

Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: The Experience of Gainesville City Schools, GA

In 2009, the UCLA-Scholastic collaboration reached out to AASA to establish a leadership initiative. One product of that initiative is development of Lead districts to demonstrate a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports. Researchers from the Education Development Center (EDC) were invited to do a case study. The following is our brief summary of the December, 2011 Case Study draft submitted by Daniel Light, Camille Ferguson, and Terri Meade on the work in the Gainesville City Public Schools (GA).

“Over the last two years, Gainesville created new policies and modified or expanded on existing strategies, policies and practices to develop a system of student supports that enables learning.

... Gainesville is a high poverty district with a diverse student population and there are pockets of students who are underperforming. In 2010, of 6,296 students enrolled in the school district, 78% were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Three of its eight schools have more than 90% of their students living in poverty. Gainesville's student population is divided between white (20%), black (19%) and Hispanic (55%) students. In particular, Gainesville has been dealing with the challenges of the growing Hispanic community.

The Superintendent of Gainesville City Schools reported that another challenge was to build the capacity of the whole district system, so that the departure of any individual staff person would not deeply impact any one practice, program or policy in the district. Developing a comprehensive system of learning supports has allowed Gainesville to build the collective capacity of the whole district as well as sustain reform efforts.

The district also wanted to further develop the cohesiveness of their school programs to reduce costs and increase efficiency so that the district would be able to sustain funding for their school programs. Considering sustainability, the Gainesville team sought to address costly inefficiencies in services, especially during unstable budget periods that schools and districts experience as a result of their dependence on public financing. The Superintendent commented, "We can see the power in the coherence. It's like putting a machine together and getting it to work more effectively." The leadership found value, especially as a high poverty district, in having consultancy partners, who would help the district address issues of positive mental health in schools.

Gainesville's Path to Creating a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

Through the Lead District Collaborative, Gainesville had access to resources like the book, *Rebuilding for Learning: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching and Re-Engaging Students* (Adelman and Taylor 2008), the resources

available at the Rebuilding for Learning Online Leadership Institute and the Rebuilding Toolkit on the website of the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools. In addition, Gainesville received technical assistance in the form of site visits led by Drs. Adelman and Taylor and other experts from Scholastic and AASA. During the technical assistance site visits, the experts provided strategic facilitation and feedback regarding the district's team based approach to developing a comprehensive system [and] also engaged and informed community leaders and stakeholders about potential outcomes that could be supported by a system of learning supports. ... Gainesville [also] had access to advice and support from a former district administrator who led her school through the process of building a comprehensive system of learning supports after hurricane Katrina devastated her Alabama community. The learning supports consultant made multiple visits to the district working with different groups. For example, she worked closely with the high school team offering them the practical experience and strategies that came her own practical experience.

What is a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports?

Most of the common approaches to school improvement and reform focus on two major policy components: enhancing instruction and curriculum and restructuring school governance. Adelman and Taylor [2006] argue for the importance of a third key component of the school system that targets removing the many barriers to learning and creating a supportive context for teaching and learning. As the third policy and practice pillar, a learning supports component enables schools to develop a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

Unifying student and learning supports into a third component is seen as empowering efforts to counter the continuing marginalization in schools of student and learning supports and provides leverage for full integration into school improvement policy and practice. The component is designed to enable academic, social, emotional, and physical development and address learning, behavior, and emotional problems in ways that yield safe and caring schools.

In operationalizing the third component, the intervention framework encompasses both (1) a continuum and (2) a set of content arenas that are designed to play out cohesively in classrooms and schoolwide. The continuum ranges from promotion of healthy development and prevention of problems through responding as soon as problems emerge to playing a role in the treatment of chronic and severe problems. The emphasis on re-engagement recognizes that efforts to address interfering factors, provide positive behavior support, and prevent disengagement and dropouts must include a focus on re-engaging students in classroom instruction, or they are unlikely to be effective over time. Furthermore, the overlapping nature of the three-component framework provides major opportunities for student support staff to play a significant role in enhancing classroom and schoolwide programs to promote student, family, and community healthy development, well-being, and engagement with schools. ...

