Moving Beyond the Mental Health and Learning Loss Crises

By now, there is widespread consensus that schools are experiencing an increase in learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Indeed, the pandemic has led to student mental health problems and learning loss being highlighted as "crises."

But there is no consensus and not enough discussion about the best way to ameliorate the problems.

What we hear from folks across the country mainly tends to emphasize the need for more personnel to enhance instruction and increase the availability of services (e.g., tutoring, counseling). This certainly has been the trend in using pandemic temporary relief funds.

> *The trouble is that just a bit more of the same approaches can only help a few more individuals and will not correct the long-standing failure of prevailing school improvement policy and practices to reduce the chronic prevalence of the opportunity and achievement gaps.*

This reality is highlighted by the way mental health and learning loss concerns currently are being pursued. Prevailing strategies emphasize enhancing instruction, bolstering service availability, and framing supports in terms of MTSS and in the context of the Community School movement. Such approaches are relevant and can be built upon. But by themselves, these efforts ignore and even impede making essential changes in school improvement policy and guiding transformative systemic improvements in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We note that, at too many schools, both MTSS and Community Schools rapidly are being adopted as buzzwords rather than substantive improvements.) See

> *>Rethinking MTSS to Better Address Barriers to Learning*
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>   https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/fall19.pdf
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> *>Evolving Community Schools and Transforming Student/Learning Supports*
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>   https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/evolvecomm.pdf

We understand the immediate pressure has been for crisis responding. At the same time, research indicates that the long-range need is for transformative changes in how schools play a major role in addressing the many barriers to learning and teaching. Indeed, our analysis is that current approaches to providing student/learning supports are too narrowly focused and are a recipe for maintaining the prevailing marginalized and fragmented approach used at schools as they attempt to ameliorate the broad range of educational, psychosocial, and health concerns they encounter daily.

These matters may be of little concern for schools where the needs of most students are being addressed well. But it is an *essential* concern for the many schools that continue to have significant numbers of students who are not doing well. These schools must move forward in rethinking and rebuilding a sustainable system of student/learning supports that is unified, comprehensive, and equitable. Such system rebuilding can be initiated by redeploying existing school resources and making formal connections with a wide range of community resources.

Unfortunately, too many recent reports have not gone beyond tinkering with what already is in place. Contrast such reports with

>***Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions***
https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf

And while our Center's work has produced many resources related to these matters, the work is detailed in three free books all of which can be accessed at https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

>*Improving School Improvement*

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

Our hope in raising these concerns and offering guides for transformative system change is to encourage greater attention to moving beyond the limitations of crisis responding to more advanced thinking about how schools working with communities can rework student/learning supports so that such supports are no longer marginalized in school improvement policy and practice.