

About School Adjustment

New beginnings are both opportunities and challenges.

Some students experience difficulties adjusting to new schools, new teachers, new course work, new classmates. Estimates suggest 20-25% of students change schools each year. The figures are greater in school districts with large immigrant populations.

Being a new kid at school can be especially difficult. Youngsters entering a new school and neighborhood are confronted with multiple transition challenges. This is also the case for many students as move to the next grade. While some make such transitions easily, many do not. The challenges are compounded when the transition also involves recent arrival in a new country and culture.

Students entering new surroundings usually are anxious and feel somewhat "out-of-touch." Their anxiety may be exacerbated by feelings of insecurity and alienation. Some may only experience benign neglect from peers; others are met with hostility and are targeted by bullies.

It is particularly poignant to see a student who is trying hard, but is having problems adjusting. If the difficulties are not addressed, failure to cope effectively with transition challenges can result in major learning and behavior problems. Over time, the psychological and social impact may be devastating and produce life-long difficulties..

Changing Schools When there is No Choice

In an era when there is widespread discussion of school choice, the reality is that options are limited. Magnet schools and charters have tight enrollments. Special provisions are rarely granted for attending a public school out of one's residence area. Private schools are not economically available to the majority. So, for the most part, youngsters must enroll in their local schools. This can be fine when the school is high performing, and the student fits in academically and socially. It can be another barrier to learning when the school is a low performer, and the student dislikes being there.

When families move, the hope is that a new school will be a good one, maybe even better than the one left behind. Unfortunately, this may not be the case. Furthermore, school change may occur anytime during an academic year, and this can be disruptive to learning and teaching, especially in schools enrolling many students from families that move several times during the year.

Any move can be disruptive, frequent moves even more so. And for students from economically disadvantaged families, any move usually means going from one low performing school to another. When a move is to a less desirable school, the likelihood of school adjustment problems increases. Moreover, teachers serving highly mobile populations carry an extra instructional burden and seldom have supports to address student school adjustment difficulties. All this is a recipe for student and school problems.

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Addressing School Adjustment Problems

If adjustment problems are not addressed, positive motivation for school dwindles and is replaced by avoidance motivation. Learning, behavior, and emotional problems increase.

Classroom and school-wide interventions can reduce adjustment problems, enhance student performance, and establish a psychological sense of community throughout the school. How well a school addresses adjustment problems is a basic indicator of program quality.

Three major intervention concerns in addressing school adjustment problems are: (1) reducing unnecessary school changes, (2) providing supports for transitions, and (3) monitoring for such problems and responding quickly when they are noted. In focusing on such concerns, teachers, support staff, peers, families, students themselves, and community stakeholders all can play a role.

Reducing Unnecessary School Changes

When families move out of boundaries for the school in which their children are enrolled, their youngsters commonly change schools. While some handle the transition into the new setting well, it can be expected that some will not. Those entering late in a school year often find it especially hard to connect and adjust. Making new friends at school requires finding ways to be accepted into a complex social milieu. Teachers often find it difficult to determine how to pick up with a student's academic program and how to connect with and engage the student in classroom activity.

Families usually recognize that residential moves involve both challenges and opportunities. Sometimes the opportunities of a school change do outweigh the problems, especially if the family didn't value the school left behind. However, if they are happy with the current school and are not moving out of the district (or even if the move takes them over the line into a nearby district), they may not want to change schools. District policies, however, may require they leave.

Supports for Transitions

Starting school, changing schools, moving to the next grade level, encountering hassles before and after school, during lunch – students (and their families) are confronted with a variety of transitions every day and throughout each year of schooling. Transitions are critical times.

Transitional problems can be viewed as stemming from external or internal factors or both. Whatever the cause, transition stressors can be barriers to school adjustment and thus learning and teaching. They also can exacerbate other factors that interfere with learning at school. Such stressors can lead students and their families, especially those who are particularly vulnerable, to behave in counterproductive ways. The experiences can have life-shaping consequences.

While the challenges are significant, addressing transitions also presents opportunities to prevent problems and enable learning. A comprehensive approach to supporting transitions involves interventions within classrooms and school-wide, among schools, and with the community and focuses on the full range of transitions (including daily transitions such as before school, changing classes, breaks, lunch, afterschool). Here our emphasis is on new school entry, within school matriculation challenges, and returning to school after lengthy periods away, such as summer breaks or a hospitalization (see box on next page).

Some Key Transition Concerns and Examples of Supports for Transitions

Newcomers to a school – new students and their families, new staff, volunteers, visitors (Examples of interventions: comprehensive orientations, welcoming signs, materials, and initial receptions; social and emotional supports including peer buddy programs; accommodating special concerns of those from other countries and those arriving after periods of hospitalization)

Matriculation challenges – new classrooms, new teachers; grade-to-grade; elementary to middle school; middle to high school; in and out of special education programs; school-to-career/higher education transition (Examples of interventions: information; academic, vocational, and social-emotional counseling and related supports; pathway and articulation strategies; mentor programs; programs to support moving to post school living and work)

Lengthy periods away from regular instruction – summer, intersession, hospitalization (Examples of interventions: supports for maintenance and catching-up, recreation and enrichment programs, service and workplace opportunities)

From the perspective of addressing barriers to learning, in-depth welcoming and social support are essential facets of every school's transition programs. In addition, adjustment problems are best addressed when classrooms provide personalized instruction and special assistance (including accommodations) whenever needed.

Monitoring for Adjustment Problems and Responding Quickly

Over the first few weeks, teachers realize quickly who has and hasn't made a good adjustment to their classroom and to the school. This is the time to address the problem before it gets worse. This is the time for staff development to focus on the type of strategies that enable good student adjustment, as well as identifying and addressing problems as soon as they are noted. This is the time for student support staff to work with teachers in their classrooms to address both motivation and capability concerns.

Particular attention must be given to addressing the complex transitional needs of highly mobile students, recent immigrants, and new staff. The greater the numbers and rate of student and staff mobility and of families arriving from other countries, the greater the priority for pursuing strategies to enhance welcoming and social support.

Make it a Major Focus of Inservice Continuing Professional Development

To facilitate a strong focus on school adjustment, schools can use staff development to encourage structured staff discussions about what teachers can do and what other staff (e.g., student support staff, resource teachers, etc.) can do to team with teachers in their classrooms. It also is important to clarify ways to use other social capital (e.g., aides, volunteers, peer tutors/coaches, mentors, those in the home) to help with additional strategies for addressing school adjustment concerns.

In addition, we suggest establishing the first month of the academic year as “Addressing School Adjustment Month – Getting the School Year Off to a Good Start” (see *Is the School Year Off to a Good Start?* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/goodstart.pdf>)

For free and easily accessed resources that can aid in professional development, see the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find entitled:

- *Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcoming* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm

For more, use the Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds to link to other Center resources and to online resources across the country. For example, see:

- *Classroom Focused Enabling* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/classenable.htm>
- *Motivation* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>
- *Response to Intervention* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/responsetointervention.htm>

Addressing School Adjustment: A High Priority Concern of a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Student and Learning Supports

While some schools already have a proactive approach to school adjustment problems, many do not. We suggest that all school improvement planning embed such a concern into their student and learning support efforts. And, we recommend unifying and then developing existing student/learning supports into a comprehensive and equitable system. Furthermore, we stress that key to transforming current student and learning supports into an effective system is expanding school improvement policy and reworking operational infrastructure for implementation and sustainability. The aim is to fundamentally improve ways to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. Such systemic changes are essential to ending the marginalization, fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and overspecialization that characterizes efforts to enhance equity of opportunity (e.g., see the box on the last page for more on this.)*

Concluding Comments

Schools must plan, develop, and sustain a focus on ways to address the variety of transition concerns confronting students, their families, new staff, and others who work at the school. In reviewing school improvement plans with respect to the concerns raised here, school staff need to ask:

- *When families move, are they required to move their child to a new school?*
- *How are new students and families welcomed and positively assimilated into the school?*
- *What is done when a student is not adjusting well to a new school or a new class?*
- *Do articulation and related counseling programs provide more than orienting information and simple skills?*

Immediate goals of transition supports are to prevent and address problems. In addition, transition periods provide opportunities to promote whole child development, increase positive attitudes and readiness skills for schooling, address systemic and personal barriers to learning and teaching, and (re)engage disconnected students and families. And, supports for transitions play a critical role in the emergence of a positive school climate.

Reports of early outcomes from transition interventions indicate reductions in tardies, vandalism, and violence at school and in the neighborhood. Over time, transition programs reduce school avoidance and dropouts, as well as enhancing school adjustment and increasing the number who make successful transitions to higher education and post school living and work. And, initial studies of programs for transition in and out of special education suggest the interventions can enhance students' attitudes about school and self and can improve their academic performance. It also is likely that transition supports add to perceptions of a caring school climate.

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*A Note about Unifying and Developing a Comprehensive and Equitable System of Student and Learning Supports

With respect to transforming student and learning supports, our analyses (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 2006, 2017) indicate the following changes are needed:

- Expanding the policy framework for school improvement from a two- to a three component framework. The third component coalesces all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching (e.g., unifies them as a Learning Support Component); is prioritized and developed as primary and essential; is fully entwined with the Instructional and Management/governance Components.
 - Operationalizing the third component. Replacing fragmented practices that focus mainly on discrete problems requires reframing student and learning support interventions to create a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports in classrooms and school-wide. A prototype intervention framework has been developed that encompasses
 - a continuum of interventions consisting of subsystems weaving together school-community resources (not the typical multi-tiered approach) for
 - >promoting effective schooling and whole child development
 - >preventing problems experienced by teachers and students
 - >addressing such problems as soon as feasible after they arise
 - >providing for students who have severe and chronic problems
- and
- a cohesively organized and delimited set of “content” arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students in the classroom and school-wide. These arenas encompass the range of concerns a school copes with each day. They also stress enhancing intrinsic motivation and resilience as protective factors. Mentoring embeds nicely into all of these arenas.
- Implementing the third component. This involves
 - reworking the operational infrastructure to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable systemic approach that enhances equity of opportunity;
 - enhancing mechanisms and strategic approaches for systemic change in ways that account for context and ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability;
 - developing standards and expanding the accountability framework to account for the third component and to do so in ways that encompass both formative and summative evaluation



*For details about a *Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports*, see

>ESSA, *Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essaanal.pdf>

>*Piecemeal Policy Advocacy for Improving Schools Amounts to Tinkering and Works Against Fundamental System Transformation* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/tinkering.pdf>

>All this is discussed in detail in a new book entitled: *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System*.