



*Improving Schools,
Engaging Students*

Policy & Practice Brief . . .

Moving Toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: The Next Evolutionary Stage in School Improvement Policy and Practice

The national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in UCLA's Dept. of Psychology.

Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563

(310) 825-3634 Fax: (310) 206-5895; E-mail: smhp@ucla.edu

Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

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As our policy reports have indicated, school improvement policies, planning, and practices have not been effective in dealing with factors leading to and maintaining students' problems, especially in schools where large proportions of students are not doing well (Adelman & Taylor, 2008a; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2005a and b).

Pressure is increasing for expanding the nature and scope of school improvement efforts in order to reduce dropouts, close the achievement gap, and ensure all students have an equal opportunity for success at school. The evidence suggests that a major focus of this expansion will be on the development by schools of a *comprehensive system of learning supports*.

Pioneer Work

With respect to state legislation, Hawai'i, in 1995, appears to have been the first to pass legislation for what the state calls a *Comprehensive System of Student Supports* (CSSS). Since then, a variety of places around the country have adopted language for a policy umbrella covering efforts to address barriers to learning, development, and teaching (see Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2007, 2008b). However, without adequate support and guidance, too many have not flourished. For example, in California, legislation for a *Comprehensive Pupil Learning Supports System* was introduced in 2006 and again in 2007; it was passed by the education committee and died in appropriations. In recent years, a fair number of school districts, regional, and state departments have flirted with facets of what has been designated as new directions for improving student supports. Some have proceeded in fits and starts; others are moving forward in promising ways.

All these initial efforts have benefitted from lessons learned from initiatives that have pursued strategies for enhancing student supports. These include endeavors for co-locating community health, social, and recreational services on school campuses, efforts to develop full-service community schools, and proposals for developing new roles and functions for school-employed student support staff (e.g., American School Counselor Association, 2005; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2007, 2008a and b; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Dryfoos, Quinn, & Barkin, 2005).

A Paradigm Shift

We view what has transpired up until now as the early stage of a paradigm shift for how schools address barriers to learning, development, and teaching. The shift is from a *marginalized and fragmented* set of student support services to development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of learning supports (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, in press). Such a system weaves together what schools already are doing and enhances this with home and community resources, especially to fill high priority systemic gaps.

A few prominent indicators of the shift are seen in:

The shift is from
*a marginalized and
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- Iowa's statewide design for a system of learning supports (Iowa State Department of Education with the Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development, 2004);
- the move by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to hire its first director of *Systems of Support for Student Learning*, who will be spearheading a Systems of Student Support task force funded through a grant from the Gates Foundation; (The task force is to be convened early next year and will inform and define specific areas of the Council's work in this arena.)
- establishment of a public-private collaboration between the Community Affairs Unit of Scholastic Inc. and our Center at UCLA focused specifically on enhancing leadership for school policy and practice to promote development of a comprehensive system of learning supports; this is a key facet of Scholastic's *Rebuilding for Learning* initiative (Adelman & Taylor, in press);
- the ongoing work of the *National Initiative: New Directions for Student Support*; in 2008, the initiative has directed increasing attention to engaging superintendents and departments and schools of education (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm>);
- various Congressional bills introduced over the last couple of years that have highlighted the growing need for rethinking student and learning supports (some of which have been enacted, albeit in an ad hoc manner).

Another indicator is the adoption of the term *learning supports* by divisions, departments, and units at state and district levels. Of course, name changes commonly are adopted as terms gain in popularity. Fad-like use of terminology without adequate, substantive change in practices is always a concern.

**Learning Supports:
Some Key Policy
and Practice
Considerations**

It remains the case that a strong academic program is the foundation from which all other school-based interventions must operate. Given that the academic program is personalized (e.g., plans and uses instructional strategies that account for both individual and group interests, strengths, and weaknesses), a learning supports component at a school is essential for addressing factors that interfere with students benefitting from improvements in academic instruction.

***About
Learning
Supports***

As defined in proposed legislation in California: “*Learning supports* are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports intended to enable all pupils to have an equal opportunity for success at school. To accomplish this goal, a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive learning support system should be integrated with instructional efforts and interventions provided in classrooms and school-wide to address barriers to learning and teaching.”

In moving toward the development of new directions for learning supports as the next stage of school improvement, pioneering work around the country stresses that:

Every school has a wide range of learners and must ensure equity of opportunity for *all* students and not just a few.

