

Connecting Schools in Ways that Strengthen Learning Supports

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Abstract

Given dwindling budgets, collaborations that can enhance effective and efficient use of resources increase in importance. This is particularly important with respect to efforts at schools to provide student and learning supports. Schools that formally connect to work together can be more effective, realize economies of scale, and enhance the way sparse resources are used for intervention and capacity building. This brief (1) discusses the concept of a family of schools and the type of operational infrastructure that enables schools to connect formally and on a regular basis, (2) highlights examples of how a family of schools can enhance student and learning supports, and (3) suggests key policy implications.

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Connecting Schools in Ways that Strengthen Learning Supports

Given dwindling budgets, collaborations that can enhance effective and efficient use of resources increase in importance. This is particularly important with respect to efforts at schools to provide student and learning supports (Adelman & Taylor, 2003; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011). And collaboration across K-12 schooling is a key ingredient in enhancing achievement and student transitions at each level of schooling. Elementary and middle school success is not just about moving students on to the next level; all levels share responsibility for increasing high school graduation rates.

While there are policies focused on enhancing school and community collaboration (Blank, Jacobson, & Pearson, 2009; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002), these policies have paid relatively little attention to the value of schools connecting with each other, especially schools that feed into each other and others operating in the same neighborhood. As continuing advocacy mounts for connecting schools and communities, policy formulations must address the matter of connecting schools to each other in ways that improve how they address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

Schools that work together formally can enhance effectiveness, realize economies of scale, and improve the way sparse resources are used for intervention and capacity building. This brief (1) discusses the concept of a family of schools and the type of operational infrastructure that enables schools to connect formally and on a regular basis, (2) highlights examples of how a family of schools can enhance student and learning supports, and (3) suggests key policy implications.

Connecting a Family of Schools

School clusters can be any group of schools geographically close together, where the individual schools in the group interact or would like to interact with one another.

<http://www.schoolclusters.com/>

School *feeder patterns* and other schools in a neighborhood share significant overlapping concerns. For example, feeder schools share the need to ensure that students make a good transition from elementary to middle and from middle to high school. Feeder schools also often have students from the same family at each level; this provides opportunities for collaboration, and when student from the same family are having problems at multiple levels, coordination is essential to good practice. And when crisis events affect a whole neighborhood, the schools can benefit from a coordinated response. Moreover, schools often share student support personnel who are assigned on a part time basis, and this provides another opportunity for schools to collaborate. We refer to a set of collaborating schools as a *family of schools*.

While large districts tend to group schools into clusters, the reality is that it is rare to find effective infrastructure mechanisms for establishing and sustaining ways for a family of schools to work

together regularly on overlapping concerns. Despite long-standing recognition of the value of connecting schools (e.g., Newberg, 1995), the matter is little researched (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus, 2003). In this section, we briefly highlight our Center's work on the problem (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011 rev.).

Our approach involves first establishing a *school-based team* (i.e., a "Learning Supports Leadership Team") and then bringing representatives from school teams that have connected as a family of schools to form a *multi-site council* (i.e., a "Learning Supports Leadership Council"). To ensure a broad spectrum of stakeholder input, a school-based team strives to include all who directly provide leadership and interventions related to learning supports at the school and representatives of classroom teachers, non-certificated staff, parents, and students, as well as community resource representatives involved at the school (see Appendix). One or two members from each school's leadership *team* (e.g., the site administrator responsible for a school's learning supports component; a representative of line staff) attend the multi-site *council* (see Exhibit 1).

About a Multi-site Council

A multi-site council is intended to provide a mechanism to help:

- ensure cohesive and equitable deployment of resources
- enhance the pooling of resources to reduce costs
- enable acquisition of resources at lesser cost because of economies of scale
- minimize redundancy and reduce costs not only by connecting schools, but also connecting a family of schools effectively with community resources, and helping develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports at the schools and in the district.

If student outcomes are to improve substantially, the chasms that now exist between school levels must be bridged.