The primacy and value placed on developing a supportive environment to facilitate learning was a key attraction for Gainesville. During a professional development session, the Gainesville Superintendent told her staff that she became interested in a comprehensive learning support system because the approach helps schools target and improve a fundamental aspect of schooling that gets scant attention from other reform models

A Comprehensive Learning Supports System also stresses developing intrinsic motivation for learning. Engagement in the learning process is a prerequisite for student achievement. Adelman and Taylor emphasize that school improvement is "not about

controlling behavior;" it's about engaging and re-engaging students in school through enhancing their intrinsic motivation. but enabling students to be motivated to learn.

As presented ..., developing a comprehensive system of student and learning supports involves working on four fundamental aspects of school improvement: (1) revising policy, (2) reconceiving student and learning supports interventions, (3) reworking operational infrastructure, and (4) facilitating major systemic changes at district and school levels.

Policy revision focuses on establishing a three component framework so that a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice as primary and essential and is no longer marginalized. Moreover, the emphasis is on unifying policies, strategies, and practices that promote healthy development for all students and prevent negative outcomes such as chronic attendance, behavior, or achievement challenges.

With specific respect to reconceiving student and learning supports interventions, as noted above, the framework encompasses both (1) a continuum and (2) a set of content arenas that are designed to play out cohesively in classrooms and schoolwide. The continuum is conceived as integrated subsystems for

- promoting healthy development and preventing problems
- intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible
- assisting those with chronic and severe problems

Note that the intent is to weave together school resources and strategically braid in a wide range of available community resources in order to meet the needs of the many and the few and significantly reduce the number of students requiring individual assistance.

Operationalizing the continuum calls for organizing programs and services coherently at every level. To enhance efforts across the continuum, programs and

services are coalesced into a multifaceted and cohesive set of content arenas. Doing this transforms a laundry list of initiatives into a set of defined, organized, and fundamentally essential intervention domains. The prototype provided to Gainesville defines the six content arenas as follows:

- Classroom-Based Approaches to Enable Learning
- Crisis/Emergency Assistance and Prevention
- Support for Transitions
- Home Involvement in Schooling
- Community Outreach
- Student/Family Assistance.

It is both the continuum and six content arenas that constitute the intervention framework for a comprehensive system of learning supports. It is represented as a matrix. Such a framework can guide and unify school improvement planning for developing the system. The matrix provides a tool for mapping what is in place and analyzing gaps with respect to high priority needs. Overtime, this type of mapping and analyses can be done at the school level, for a family of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern), at the district level, and community-wide.

Conclusion

The district tracks its own progress developing a system of learning supports through a number of measures including parent and teacher feedback. For example, the district gathers feedback from parents about policy changes through three yearly parent surveys that are administered district wide. For example, at the end of year survey for 2010-2011 the district asked about perceptions of the new grading policy.

But the district has primarily been focused on discipline data, such as numbers of referrals, detentions, suspensions, etc. to track the early progress of their comprehensive learning supports approach. First, referrals for disciplinary action for the middle and high schools have dropped from 91 disciplinary tribunals in 2008-09 to 47 in 2010-11, and the elementary schools saw a 75% decrease. Second, graduation rates have increased from 73.3% in 2009 to 81.3% in 2010 and 84.9% in 2011. The district is looking carefully at the numbers because they do not want the numbers to decrease simply because schools have stopped reporting incidents. So the district looks for patterns in what the suspensions are for, or which students receive them, etc.

Another change they have noticed was a decrease in referrals for tribunal (the initiation of placing in an alternative school), by approximately 50% over the last three years. The district considers this a positive result of their learning supports because they developed the Woods Mill Non-Traditional High Schools as a learning support for those students who needed flexible scheduling and diverse options because their life -situations made a traditional school day impractical (i.e. teen mothers). Previously, these students had gone to the alternative school,

which was actually designed for students with behavioral and cognitive challenges.

The Superintendent was initially interested in looking at learning supports and the Rebuilding for Learning initiative as a possible answer to the district's needs because a learning supports approach "is not a program, it is a framework for how we do things." She believed that comprehensive learning supports were different from other reform models because it actually brought something new to the table - learning supports for all children. Most other reform models target the two things that school already do - management and instruction, but comprehensive learning supports gets districts thinking about something new and how these supports relate to (and can improve) the job schools are already doing.

Now, two years down the road Gainesville was well on its way to creating a system that enables all children to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and in life."

References cited

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