1. Every school has a wide range of learners and must ensure equity of opportunity for *all* students and not just a few.
2. External and internal barriers to learning and teaching interfere with schools achieving their mission.
3. To meet the challenges for the many students in need, school districts must design and implement learning support systems that are comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive, and institutionalize them at every school.
4. Learning support systems must address barriers to learning and teaching and ensure that students are engaged and re-engaged in classroom learning. Such systems must reflect the best available science, with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation theory and practices.
5. In order to meet the goal of all children learning to high standards or reaching proficiency, the system of learning supports must be fully integrated with instruction.

6. Developing a comprehensive system of learning supports requires weaving together the resources of school, home, and community. This involves an operational infrastructure that ensures the learning supports system is treated as primary and essential in planning school improvement.

7. Equity requires developing a comprehensive system of learning supports that plays out in every school in a district.

***Four Core,
Interrelated
Systemic
Considerations***

With the above in mind, our work has highlighted four core systemic matters with which decision makers and planners must grapple in developing effective *systems* for addressing barriers to learning and teaching (e.g., see Adelman & Taylor, 2006a; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008a). These considerations, highlighted in the Exhibit on the next page, stress the need to:

- >Expanding policy

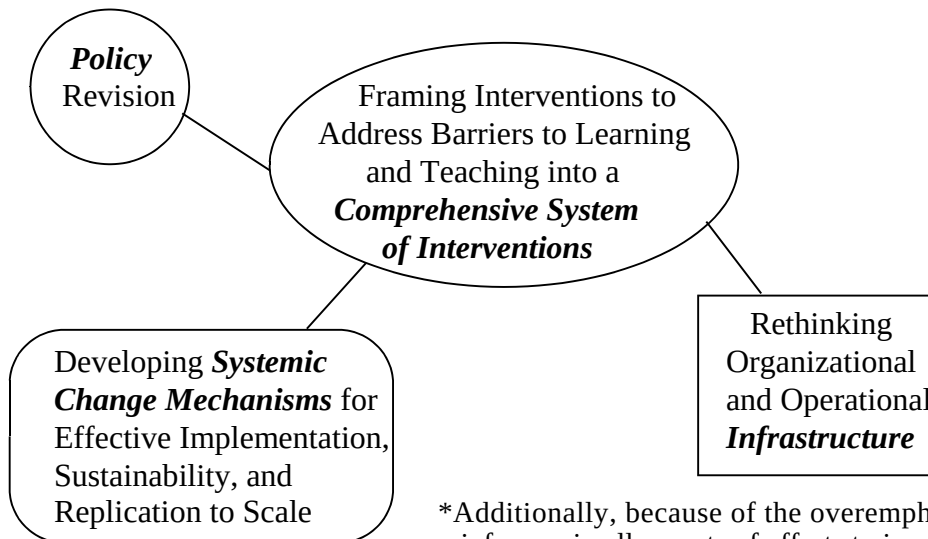
 - *Expand policy* – broadening policy for school improvement to fully integrate, as primary and essential, a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching (with the focus on matters such as enhancing home and community engagement and school safety and climate embedded in natural and authentic ways),
- >Reframing intervention

 - *Reframe interventions in-classrooms and school-wide* – unifying the fragmented interventions used to address barriers to learning and teaching and promote healthy development under an umbrella framework that can guide development of a comprehensive system at every school,
- >Reconceiving infrastructure

 - *Reconceive infrastructure* – reworking the operational and organizational infrastructure for a school, a family of schools, the district, and for school-family-community collaboration with a view to weaving resources together to develop a comprehensive system,
- >Framing the implementation problem as systemic change

 - *Rethink the implementation problem* – framing the phases and tasks involved in "getting from here to there" in terms of widespread diffusion of innovations in organized settings that have well-established institutional cultures and systems.

Exhibit
Four Fundamental and Interrelated Considerations*



*Additionally, because of the overemphasis on using extrinsic reinforcers in all aspects of efforts to improve schools, we find it essential to re-introduce a focus on **intrinsic motivation** in planning related to all four concerns (Brophy, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Moller, 2005; National Research Council, 2004).

Prototype Frameworks

In addressing the four core, interrelated systemic considerations, the Center has formulated a set of frameworks to underscore the need and as potential guides for moving forward (Adelman & Taylor, 2006, 2008b; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008a). These include:

(1) *Expanding Policy*. Effective policy for a comprehensive system of learning supports requires moving beyond the current approach to school improvement because that approach marginalizes learning supports; it primarily emphasizes two components – instruction and governance/management. The new approach expands school improvement policy to add a third primary component focused on addressing barriers to learning and teaching. In doing so, it provides for guidelines that delineate:

- a unifying umbrella policy concept,
- a comprehensive systemic intervention framework,

- an integrated infrastructure at all levels for developing a comprehensive system of learning supports and ensuring that it is a full partner in school improvement planning and decision making
- an expanded school improvement accountability framework
- support and guidance for systemic change and scale-up

Prototype frameworks underscore the need and provide potential guides for moving forward

(2) *Reframing Intervention*. A prototype of an enabling/learning supports component has been operationalized. The prototype combines an integrated and systemic continuum of interventions and a multifaceted and cohesive set of content arenas. It conceptualizes a system of classroom and school-wide learning supports in terms of a primary *Enabling or Learning Supports Component*. Such a component has two facets: addressing interfering factors and (re-)engaging students in classroom instruction. (The emphasis on engagement recognizes that interventions that do not address student disengagement are insufficient in sustaining, over time, student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.)

(3) *Reconceived Operational and Organizational Infrastructure*. Prototype frameworks have been formulated to guide establishment of leadership and workgroups for developing and maintaining a comprehensive system of learning supports. Well-designed, compatible, and interconnected infrastructures at schools, for school complexes (e.g., feeder patterns), at the district level, and for school-community collaboratives are essential. Each level plays a key role in weaving together existing school, home, and community resources and developing a full continuum of interventions over time. Moreover, content and resource-oriented infrastructure mechanisms enable programs and services to be developed and function in an increasingly cohesive, cost-efficient, and equitable way.

(4) *Implementing Systemic Change*. School improvement planning also must be expanded to better address *how* schools and districts intend to accomplish designated changes. In support of this, we have framed and outlined some basics related to systemic change for school improvement (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). School improvement obviously needs to begin with a clear framework and map for what changes are to be made. It should be equally obvious that there must be a clear framework and map for how to get from here to there, especially when the improvements require significant systemic change. And, in both cases, there is a need to use a strong science-base and provide leadership and adequate resources to facilitate capacity building.

Concluding Comments

As the Carnegie Task Force on Education has stressed:

*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.*

The complexity of factors interfering with learning, development, and teaching underscore the need not only to coalesce current efforts but to transform them by ensuring school improvement plans encompass the development of a *comprehensive system of learning supports* as primary and essential in addressing the variety of factors that interfere with a school accomplishing its mission. Evidence from institutional indicators and pioneering work on moving in new directions to enhance student and learning supports all herald a paradigm shift supporting development of a comprehensive and systemic approach.

*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

As the Council for Chief State School Officers stresses in its mission statement: the ultimate aim is to achieve “the vision of an American education system that *enables* all children to succeed in school, work, and life.” (italics added)

Thus, whether or not the impending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act incorporates the new paradigm for supporting learning, we conclude that the next evolutionary stage in enhancing school improvement will and should be a focus on developing a comprehensive system of learning supports.

Attached to this brief report is a Response Form to determine interest in and identify current efforts related to developing a comprehensive system of learning supports

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RESPONSE FORM

**School Improvement Planning to Develop
a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports**

Interested in Networking/Sharing/Learning More About the Matters Covered?

Check off any of the following that are a good match with your interests:

____ receiving regular information about the matters discussed in the report

____ being part of a national listserv connecting professionals concerned
with these matters

____ convening a leadership institute focused on these matters

____ having a further in-depth interchange with our Center about these or other
matters of mutual interest and concern.

Other ideas:

Also, if you know of any programs that are already focusing on addressing barriers to learning and teaching in a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated way, please let us know so that we can contact them and let others know about them.

It is important to get the report into the hands of decision makers. You are free to share the report yourself. And, if there are others to whom you would like us to send the report, indicate their names and contact information below:

Finally, if you take any strategic local action related to these matters, please share it with us so we can use it as a catalyst for change.

Your Name _____ Title _____

Organization _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone (____) _____ Fax (____) _____ E-Mail _____

Thanks for completing this form. Return by FAX to (310) 206-5895.

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