involved	—	—
_____	—	—
_____	—	—
_____	—	—
Staff who provide professional development for the above personnel	—	—
Other (specify)	—	—
_____	—	—
_____	—	—
_____	—	—

Exhibit 2

Matrix for Mapping Student/Learning Supports¹



¹ The matrix provides a guide for organizing and evaluating a system of student and learning supports and is a tool for mapping existing interventions, clarifying which are evidence-based, identifying critical intervention gaps, and analyzing resource use with a view to redeploying resources to strengthen the system. The framework can guide efforts to embed supports for compensatory and special education, English learners, psychosocial and mental health problems, use of specialized instructional support personnel, adoption of evidence-based interventions, integration of funding sources, and braiding in of community resources.

² While the *continuum* of interventions often is called MTSS (a multi-tiered student support), MTSS is just a starting point for transforming student/learning supports. Where the MTSS framework has been adopted, it often is promoted as THE ANSWER rather than as a starting point for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. For those ready to build on their MTSS framework, see *Rethinking MTSS to Better Address Barriers to Learning* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/fall19.pdf>

For a picture of school and community resource mapping in action, see the video from the School District of La Crosse – http://youtu.be/-QmheKE7__k

With respect to mapping a full range of community resources, see Kretzmann, & McKnight. *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. IL: ACTA Publications. <http://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/publications/community/introd-building.html>

Exhibit 3

Questions for Key Student/Learning Supports Personnel

Items 1-10 ask about what processes are in place.

Use the following ratings in responding to these items.

DK = don't know

1 = not yet

2 = planned

3 = just recently initiated

4 = has been functional for a while

5 = well institutionalized (well established with a commitment to maintenance)

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Is someone at the school designated as the administrative leader for activity designed to address barriers to learning (e.g., student and learning supports)? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Is there a time and place when personnel involved in activity designed to address barriers to learning meet together? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Is there a system development team – as contrasted to case-oriented teams? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (a) Does the team analyze data trends at the school with respect to | | | | | | |
| >attendance | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >drop outs | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >misbehavior | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <referrals for special assistance | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >achievement | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (b) Does the team map learning supports programs and services to determine whether | | | | | | |
| >identified priorities are being addressed adequately | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >program quality is up to standards | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >gaps have been identified and priorities for the future are set | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (c) Which of the following domains of student/learning supports are reviewed regularly? | | | | | | |
| >Classroom-based Student/Learning Supports | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >Crisis Assistance and Prevention | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >Support for Transitions | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >Home Involvement in Schooling | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >Community Outreach for Involvement and Support | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >Student and Family Assistance | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Are there <i>written descriptions</i> of the supports available to give | | | | | | |
| >staff | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >families | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >students | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >community stakeholders | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Are there a case-oriented systems in place for | | | | | | |
| >concerned parties to use in making referrals? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >triage (to decide how to respond when a referral is made)? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >case monitoring and management? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Are there <i>written descriptions</i> available to give to staff and others about | | | | | | |
| >how to make referrals | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >the triage process | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >the process for case monitoring and management | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >the process for student review | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. Is there | | | | | | |
| >a student review team? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >an IEP team? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >a crisis response team? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| >a learning supports system development team? | DK | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Survey (cont.)

8. Are there systems in place to support staff wellness? Y N
9. Are there processes by which staff and families learn
- (a) what student/learning supports are available at school Y N
- (b) what supports are available in the community Y N
- (c) how to access student/learning supports they need. Y N
10. Has someone at the school been designated as a Y N
representative to meet with the other schools
(e.g., in the feeder pattern) to enhance connectivity and use
of student/learning supports and equity in linking with
community resources?

The following items ask about effectiveness of existing processes.

Use the following ratings in responding to these items.

