Improving Schools? *Not Another Special Initiative!*

What Will It Take To Close The Opportunity Gap? Ultimately, the opportunity gap ... will not be closed by a set of programs and initiatives that benefit some individuals but do not have a larger scale, collective impact. ... The solution is not technical. It's not about data. It is about fundamental change at the social, political and cultural levels.

Warren Simmons, Executive Director (2014)
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As part of the litany of school improvement proposals, editorial and OP ED pages commonly offer advocacy about ways for schools to do better in closing what many refer to as the opportunity gap. Advocacy for doing more usually follows any event that increases public concern about matters such as violence at schools, bullying, dropouts, the achievement gap, etc. One result is that schools are constantly confronted with requests and mandates for another initiative (e.g., another pilot project, another program) to better address learning, behavior, or emotional problems. Most schools are stretched thin by the many programs already underway. So it is not surprising that a common reaction of administrators is: *Enough - we can't take on another thing!* Nevertheless, when extramural funds are attached, budget-starved schools generally find special initiatives almost irresistible.

New initiatives often reduce attention to other important concerns

While special initiatives to address a specific problem in schools usually are well-intentioned, ad hoc additions can have pernicious effects on school improvement. For example: a new initiative often reduces attention to other important concerns – especially when budgets are tight; many such initiatives are keyed to a relatively few students; projects funded extramurally tend to be short-lived; piecemeal policies and practices further fragment what is already a too scattered approach to ameliorating problems. Of greatest consequence, however, is that this type of tinkering exacerbates the ongoing marginalization of efforts to make fundamental systemic changes in how student and learning supports are provided.

In terms of public education policy, the problem lies with the reality that prevailing policy stresses a two component framework for school improvement. One component emphasizes enhancing instruction; the other intends to improve the management/governance of schools. Some attention, of course, also is given to student and schooling problems. However, in most school systems, these matters are at best a secondary concern in school improvement planning and practice.

The two component framework works fine for schools where few students encounter barriers to success. The framework is grossly insufficient for addressing the complex array of factors interfering with student success at schools enrolling large numbers from economically disadvantaged homes. The necessity in such schools is to embrace a three component vision for school improvement policy and practice that establishes addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a unified, primary, and essential third component for school improvement.

In response to the number of schools and students in trouble, there is movement toward adopting a three component school improvement policy as a basis for fundamentally transforming student and learning supports. Such a transformation involves:

- Expanding the policy framework for school improvement to fully integrate, as primary and essential, a student and learning supports component.

- Reframing student and learning support interventions to create a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports in-classrooms and school-wide.

- Reworking the operational infrastructure to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

- Enhancing approaches for systemic change in ways that ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability.

Moving to a three component framework for school improvement

Analyses of many school improvement plans underscores how far away most schools are from playing an effective role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and enabling equity of opportunity. And schools that mainly tinker with systemic changes and continue to add special initiatives in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner are unlikely to be more effective.

Trailblazing work already is underway in places such as Alabama where education leaders are pioneering the three component framework using research and resources from UCLA and additional resources from Scholastic.[1] This work is transforming student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, systemic, and equitable approach to addressing a full range of overlapping learning, behavior, and emotional concerns.

As the pioneering efforts demonstrate, state departments of education, districts, and schools can undertake fundamental transformation of how they address barriers to learning and teaching. And progress can be accelerated through enabling legislation at all levels. In particular, as Congress eventually faces up to the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, the need is for unifying the approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching (i.e., delineating a third primary and essential component for school improvement policy).

It is time to face up to what the Carnegie Council Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents stressed back in 1989. As they clearly stated, while "school systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students, when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge"

Transforming student and learning supports, of course, is an enormous challenge. To do less, however, is to maintain an extremely unsatisfactory status quo, and this will exacerbate the threat to public education and to democracy.

[1]See *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Trailblazing Initiatives!*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/summer14.pdf

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Given sparse resources, not working strategically is a recipe for failure.

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There's never time to plan things right.

True, but there's always time to do things wrong!