Coda. Five Essential Elements of a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports

What the best and wisest parent wants for his [or her] own child,
that must the community want for all of its children.
Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely;
acted upon, it destroys our democracy.
John Dewey (in *The School and Society*, 1907)

Given the many barriers to learning and teaching, the time is overdue for schools to move from a fragmented and marginalized set of student and learning supports to a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system. *But as easy as this is to say, it is more than hard to do!*

Transforming student and learning supports is a complex, multi-year process that requires a high degree of commitment and relentlessness of effort. Facilitating transformation is not straight-forward, sequential, or linear. Rather, the work proceeds and changes emerge in overlapping and spiraling ways; time frames for building capacity to accomplish the changes must be realistic and flexible; prototypes must be adapted to localities; change agents must be opportunistic. The effort can be frustrating and tiring.

Clearly, transforming schools is a job for brave and hardy souls.

At the core of all efforts to facilitate transformation is the constant concern that changes will be superficial. While adaptations are inevitable, care must be taken not to minimize or eliminate elements that are essential to the fundamental transformation of how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. A constant problem we encounter in this respect is the tendency for some places to adopt the terminology and not the substance of the intended transformation.

So, we want to clearly stress five elements that are essential in developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.

(1) *Policy*: Moving to a three component policy for schools

To enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond, schools need to *directly* address barriers to learning and teaching. This requires elevating policy that establishes student and learning supports as a third primary and essential component for school improvement. As indicated in Exhibit 2.1, the third component might be called a learning supports component or a component to address barriers to learning and teaching or something comparable.

Moreover, the policy must be translated into a design document and strategic plan that ensures learning supports are unified and then developed into a comprehensive system of supportive interventions in classrooms and school-wide. Key here is fully integrating the design and strategic plans for the third component into existing school improvement plans. (Examples of policy statements and design and strategic planning aids are in Sections A and B of our Center's System Change Toolkit – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm).

Obviously, it is desirable that the three component policy be adopted at state and district levels; however, any school can espouse such a policy and begin moving forward.

(2) *A transformative intervention framework that encompasses a continuum <u>and</u> content*

This element refers to the prototype presented in Exhibit 3.4. As discussed in Chapter 3, a unified and comprehensive intervention framework combines both (a) an interconnected continuum of school and community interventions (delineated as subsystem levels)* and (b) a multifaceted and cohesive focus on content organized into about six arenas of support.

> *The continuum is designed to (a) promote positive development and prevent problems, (b) intervene as early after the onset of problems as is feasible, and (c) provide special assistance for severe and chronic problems. This continuum must not be presented as identical to the tiers or pyramid currently emphasized in relation to Response to Intervention (RtI) and behavioral initiatives.

(3) *A daily operational infrastructure dedicated to the third component*

To ensure effective daily functioning and continuous development and improvement in keeping with the design and strategic plan, there must be
- an administrative leader (e.g., associate superintendent, assistant principal)
- a system development learning supports leadership team
- workgroups to carry out specific tasks.

(Review prototype presented in Exhibit 11.1.)

The job description for the leader of the Learning Supports Component must be revised to reflect the new responsibilities and accountabilities. The role must ensure this leader is at administrative planning and decision making tables so that the Component's development is a regular part of the agenda.

Working with the administrative leader, a learning supports leadership team clarifies how resources currently are used, analyzes gaps, identifies priorities, recommends resource redeployment, and establishes and guides work groups for developing each facet of the component over a period of several years. (For job and team descriptions, see Section B of our Center's System Change Toolkit – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm.)

(4) *Continuous capacity building for direct implementation and facilitating transformation*

General capacity building plans and their implementation must include a specific focus on enhancing development of the Learning Supports Component. This includes in-depth professional development for learning supports staff and related professional development for teachers, administrators, other staff and volunteers, and community stakeholders. (This book and related resources on our Center's website provide a focus for capacity building – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/.)

(5) *Monitoring for improvement and accountability*

Essential to the ongoing development of a learning supports component are (a) continuous monitoring of all factors that facilitate and hinder progress and (b) ensuring appropriate actions are taken. (See Appendix H for a set of benchmarks to use in monitoring and improving transformation.)

As significant progress is made in developing the system, the monitoring expands to evaluate the impact on student outcomes that directly reflect the contribution of learning supports, such as increased attendance, reduced misbehavior, fewer inappropriate referrals, as well as improved learning. (Examples and indicators for use in monitoring, evaluation, and accountability are in Appendix B and in our Center document entitled: *Standards for a Learning Supports Component* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/commcore.pdf.)

THE CHALLENGE NOW IS TO MOVE FORWARD

With passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states and districts are in a good position to transform how their schools address barriers to learning and re-engage disconnected students. It is time and it is imperative to reorganize student and learning supports into a cohesive unit and provide guidance and capacity building support for schools to unify student and learning supports and, over several years, to develop them into a comprehensive and equitable system.

Accomplishing this involves going beyond thinking mainly in terms of providing traditional services, linking with and collocating agency resources, and enhancing coordination. These all have a place, but they do not address how to unify and rethink ways to better meet the needs of the many, rather than just providing traditional services to a relatively few students.

It is time and it is imperative to fundamentally transform student and learning supports. Fortunately, work done in recent years provides places to observe, prototypes to adopt/adapt, and guidance for states, districts and schools.

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To further help districts and schools make the transformation, our Center is developing additional online, free resources – including professional development activities, powerpoints, implementation resources, and a revised System Change Toolkit. We also provide technical assistance and coaching.*

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*Currently, the Center at UCLA works with states and districts across the country to mentor and coach strategic efforts to plan, implement, and sustain the essence of the prototype frameworks presented in this book. This mentoring and coaching includes the opportunity for regular exchanges and technical assistance over the years. The Center also continuously updates online resource aids to support ongoing work. No fees are attached to the using the Center since most of its coaching and technical assistance can be done via email and phone conferencing and all its resources are available for free access online.

Interested? **Contact Ltaylor@ucla.edu**

Appendices

A. ESSA, Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning

B. Expanding the Accountability Framework for Schools

C. Standards for a Learning Supports Component

D. Self Study Surveys

E. District Level Operational Infrastructure

F. Facilitative Mechanism's Functions and Interrelationship

G. Major Tasks of Mentors and Coaches

H. Benchmarks for Monitoring and Improving Transformation