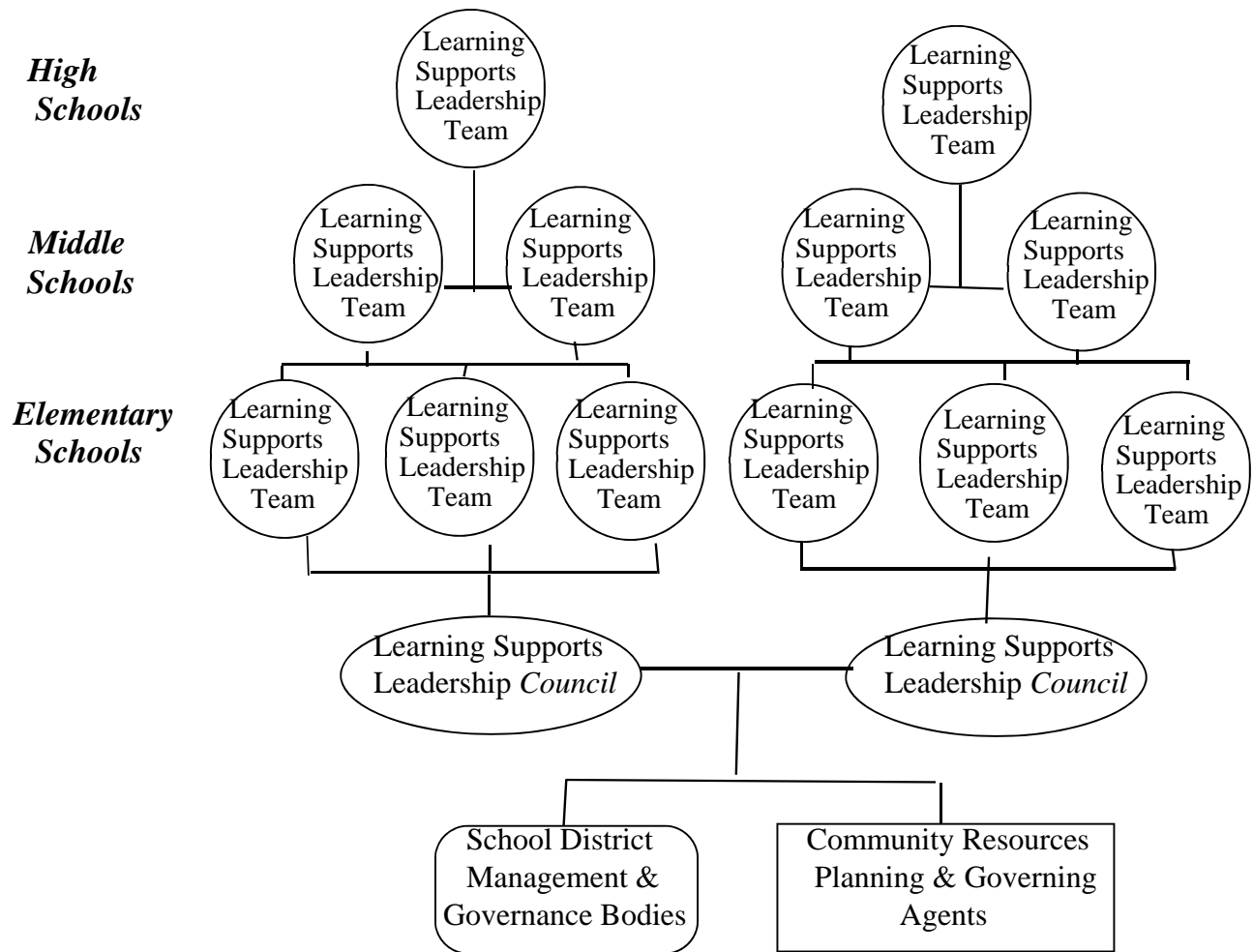
Michael Newberg

In terms of process, the multi-site council provides a useful mechanism for leadership, communication, maintenance, quality improvement, and ongoing development of the component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Natural starting agenda for councils are the sharing of needs assessments, resource mapping, analyses, and recommendations for improvements for all the connected schools with respect to well-designed interventions and development of a comprehensive system of student and learning supports. For feeder schools, one of the first intervention matters that a council can address is how to respond to families who have

Exhibit 1

Connecting Leadership Teams to Enhance Development of a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports by Linking a Family of Schools Together and with the Community



Note: Council facilitation involves responsibility for convening regular monthly (and other ad hoc) meetings, building the agenda, assuring that meetings stay task focused and that between meeting assignments will be carried out, and ensuring meeting summaries are circulated. With a view to shared leadership and effective advocacy, an administrative leader and a council member elected by the group can co-facilitate meetings. Meetings can be rotated among schools to enhance understanding of each site in the council.

**Multi-site councils
are especially
attractive to
community agencies**

youngsters attending more than one level of schooling in the feeder pattern. For example, it is neither cost-effective nor good intervention for each school to contact a family separately in instances where several children from a family are in need of special attention. Another fundamental feeder school matter is how to integrate interventions to support articulation and transition.

With respect to linking with community resources, multi-site councils are especially attractive to community agencies. Agencies often don't have the time or personnel to link with individual schools. Such a mechanism can (a) coordinate and integrate programs serving multiple schools, (b) identify and meet common needs with respect to guidelines and staff development, and (c) create linkages and collaborations among schools and with community agencies. In this last regard, the group can play a special role in community outreach both to create formal working relationships and ensure that access to such resources is equitably available for all participating schools.

Some specific functions for a multi-site council are:

- to share information about resource availability (at participating schools and in the immediate community and in geographically related schools and district-wide) with a view to enhancing communication, cooperation, coordination and integration
- to aggregate data and map resources from schools and neighborhood for needs and resource analyses
- to identify specific needs and problems and explore ways to address them (e.g., Can some needs be met by pooling certain resources? Can improved linkages and collaborations be created with community agencies? Can additional resources be acquired? Can some staff and other stakeholder development activity be combined?)
- to discuss, analyze, and recommend priorities and longer-term plans and advocate for system changes, capacity building, and appropriate resource allocation related to developing a comprehensive system of student and learning supports
- to define standards, expand the school improvement accountability framework and indicators, and ensure appropriate outcome evaluation.

**About a District
Mechanism**

School and multi-site mechanisms are not sufficient. A district leadership team dedicated to improving student and learning supports must be in place (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2007). Such a team can provide operational guidance and capacity building for developing and sustaining effective school teams and family of schools councils. In addition to ensuring there is a district-wide vision and strategic planning to support developing a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports, this leadership team can help (a) ensure coordination and integration among schools across the district, (b) establish linkages and integrated collaboration among district programs and with those operated by community, city, and county agencies, (c) facilitate full integration of the family of schools concept into the district's school improvement plans, and (d) ensure evaluation, including determination of equity in program delivery, quality improvement reviews, and ascertaining results for accountability purposes.

To accomplish all the above, the district team must be represented on a regular basis at systemwide decision making and school improvement planning tables. The group itself should include (a) representatives of multi-site councils, (b) key district administrative and line staff with relevant expertise and vision (including unit heads, coordinators, union reps), and (c) various other stakeholders such as nondistrict members whose job and expertise (e.g., public health, mental health, social services, recreation, juvenile justice, post secondary institutions) make them invaluable contributors to the tasks at hand.

**About Families of
Schools and
School-Community
Collaboratives**

For many neighborhoods and small towns, multi-site councils would be a logical group to bring into an existing school-community collaborative or around which to build such a collaborative. For larger cities, the district mechanism might better fulfill this role (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011).

With respect to school-community collaboratives, remember that the range of community entities is not limited to agencies and organization. It encompasses all human and social capital in a locale (e.g., people, businesses, community based organizations, postsecondary institutions, religious and civic groups, programs at parks and libraries, and any other facilities that are useful for recreation, learning, enrichment, and support). At the same time, it is important not to be deluded into thinking that community resources can effectively meet the needs of schools in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The reality is that even when one adds together community and school assets, available resources in impoverished locales are woefully underfinanced.

Appreciating How a Family of Schools Can Improve Supports

To fully appreciate how a family of schools can improve student and learning supports, it helps to start with a comprehensive, systemic intervention framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Over the years, our intervention research has generated such a framework (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008a). This evolving framework has two facets:

- (1) *Levels of intervention* conceived as a full continuum of integrated intervention subsystems that stress the importance of weaving together school-community-home resources. The continuum encompasses:
 - promotion of healthy development and prevention of problems
 - intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible
 - assisting with chronic and severe problems.
- (2) *Arenas of activity* to escape the trend to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level by organizing programs and services into a circumscribed set of six arenas reflecting the content purpose of the activity. The six arenas encompass interventions to:
 - enhance regular classroom strategies to enable learning (e.g., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems; includes a focus on prevention, early intervening, and use of strategies such as response to intervention)
 - support transitions (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
 - increase home and school connections and engagement
 - respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises
 - increase community involvement and support (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
 - facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed

In keeping with public education and public health perspectives, the above framework encompasses efforts to enable academic, social, emotional, and physical development and to address behavior, learning, and emotional problems in the classroom and schoolwide. With local adaptations, the framework has held-up over the last decade in venues across the country (see *Where's it Happening* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/nind7.htm>).

At all three levels and for all six arenas, connecting a family of schools can have significant payoffs (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2

Examples of Arenas for Connected Interventions

Each of the following examples highlights many facets of schooling that can be improved by a family of schools working together:

Classroom learning supports. Given the increasing calls for improving the classroom learning environment, it is surprising how little attention is directed at enhancing student and learning supports directly in the classroom. Part of the problem is the continuing predilection to refer learning and behavior problems for outside the classroom interventions. And while the policies introducing Response to Intervention (RtI) and schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are meant as a step in reducing this trend, more than RtI and PBIS are needed. Classroom doors must not just be portals out. Student and learning support personnel must come in to play a meaningful role in helping teachers enhance a caring learning environment, expand personalized instruction and improve classroom management through use of volunteers, and create processes for re-engaging disconnected students. This expansive teacher development agenda can best be achieved by weaving together the resources of a family of schools.

Crisis response and prevention. Many crises arising for a school affect all schools in a neighborhood and are best responded to immediately and in the aftermath with coherent and coordinated action by schools that have planned together and combine relevant resources. In addition, many crises are preventable (e.g., intergroup and personal violent acts). Understanding best practices for prevention and building capacity requires considerable development on the part of schools that not only are connected with each other, but also with neighborhood resources.

Support for transitions. Students and their families are regularly confronted with a variety of transitions – changing schools, changing grades, encountering a range of other daily hassles and major life demands. Many of these can interfere with productive school involvement. A comprehensive focus on transitions requires schoolwide and classroom-based systems and programs designed to (a) enhance successful transitions, (b) prevent transition problems, (c) use transition periods to reduce alienation and increase positive attitudes toward school and learning, and (d) monitoring transitions to detect transition problems and then providing special assistance. Examples of programs include schoolwide and classroom specific activities for welcoming new arrivals (students, their families, staff) and rendering ongoing social support; counseling and articulation strategies to support grade-to-grade and school-to-school transitions and moves to and

(cont.)

from special education, college, and post school living and work; and before and after-school and inter-session activities to enrich learning and provide recreation in a safe environment.

Anticipated overall outcomes from a multifaceted and coherent approach to support for transitions include reduced alienation and enhanced motivation and increased involvement in school and learning activities. In particular, articulation programs can reduce school avoidance and dropouts, as well as enhancing the number who make successful transitions to higher education and post school living and work. And, in general, it is likely that a caring school climate can play a significant role in reducing student transiency. While articulation interventions clearly are a major focus for any multi-site council, all transitions concerns can benefit from multi-site councils that focus on ensuring that the family of schools fully integrates a wide range of support for transitions into school improvement planning.

Home involvement and engagement. Concern for parent involvement at schools during and after the school day are features of the *No Child Left Behind Act* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. However, this has generated mostly a school-by-school focus. From a family of schools perspective, the matter takes on additional facets. For example, feeder patterns often serve students at every level who come from the same home. Feeder patterns also see a major drop-off from elementary to middle to high school with respect to family engagement with a school.

Just as students vary in their motivation and ability to participate at school so do their caretakers (e.g., parents, other family members who play a caretaking role, foster care homes). Efforts to involve those in the home who seem uninterested or resistant raise all the issues and problems associated with intervening with reluctant individuals. For the most part, schools have not developed the type of well-designed, systematic, and personalized programs for outreach and ongoing encouragement of home involvement that are essential to establishing and maintaining involvement of a wide range of caretakers. A multi-site council provides a unique mechanism for enhancing understanding of the implications of these matters and how to enhance home involvement and engagement.

Community involvement and engagement. Concern for greater community involvement at schools during and after the school day also are features of the *No Child Left Behind Act* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. An additional push toward school and community collaboration is generated by the emphasis in these acts on supplemental and special services, extended learning, and school-to-career opportunities. From another direction, a major thrust toward community involvement in schools has come from federal, state, and local efforts to reform community agencies. For example, a widespread agenda for some community agencies is to establish linkages with schools for purposes of increasing access to clients and enhancing coordination and

(cont.)

integration of services. Still another thrust from the community side has come from the business community, and a third has come from social activists, community-based organizations, and institutions of higher education (e.g., philanthropic foundations, the Children's Defense Fund, Children's Aid Society, Communities in Schools, groups concerned with organizing communities, groups focused on youth development, groups representing "minorities"). This last sector of stakeholders has generated a community schools' movement (e.g., Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2004; Coalition for Community Schools, www.communityschools.org; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002).

As with home involvement, the focus here also has mostly been a school-by-school focus and has raised a variety of policy-related concerns (see the discussion in the recent policy brief from the Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011). Considerations about both equity and resource availability make it essential that community resources connecting to schools be planned at the district level with engagement focused on families of schools.

Student and family assistance. Given the best classroom and schoolwide efforts, there will continue to be a need to facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed. This requires analysis, improvement, documentation, and circulation of information and recommendations on how to use current "systems" (clarification of steps, development of flow charts, written descriptions, training of personnel, etc.) related to

- >promoting healthy development & preventing problems
- >response to intervention (RtI)
- >handling behavior problems
- >referral for emergency help-major services
- >triage
- >assistance and care management to specific students and families

Few schools working alone have the resources to handle the development and capacity building related to all this. Each can benefit from working with other in a family of schools and with others at the district level with specialized expertise.

Concluding Comments and Some Key Policy Implications

As this brief stresses, well-redesigned organizational and operational mechanisms are needed to enable schools to connect. Formally connected schools can

- develop ways to weave together and allocate resources and achieve economies of scale
- maximize systematic and integrated planning, implementation, maintenance, and evaluation of a comprehensive system of student and learning supports
- outreach to create formal working relationships with community resources to bring some to a school and establish special linkages with others
- upgrade and modernize interventions to reflect the best practices and develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.

Implied in all this are new roles and functions for some staff and greater involvement of parents, students, and other representatives from the community. Also implied is redeployment of existing resources as well as finding new ones.

The next decade must mark a turning point in how schools and communities address the problems of children and youth. In particular, the focus must be on initiatives to transform how schools work to prevent and ameliorate the many learning, behavior, and emotional problems experienced by students. To accomplish such ambitious ends, families of schools must work together.

Ultimately, those committed to transforming schools must resolve four key problems related to significantly improving how school address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

First and foremost, they must expand school improvement policies to end the *marginalization* of student and learning supports.

Second, they must adopt unifying intervention frameworks that encompass a comprehensive and multifaceted continuum of interventions with the intent of guiding development of a comprehensive and cohesive enabling or learning supports component at every school.

Third, they must reframe the operational infrastructure at school, complex, and district levels (and beyond) to ensure effective leadership, redefine roles and functions, and establish resource oriented mechanisms at schools, for families of schools, and at the district level.

Finally, they must focus on enhancing strategic approaches for enabling effective systemic change and replication to scale of the new directions.

With these matters in mind, policy makers and school improvement planners must ensure that districts

- (1) expand current policy and planning to ensure student and learning supports are attended to as a primary and necessary component of school improvement and are developed into a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students
- (2) revisit school improvement planning guides to ensure they focus on developing operational mechanisms for formally connecting families of schools
- (3) designate a dedicated leadership position at the district level to guide development of school-based resource teams and multi-site councils capable of transforming fragmented learning supports into a comprehensive system
- (4) develop guidelines for school improvement planning that include an emphasis on redefining roles and functions for school-site leadership related to development and implementation of school-based resource teams and multi-site councils;
- (5) develop guidelines for school improvement planning that specify ways to connect families of schools with community resources with the intent of weaving school-community resources into a cohesive and integrated continuum of interventions over time.

In addition, policy makers need to support research that enhances the science-base related to how to connect families of schools and evaluations that determine the long-term impact of doing so.

What constitutes school success?

The elementary school principal breathed a sigh of relief:

We succeeded in moving this group on to middle school.

The middle school principal breathed a sigh of relief:

We succeeded in moving this group on to high school.

But noting how many youngsters did not graduate from high school, the high school principal asked:

Did any of us succeed?

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Appendix

About a Site-based Learning Supports Leadership Team

Every school that wants to improve student and learning supports needs a mechanism specifically working on system *development* to enhance how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. The goal is to rework existing resources by establishing a unified and comprehensive approach. A *Learning Supports Leadership Team* is a vital mechanism for transforming current marginalized and fragmented interventions into a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive *system* that enhances equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school.

Most schools have teams that focus on individual student/family problems (e.g., a student support team, an IEP team). These teams pursue such functions as referral, triage, and care monitoring or management. In contrast to this case-by-case focus, a school's *Learning Supports Leadership Team*, along with an administrative leader, can take responsibility for developing a unified and comprehensive enabling or learning supports component at a school. In doing so, it ensures that the component is (1) fully integrated as a primary and essential facet of school improvement and (2) outreaches to the community to fill critical system gaps by weaving in human and financial resources from public and private sectors.

What Are the Functions of this Leadership Team?

A Learning Supports Leadership Team performs essential functions and tasks related to the implementation and ongoing development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system for addressing barriers to student learning and teaching.

Examples are:

- ◆ Aggregating data across students and from teachers to analyze school needs
- ◆ Mapping resources at school and in the community
- ◆ Analyzing resources & formulating priorities for system development (in keeping with the most pressing needs of the school)
- ◆ Recommending how resources should be deployed and redeployed
- ◆ Coordinating and integrating school resources & connecting with community resources
- ◆ Planning and facilitating ways to strengthen and develop new programs and systems
- ◆ Developing strategies for enhancing resources
- ◆ Establishing work groups as needed
- ◆ “Social marketing”

Related to the concept of an enabling/learning supports component, these functions and tasks are pursued within frameworks that outline six curriculum content arenas and the full continuum of interventions needed to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to student and learning supports that is integrated fully into the fabric of school improvement policy and practice. (See

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemicttransformation.pdf>)

Who's on Such a Team?

A Learning Supports Leadership Team might begin with only a few people. Where feasible, it should expand into an inclusive group of informed, willing, and able stakeholders. This might include the following:

- Administrative Lead for the component
- School Psychologist
- Counselor
- School Nurse
- School Social Worker
- Behavioral Specialist
- Special education teacher
- Representatives of community agencies involved regularly with the school
- Student representation (when appropriate and feasible)
- Others who have a particular interest and ability to help with the functions

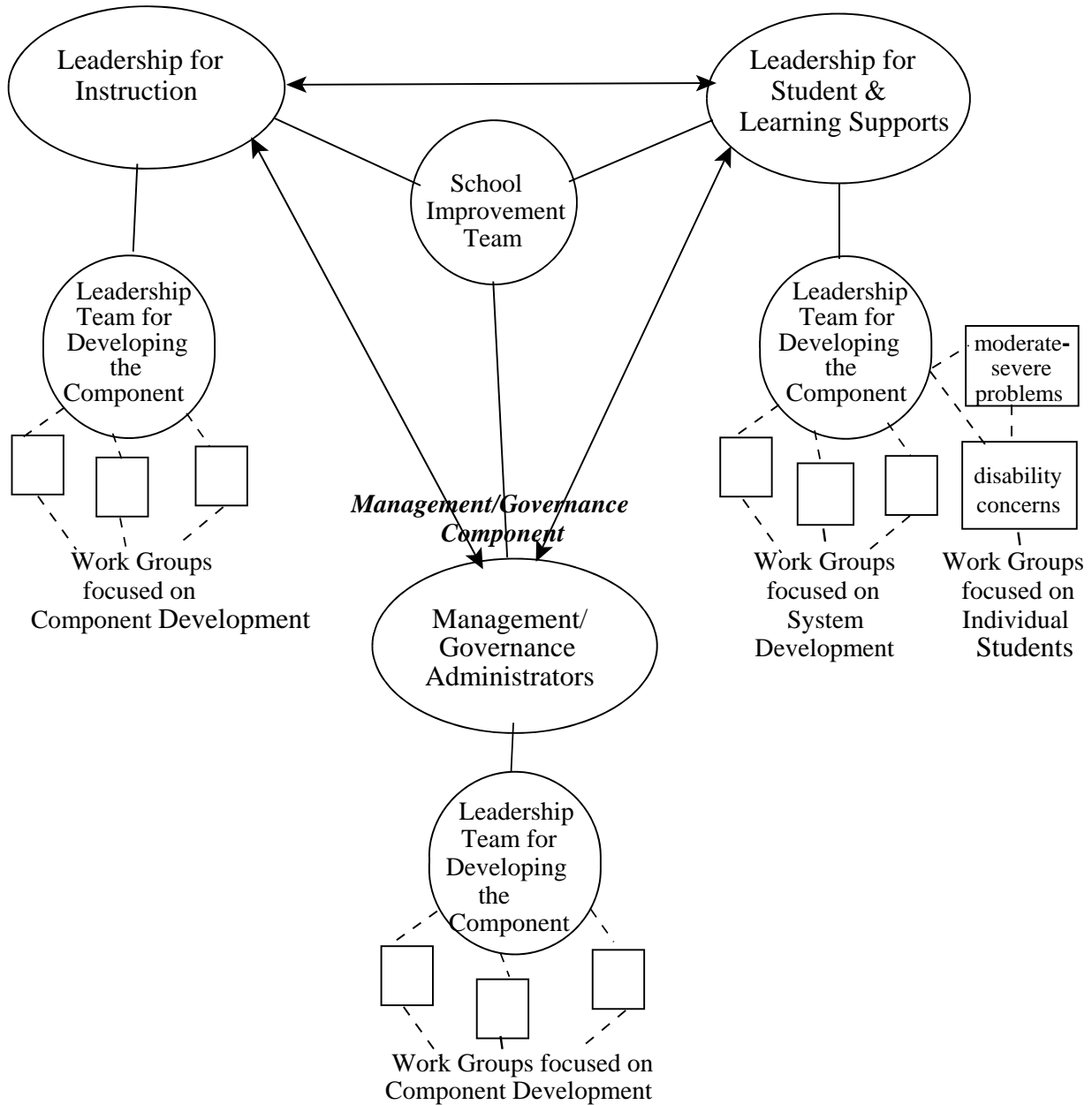
It is important to integrate this team with the infrastructure mechanisms at the school focused on instruction and management/governance. For example, the school administrator on the team needs to represent the team at administrative and governance meetings. A member also will need to represent the team when a Learning Supports Leadership *Council* is established for a family of schools (e.g., the feeder pattern).

For Related Center Resources, see the toolkit for *Rebuilding Student Supports into a Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* – especially Section B on Reworking Infrastructure – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

Example of an Integrated Infrastructure at the School Level*

Facilitating Learning/Development *Instructional Component*

Addressing Barriers to Learning *Enabling or Learning Supports Component*



*The infrastructure for a comprehensive system of learning supports should be designed from the school outward. That is, conceptually, the first emphasis is on what an integrated infrastructure should look like at the school level. Then, the focus expands to include the mechanisms needed to connect a family or complex (e.g., feeder pattern) of schools and establish collaborations with surrounding community resources. Ultimately, central district units need to be restructured in ways that best support the work at the school and school complex levels.