

Fully Integrating Student/Learning Supports into the School Improvement Agenda

Are you worried about the ongoing marginalization of student/learning supports?

Then, find your way, as early as you can, to the tables where school improvement planning and major decision making are underway.

Why is it essential to be at school improvement and decision making tables?

If you are not involved in planning and making major decisions, the concerns you represent will be marginalized in the schools quest for immediate increases in test scores. In an era of sparse school resources, this means that all interventions designed to address “barriers to learning and teaching” will be attended to in superficial ways when resources are allocated. That is, even when the concerns are understood (and lamented), appropriate resources will not be assigned to address the matters.

How to Proceed

(1) Accept and support the reality that:

Effective instruction is the bottom line for any school. No one wants to send their child to a school where teachers do not have high standards, expectations, and competence.

(2) Within that context, strongly make the following points:

- *School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students. But, when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.*
(Carnegie Task Force on Education)
- And, the reality in too many classrooms is that improved instruction is not sufficient. In daily practice, schools continue to be plagued by student disengagement, bullying, violence, and other behavior problems, substance abuse, and dropouts.
- Teachers need and want considerable help in addressing barriers to student and school success. Unfortunately, the sparse help they currently receive is grossly inadequate.
- A fair interpretation of the phrase “No Child Left Behind” is that all students will have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Unless school improvement efforts ensure there is a systemic, comprehensive, and cohesive approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, many will continue to be left behind.

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(3) Ask to be part of the formal needs assessment used as a basis for school improvement:

Provide help with the school improvement needs assessment to be certain that factors directly interfering with effective learning and teaching are fully delineated. For instance, the guidance for designing schoolwide programs in Title I schools calls for needs assessment in seven arenas. In each of these, data should stress necessary improvements related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching (see examples below):

- *standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment* – Are problems effectively addressed related to student motivation and readiness to learn what the teacher plans to teach on a given day (e.g., how many students are not adjusting well to school? how many are not very engaged? how many have actively disengaged?)?
- *structural reform strategies* – What does the school do each day to address barriers to teaching and learning as an essential aspect of enabling all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school?
- *leadership and governance* – Is there at least one major leader/administrator who sits at decision making tables and whose job description encompasses substantial responsibility and accountability for the development of a comprehensive system of learning supports?
- *professional development* – Is there an effective capacity building program for all staff who work to enable learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching?
- *culture and climate* – Is there understanding of the relationship between how the school addresses barriers to learning and teaching and how students, staff, and families feel about the school?
- *external supports and parent and community involvements* – Are all these used to strategically fill high priority gaps related to developing a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of learning supports?
- *extended learning activities* – Are these used not only to enhance the school’s immediate academic concerns, but also to provide major opportunities to enhance social and emotional development and for true enrichment experiences?

(4) With the data from the needs assessment, you can request formal inclusion in the planning process to ensure there is an appropriate focus on addressing barriers to learning:

In doing so, you can be guided by the five step process outlined in the guidance for designing schoolwide programs in Title I schools, but with the added emphasis on effectively dealing with concerns about addressing barriers to learning and teaching. This requires

- ensuring that staff who understand learning supports are key members of the planning team (some guides do specifically mention that the planning team should include “non-instructional staff” such as pupil services personnel, guidance counselors, health service providers, etc.)
- clarifying that the vision for reform not only includes improving instruction and governance/management of resources, but also requires a comprehensive approach to enabling learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching
- including in the school profile a detailed, separate section on learning supports that
 - specifies professional development for learning supports staff
 - broadens the focus with respect to family and community involvement to strategically fill high priority gaps related to development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of learning supports
 - focuses on how well the learning supports staff are integrated into the infrastructure for decision making about resource allocation and daily operations

(5) At the planning table, stress that meeting the challenge stemming from factors that interfere with learning and teaching:

- is an absolute *imperative* given how many schools are designated as low performing, how difficult it is to close the achievement gap, and the continuing concerns about school safety.
- requires rethinking how schools can more effectively use *all* support programs, resources, and personnel.
- requires setting appropriate priorities and goals for meeting needs (addressing about three major concerns each year)
- requires establishing an *infrastructure* for beginning the process of developing a comprehensive schoolwide approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching (e.g., the leader/administrator responsible for doing so, a team to work with the leader in developing a comprehensive system of learning supports).

Fully Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching in the School Improvement Design

While school improvement guidance documents allow for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, they do not give direct attention to developing a comprehensive system of learning supports that accounts for the full range of learning, behavior, and emotional problems teachers encounter each day. Think about the need for a system that enables teachers to be more effective in teaching the many with garden variety learning and behavior problems (who currently are inappropriately misdiagnosed as LD or ADHD in order to provide them with additional assistance); think about what must be done to re-engage the large and growing number of students who teachers report have actively disengaged from classroom instruction.

No one needs to start from scratch in planning to develop and fully integrate a systemic approach for “student/learning supports” into a comprehensive schoolwide plan. The Center has several examples online (see appended references). We consistently use these examples as prototypes in analyzing school improvement planning guides (e.g., the guidance for designing schoolwide programs in Title I schools). From that perspective, it seems clear, for example, that the following five of the nine components that must be addressed in the Title I plan can readily be designed to ensure development of a system of learning supports.

- *High-quality and ongoing professional development.* “The statute requires that professional development be extended, as appropriate, to those who partner with teachers to support student achievement” This certainly should include all who are or need to be involved in addressing barriers to learning and teaching.
- *Strategies to increase parental involvement.* Again, this is an area that provides opportunity to focus on how the school can expand its efforts to involve families/homes (including foster care providers). A comprehensive system of learning supports includes a full continuum of interventions necessary for reaching out to those with whom schools find it hard to connect.
- *Plans for assisting preschool students in the successful transitions from early childhood programs to local elementary schoolwide programs.* Support for a full range of transitions is a key element of a system of learning supports. Of particular concern related to the transition from early childhood is elementary school adjustment and follow-through with children who need social and academic support well into kindergarten and often into grades 1 and 2.
- *Activities to ensure that students who experience difficulty attaining proficiency receive effective and timely assistance.* While improved (e.g., personalized) instruction may be sufficient for some students, many need additional supports to enable learning. Often this amounts to adjustments and accommodations that can be implemented in the classroom to enhance motivation and capability to learn (e.g., classroom-focused enabling). However, a schoolwide approach also requires the operation of a full range of learning supports, including access to specialized student and family supports.
- *Coordination and integration of Federal, State, and local services and programs.* A well-designed system of learning supports braids together all school and community resources into a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive intervention framework to address barriers to learning and teaching.

And, so: If schools are to ensure that students succeed, school improvement designs must reflect the full implications of the word *all*. Clearly, *all* includes more than students who are motivationally ready and able to profit from demands and expectations for “high standards.” Leaving no child behind means addressing the problems of the many who aren’t benefitting from instructional reforms because of a host of *external* and *internal* barriers interfering with their development and learning. This is certainly the case for students in any school in need of improvement, and therefore, school improvement planning must fully reflect this reality.

A Few Relevant References from the Center

- *Sustainability & Scale-up: It's about Systemic Change* (newsletter feature article) – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Newsletter/Fall04.pdf>
- *Sustaining School-Community Partnerships to Enhance Outcomes for Children and Youth: A Guidebook and Tool Kit* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/sustaining.pdf>
- *Systemic Change for School Improvement: Designing, Implementing, and Sustaining Prototypes and Going to Scale* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/systemicreport.pdf>
- “Scaling-Up reforms across a school district” by L. Taylor, P. Nelson, & H.S. Adelman (1999). *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 15, 303-326. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/21_SCALING-UP_REFORMS_ACROSS_A_SCHOOL.pdf
- “On sustaining project innovations as systemic change” by H.S. Adelman, & L. Taylor (2003). *Journal of Education and Psychological Consultation*, 14, 1-25. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/45_on_sustainability_of_project_innovations_as_systemic_change.pdf
- “Toward a scale-up model for replicating new approaches to schooling” by H. S. Adelman, & L. Taylor (1997). *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 8, 197-230. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/06_toward_a_scale_up_model_for_replicating_new_approaches.pdf
- *School Improvement Planning: What's Missing?* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/whatsmissing.htm>
- *Addressing What's Missing in School Improvement Planning: Expanding Standards and Accountability to Encompass an Enabling or Learning Supports Component* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enabling/standards.pdf>
- *Designing Schoolwide Programs in Title I Schools: Using the Non-Regulatory Guidance in Ways that Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/DOEGuidance.pdf>
- *The School Leader's Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning* by H. Adelman & L. Taylor (2006) (<http://www.corwinpress.com/book.aspx?pid=11343>)
- Example of a Formal Proposal for Moving in New Directions – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/studentssupport/toolkit/aidj.pdf>
- *Developing Our Youth: Fulfilling a Promise, Investing in Iowa's Future - Enhancing Iowa's Systems of Supports for Learning and Development* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/iowasystemofsupport.pdf>
- *The Implementation Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning* by H. Adelman & L. Taylor (2006) (<http://www.corwinpress.com/book.aspx?pid=11371>)

A few more resources to help make the case:

- *Talking Points - Five Frequently Asked Questions About: Why Address What's Missing in School Improvement Planning?* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/q&aschoolimprove.pdf>
- *Costs of Not Addressing Barriers to Learning* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/costs.pdf>
- *Data on the Plateau or Leveling Off Effect of Achievement Test Scores* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/plateau.pdf>
- *Data Related to the Need for New Directions for School Improvement* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/data.pdf>
- *Another Initiative? Where Does it Fit? A Unifying Framework and an Integrated Infrastructure for Schools to Address Barriers to Learning & Promote Healthy Development* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infrastructure/anotherinitiative-exec.pdf>