DK = don't know

1 = hardly ever effective

2 = effective about 25 % of the time

3 = effective about half the time

4 = effective about 75% of the time

5 = almost always effective

11. How effective are the processes for
- >planning, implementing, evaluating and improving student/
learning supports? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- >enhancing student/learning supports resources (e.g.,through
budget decisions, staff development; developing or bringing
new programs/services to the site; making formal linkages with
programs/services in the community)? DK 1 2 3 4 5
12. How effective are the processes for ensuring that
- >resources are properly allocated and coordinated? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- >community resources linked with the school are effectively
coordinated/integrated with related school activities? DK 1 2 3 4 5
13. How effective are the processes for ensuring that resources
available to the whole feeder pattern of schools are properly
allocated and shared/coordinated? DK 1 2 3 4 5
14. How effective is the
- (a) referral system? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (b) triage system? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (c) case monitoring and management system? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (d) student review team? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (e) IEP team? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (f) crisis response team? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (g) learning supports system development team? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (h) development of Classroom-based Learning Supports? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (i) development of Supports for Transitions? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (j) development of Home Involvement and Engagement? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (k) development of Community Outreach & Collaborative
Engagement? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (l) development of Crisis Assistance and Prevention? DK 1 2 3 4 5
- (m) development of Student and Family Special Assistance? DK 1 2 3 4 5
15. How integrated are the community resources that bring
program(s) to the school site? DK 1 2 3 4 5

Analyzing What's in Place and What's Changes are Needed

Awareness of the many factors that can interfere with student success at school and beyond has given rise to a variety of school programs and services and school-community collaborative initiatives. As a result, a great amount of activity is in play across a district to support students, families, and staff. In an era of tight resources, it becomes ever more essential to identify what's working, what's not, and why. This is especially the case with respect to student/learning supports since there is widespread agreement that improvements are needed.

Obviously, the nature and scope of student/learning supports needed and provided vary greatly. Here is our analysis of current efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching in many districts and at many schools.

In general, we find the efforts

- (1) fragmented, overly specialized, and compartmentalized,
- (2) sometimes redundant,
- (3) not cost-effective,
- (4) engender counterproductive competition for sparse resources,
- (5) serve a relatively few students,
- (6) too limited in how and with whom they connect in the community.

A Snapshot of What's Happening

Across a district, while some schools have many student and learning supports in place, others mainly provide whatever is mandated. In large districts, psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, and other specialists often are organized into separate units. Such units overlap regular, special, and compensatory education. In general, districts plan and implement student and learning supports in a fragmented and piecemeal manner – generating a variety of specialized programs and services that deal with the same common barriers to learning and teaching. Federal and state funding streams have exacerbated this state of affairs.

At many schools, student support staff tend to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with a great deal of the work oriented to discrete problems and with an overreliance on specialized services for individuals and small groups. In some schools, a student identified as at risk for grade retention, dropout, and substance abuse may be assigned to three counseling programs operating independently of each other. Such fragmentation, specialization, and redundancy not only is costly, it works against developing cohesiveness and maximizing effectiveness, and it leads to counterproductive competition for sparse resources – all of which works against reducing redundancy and enhancing availability.

Schools confronted with a large number of students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems rarely have enough resources to meet the demand. And in most schools, teachers simply do not have the supports they need when they identify students who are having difficulties.

As always, equity concerns arise related to schools in low socio-economic neighborhoods.

Underlying all this, our analyses stress that the unsatisfactory state of affairs stems from the *marginalization* of student/learning supports in school improvement policy.

Analyses made at different schools will differ with respect to need and priorities as they address barriers to learning and teaching and the problem of reengaging disconnected student and families. However, planning groups have a common goal – moving away from piecemeal approaches and developing a potent system of supports.

Initially, the challenge is to plan ways to coalesce current activity into a unified component. Then, the emphasis is on how resources can be deployed to develop the component into a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports. Analyses zero in on redundant and poorly conceived activities in order to redeploy those resources. Gaps are identified that must be filled in developing the system.

Another challenge in making changes involves revamping the operational infrastructure at the school. For an aid in considering this, see *Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure*.

As soon as feasible, representatives from a family of schools (e.g., the feeder pattern) are brought together to share their maps and analyses and explore ways for their schools to work together and equitably use local community resources. A shared analysis of common concerns guides efforts to enhance cost-effectiveness by facilitating collaboration, coalescing resources, and engendering economies of scale.

At the very least, schools should discuss the following matters related to improving how to improving student/learning supports:

- (1) Is there a map of all the student/learning supports help available at the school?
- (2) What is provided to teachers, students, parents, and others to inform them of what's available?
- (3) What teams are in place that bring together student/learning supports staff?
- (4) What is done to coalesce all the separate efforts of the student/learning supports staff?
- (5) What is done to integrate the efforts into general school improvement planning?
- (6) Is there ongoing staff development at the school for those providing student/learning supports and for teachers with respect to ameliorating students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems?

About Rethinking Student/Learning Supports

When we have mapped and analyzed student/learning supports at schools, the results have shown that, despite all the emergency band-aid approaches added to cope with the increases in student problems, the schools are nowhere near responding in ways that can significantly enhance equity of opportunity. And, of course, as long as so many students lack equity of opportunity to succeed at a school, the school cannot significantly reduce the achievement gap.

Efforts mainly focused on improving instruction are helpful, but clearly insufficient. So is adding a few more student/learning supports (especially if the additions are affordable only with temporary extramural funding).

Based on available research, our Center continues to emphasize that reducing the achievement gap requires a laser-like focus on enhancing equity of opportunity. And we see a key facet of this as involving the transformation of the role schools play in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students.

Proposals that focus mainly on integrating student and learning supports are much too limited. The need is for fundamental changes in the way student and learning supports are conceived and structured.

So it is time to rethink how districts and schools – working with communities – address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students and families. We have stressed that the way to go is to unify existing student/learning supports and, over a couple of years, develop them into comprehensive and equitable system that encompasses both a full *continuum* and *domains* of interventions (as illustrated in Exhibit 2). Such a system is fundamental to all efforts to reduce the achievement gap and effectively promote whole child development, advance social justice, and enhance a positive school climate.

A Note about Involving Students in Mapping and Analysis

Rarely are students, especially those not doing well at school, included in major roles as part of school improvement processes. Yet their participation can provide an invaluable perspective. Moreover, including students in design and development processes is seen as maximizing the likelihood that they and their peers will perceive supports positively, seek them out, and participate in a motivated manner. Student involvement can be expedited in various ways (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups, inclusion in work groups that map and analyze resources).

Concluding Comments

Initial mapping and analysis is a beginning, not an end.

Every school can replace its “laundry list” of supports with a framework that conveys a well-organized system and how to access the supports.

Ongoing mapping, analysis, and system development at a school and among a family of schools can enhance cost-effectiveness by facilitating collaboration, coalescing resources, and engendering economies of scale with respect to providing supports and staff development.

School accountability can be expanded to include *direct* measures of the effectiveness of student/learning supports.

The information gathered can be used by schools and districts for public relations and social marketing.

Now is the time for schools to begin a process for improving the essential role they play in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families.

While our Center has developed many resources related to improving student/learning supports, at this critical time when there is so much emphasis on supporting students and improving schools, we thought a *brief* guide would be especially useful to stakeholders ready to move forward. See

>[*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*](#)

For more in depth discussion of the matters highlighted, see

>[*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*](#)

>[*Improving School Improvement*](#)

>[*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*](#)

For more on mapping, see the Center’s Quick Find on:

>[*Mapping Existing School and Community Resources for Addressing Barriers to Learning*](#)

Also see

>[*Mapping Your School’s Resources*](#) (from the Michigan Dept. of Education) –

A Call to Action

If schools are to enhance equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond, it will take enlightened leadership at all levels to end the status quo by moving forward. And, it will take committed people, working together, to establish and fully unify and develop comprehensive student/learning support systems into every school improvement initiative.

At the same time, the process begins with a few individuals taking action and starting with a few strategic steps.

At a minimum, we are asking you to share your thoughts about ways to elevate student and learning supports in policy as a nonmarginalized and unified system. That will help us in mobilizing others. And send us all information about what you see happening to move learning supports forward as a unified and nonmarginalized system so we can let others know. Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu or to adelman@psych.ucla.edu

Here are a few more strategic steps you can take:

(1) Create awareness by sharing information with others (directly and/or through us)*

Help enhance awareness by ensuring that others who are in a position to effect systemic changes are well-informed about

- the need for new directions for student and learning supports, including the costs of continuing to do business as usual
- how to rethink student/learning resources

If you want us to send information to anyone, just let us know.

(2) Let us know about other centers, associations, journals, and various media you think would be willing to join in the call for rethinking supports and moving in new directions

Let us know about who to contact and any suggestions about enlisting their participation.

(3) Use any window of opportunity to play a role in kick-starting some activity to initiate fundamental systemic changes that can enhance the effectiveness of supports for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students.

*Communicate any data and your own experiences and perspectives, and share resources from our Center such as

>Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions

and the aids in the Center

>System Change Toolkit for Transforming Student Supports into a Unified & Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching