A Center Policy Brief

Designing Schoolwide Programs in Title I Schools:

Using the Non-Regulatory Guidance in Ways that
Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Abstract

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Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

As with so many guides for school improvement, the U.S. Department of Education's March 2006 Non-regulatory Guidance document entitled, *Designing Schoolwide Programs*, continues to marginalize the essential role of student/learning supports. This brief report analyzes the guidance document with a specific focus on how to ensure Title I schoolwide planning addresses barriers to learning and teaching in a comprehensive way. The emphasis is on planning that fully integrates development of a comprehensive *system of learning supports*. Such a system is discussed as an essential component of efforts to counter ongoing factors that interfere with equalizing the odds for all students to succeed at school. Failure to develop such a system is seen as contributing to the perpetuation of achievement gaps and dropout rates and as playing a major role in the plateauing of achievement gains.

Awareness of these matters is on the upswing. We note with interest that the July 21, 2006 revision of the LEA and School Improvement Non-Regulatory Guidance adds the following sentence that we see as highly relevant to the matters discussed in this document (see revision online at http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/schoolimprovementguid.pdf).

> "In determining which alternative governance option the school should implement, LEA and school staff should analyze the causes of why individual students are not learning, identify barriers to learning that affect students, and seek solutions to correct the problems."
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> (See Page 30, #G-11, paragraph 2)

The paragraph concludes:

> "For example, a school undergoing restructuring may not be able to improve instruction without attending to leadership, improve leadership without emphasizing parent involvement, or concentrate on high-quality programs and evidenced-based student interventions without identifying the specific problem areas and underlying causes."

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As you probably are aware, our Center is using the lens of "addressing barriers to learning and teaching" to analyze all major guidance documents we encounter that play a role in shaping the design of school improvement initiatives.

The brief analysis offered here focuses on the U.S. Department of Education's March 2006 Non-regulatory Guidance document entitled:

Designing Schoolwide Programs

(see http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/designingswpguid.doc)

The present analysis is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, it is designed to highlight that, if schools are to address barriers to learning and teaching, all school improvement planning must fully integrate a focus on developing a comprehensive *system of learning supports*.

The Opportunity to Enhance Equity

While not emphasized in the guidance document, the federal government's effort to encourage design of schoolwide programs provides a substantive opportunity to develop a comprehensive system of learning supports. That is, Title I schools can and should plan schoolwide approaches to develop such a system as an essential component of efforts to counter ongoing factors that interfere with equalizing the odds for all students to succeed at school. Failure to do this, of course, perpetuates achievement gaps and dropout rates and plays a major role in the plateauing of achievement gains.

However, capitalizing on the opportunity to develop a system of learning supports requires that planners go beyond the examples provided in the USDOE guidance document.

How are barriers to learning being addressed?

Unfortunately, as is the case with so many guides to school improvement, the guidance document perpetuates the marginalization of student/learning supports. Going beyond the examples (and the disconnects) in the guidance requires looking at the school through the lens of how it and the surrounding community are and are not addressing barriers to learning and teaching.[1] That is, those doing the needs assessment, gap analysis, and comprehensive planning must attend to what currently is being done and what else needs to be done to enable learning (over and above prevailing strategies for improving instruction).

While the guidance document allows for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, there is no direct attention given 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

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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.

Some will argue that the USDOE guidance covers the concerns we raise and that the document's lack of examples related to developing a system of learning supports simply reflects an effort to avoid distracting schools from direct efforts to improve instruction. Unfortunately, this position ignores the reality that the lack of specific attention to developing a schoolwide system of learning supports contributes to the ongoing *marginalization* of efforts to improve how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. Moreover, the dearth of examples highlighting a systemic approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching tends to maintain some very old and cost-ineffective ideas about learning supports (e.g., clinical service approaches, separate initiatives, specialized staff roles and functions).

>All this said: *the guidelines do provide ample opportunity to go beyond the examples offered.*

Going Beyond the Examples

To be specific: The non-regulatory guidelines for designing schoolwide programs stress that three core elements must be addressed: (1) needs assessment, (2) the comprehensive plan that is designed, and (3) annual evaluation. Our analysis of how each of these is described in the guidance suggests that each can and should be pursued with full attention to how the school is and is not addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

To highlight the matter, we suggest the following:

(1) *Needs Assessment.* In each area identified for needs assessment, data should be gathered that stresses the need for improvements related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. For example:

There is a need to enable learning

>*standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment* – Are problems addressed effectively 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?

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>*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?

Staff who understand learning supports need to be part of the planning team

For there to be an appropriate focus on addressing barriers to learning, the five step process outlined in the guidance will need to

>ensure that staff who understand learning supports are key members of the planning team (The guidance does specifically mention that the planning team should include "non-instructional staff" such as pupil services personnel, guidance counselors, health service providers, etc.)

>clarify 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

>include 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

(2) *Designing a Comprehensive Plan*. No one needs to start from scratch in planning to develop and fully integrate a system of learning supports into a comprehensive schoolwide plan. The Center has several examples online.[2] We used these examples as prototypes in analyzing the USDOE guidance. From that perspective, it seems clear 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

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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.

No school improvement plan is complete if it does not include a focus on developing a comprehensive system of learning supports

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About Setting Priorities and Goals

The USDOE guidance emphasizes the necessity of setting well delineated priorities and measurable goals.

Priorities. The guidance wisely stresses that no school should attempt to address every identified need in a single year and, indeed, should set no more than three priorities in the first year. With this in mind, it is essential that one of the priorities be the establishment of an *infrastructure* for beginning the process of developing the school's system of learning supports (e.g., the leader/administrator responsible for doing so, a team to work with the leader in developing the system).

Measurable Goals. In formulating measurable goals relayed to a system of learning supports, see the Center document
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

Concluding Comments

Effective instruction is, of course, fundamental to a school's mission. None of us want to send our children to a school where teachers do not have high standards, expectations, and competence.

At the same time, the reality is that many factors can interfere with learning and teaching. Teachers in low performing schools point to how few students appear motivationally ready and able to learn what the daily lesson plan prescribes. Teachers in the upper grades report that a significant percentage of their students have become actively disengaged and alienated from classroom learning. And, "acting out" behavior, especially bullying and disrespect for others, is rampant. (So is passivity, but "hypoactivity" attracts less attention.) One result of all this is seen in the increasing number of students misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorders (ADHD). Another result is the number of dropouts (students and teachers) – often referred to as "pushouts."

Teachers need and want considerable help in addressing barriers to student and school success. Unfortunately, the sparse help they currently receive is grossly inadequate.

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Part of the problem is that most guidelines for school improvement give only sparse attention to matters other than the instructional component of schooling. Such guides *do* recognize that "acting out" students are disruptive of teaching and may harm others. And, thus, some planning focuses on improving classroom management and enhancing school safety. Sometimes this includes classroom instructional initiatives intended to enhance students' respect for school staff, parents, and each other (e.g., "character education").

But, the overall approach to school improvement conveys the impression that better academic instruction is sufficient for increasing a school's test score averages, closing the achievement gap, and reducing the number of students leaving school before graduation. Anything not directly instruction-centered runs a distant second in planning and therefore in resource allocation.

The reality in too many classrooms, however, is that improved instruction is not sufficient. In daily practice, schools continue to be plagued by student disengagement, behavior problems, and dropouts. Thus, to whatever degree is feasible, efforts are made to provide some "supports." But, the marginalized policy status of student and learning supports leads to reactive, ad hoc, piecemeal, and fragmented practices that often reach only a small percentage of students in need.[3]

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 potent *system* of learning supports to enable that success, many will continue to be left behind. With this in mind, we suggest that concerns about student disengagement, disrespect, misconduct, and the new cycle of distress over dropouts, all need to be pursued as critical opportunities for a *fundamental transformation in how schools enable learning.*

The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones.

John Maynard Keynes

Moving from the status quo will require a substantial cultural shift in schools. Those who want to facilitate the shift must become catalysts for systemic change. They must help others understand the need to escape old ideas and increase general awareness of new ideas that must replace the old ones.

The current culture for student support at schools stresses (a) clinical models, (b) separate initiatives, and (c) specialized roles and functions. Each of these has some merit. But, they also represent approaches that are too confining if we are to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

The bottom line is: 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 Title I schools, and therefore, school improvement planning must fully reflect this reality.

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[1] See:
>*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

>*The School Leader's Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning* (http://www.corwinpress.com/book.aspx?pid=11343)

[2] See:
>*Example of a Formal Proposal for Moving in New Directions* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/studentsupport/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

Also see:
>*The Implementation Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning* (http://www.corwinpress.com/book.aspx?pid=11371)

[3] 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

>*School-Wide Approaches to Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/schoolwide%20approaches%20to%20address%20barriers.pdf

>*Moving Toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: The Next Evolutionary Stage in School Improvement Policy and Practice (Policy & Practice Brief)*
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/paradigmshift.pdf

>*Transforming School Improvement to Develop a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: What District Superintendents Say They Need to Move Forward (Center Report)*
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/superintendentssay.pdf

>*Preparing All Education Personnel to Address Barriers to Learning & Teaching (Center Report)* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/preparingall.pdf

>*Steps and Tools to Guide Planning and Implementation of a Comprehensive System to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/stepsandtoolstoguideplanning.pdf

>*Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching (a Resource Aid)* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf

>*Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports (a Resource Aid)*
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf