

**Embedding Mental Health into a Learning Supports Component:  
An Essential Step for the Field to Take Now**

**F**or many years, our Center's policy analyses have stressed that all narrow agenda for student and learning supports, including endeavors to expand mental health in schools, need to be embedded into a broad concept such as *Learning Supports* as an essential step in countering the continuing marginalization of such efforts. This position has now been adopted by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP),<sup>1</sup> and 29 national and state organizations have signed on to the policy recommendation that NASP and our Center have prepared.<sup>2</sup>

In writing for the *NASP Communiqué*, here is some of what Anastasia Kalamaros Skalski states:

"Sometimes in the world of public policy, people read something that resonates with them in a new and unexpected way and results in a change in the way we do business. Some call this a paradigm shift, while others say they've had an epiphany. Whatever the assessment, when we start to be able to see the forest through the trees, it helps us successfully navigate our path to our destination.

After reading a policy analysis issued by the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools: Program and Policy Analysis this year, it became clear to several of NASP's public policy leaders and staff, including myself, that we needed to reframe our work from the viewpoint of the forest versus the trees. The document that stimulated this change was called Synthesis and Analysis of Recommendations to Congress for ESEA Reauthorization From the Perspective of Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching (2010). It reviewed recommendations for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; also known as No Child Left behind; NCLB) offered by witnesses at hearings on Capitol Hill and written recommendations submitted by a variety of national organizations, NASP included. The policy analysis determined that current recommendations were generally insufficient and would amount to mere "tinkering" with our educational system. The report asserted that real meaningful policy reforms were not likely to be achieved based upon current proposals because their primary focus was almost exclusively on two components: instructional (e.g., standards, high quality instruction, teacher quality, etc.) and organizational (e.g., accountability, budgets, governance, resource and facility management, etc.). While these two components of schooling are critical, the researchers' analysis determined that this focus alone is insufficient to achieve the true policy and practice reforms necessary to ensure that all students learn. In short, a child who is struggling to overcome barriers to learning (e.g., poverty and homelessness, school climate and safety, student engagement, and individual learning and mental health challenges) will not be fully available for instruction, even with strong curricula, highly qualified teachers, and a rigorous accountability system. A new approach is needed.

The UCLA researchers propose that a three component framework for ESEA reauthorization be advanced that balances instruction, management, and a third

---

<sup>1</sup>"Promoting the Critical Role of Learning Supports in Policy, Practice, and School Improvement" by Anastasia Kalamaros Skalski – in the National Association of School Psychologists' *NASP Communiqué*, Vol. 39, #5, January/February 2011. Online at: <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/mocq395Advocacy.aspx>

<sup>2</sup>See the brief four-page document that highlights the message for policy makers: online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enhancingtheblueprint.pdf>

component- learning supports for students. Learning supports are defined as "the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school by directly addressing barriers to learning and teaching and by reengaging disconnected students." Federal policy that almost exclusively addresses issues related to only two components essential to school reform is the equivalent of trying to successfully sit upon a two legged stool. Much attention has been given to instructional and organizational issues over the past decade, yet our schools have not attained the goal of high achievement and school completion for all students. The only essential component of education that has not been fully integrated into policy, and hence practices, is that which encompasses learning supports. Without equal attention to this critical third leg, schools will continue to fall short of their mission for every student to learn and succeed in school. Further, programs and initiatives within this third component, such as school wide positive behavior supports, response to intervention, school-community partnerships, social-emotional learning, and other learning support types of programs will compete for the remaining resources resulting in fragmentation and marginalization of services and supports. Despite the wonderful work represented by all of these programs, no single learning support program can meet every student need. "Comprehensive and coordinated" learning supports that reflect a full continuum of learning support services and personnel are essential to school improvement and in order for these to be effective, the importance of learning supports must become integral to every school improvement discussion and dialogue."

As the article also notes:

"NASP presented the summary of this work at a variety of coalition meetings including such groups as the National Alliance for Pupil Services Organizations, Success for All, Communities in Schools, and the National Coordinating Committee for School Health and Safety. NASP and the UCLA Center then disseminated organizational sign on letters addressed to the Chairmen and Ranking Members of the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate Education and Labor committees and the U.S. Secretary of Education to request that they refocus their attention in the reauthorization process on building policies and promoting practices that support a "3 component model." These letters were sent in November with 29 national and state organizations signing on in support of this effort."

### **It is Time to Embed Mental Health into a Student and Learning Supports Umbrella Concept**

The time has come for ending the counterproductive competition that arises from efforts that push separate, narrow agenda for student and learning supports. As the NASP statement underscores, no single program or service can address the range of factors interfering with equity of opportunity to succeed at school for the large number of students affected. And the competition for resources resulting from separate advocacy for such programs and services is contributing to the continuing marginalization and resultant fragmentation of such endeavors and the fact that they reach only a small proportion of the many students who should be beneficiaries.

The bottom line in terms of policy is that it is time to adopt a comprehensive concept such as learning supports as the umbrella under which those who push for expanding the focus on mental (and physical) health must learn to embed themselves. A health agenda (and especially a clinical health agenda) by itself is too narrow to fit into the broad mission of schools in our society and is inadequate for enabling equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school. We can continue to build a few islands of excellence (demonstrations, pilots) and "Cadillac models," but with over 90,000 schools in the U.S.A., the scale of need demands moving quickly in fundamentally new directions.

By defining mental health in schools as encompassing a full continuum of interventions and embedding the work into a comprehensive system of student/learning supports, policy makers can

- avoid the unrealistic and often inappropriate call for more and more one-on-one direct services
- counter the mistaken view that collocating community services on school campuses can ever be a sufficient approach to filling critical intervention gaps at schools and for enhancing community and home engagement
- better address classroom, school wide, and community interventions that can reduce the need for one-on-one services
- facilitate the weaving together of school, home, and community resources to gain economic benefits and enhance outcomes
- enhance coordination and cohesion of all resources (school, community, family) intended to support young people.

The current unsatisfactory state of affairs underscores the need to move in new directions. By embedding mental health into a student and learning supports umbrella concept, public education, public health, and the community at large can reduce nonproductive competition for sparse resources and do more for more students and their families.

### **About New Directions**

Embedding mental health into the proposed third component for school improvement policy (e.g., a learning supports component) establishes an essential foundation for ending marginalization of mental health concerns in schools. The focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students provides a sound umbrella for pursuing a wide range of mental health and psychosocial interventions.

Operationalizing the third component involves developing a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of supports. The resources for system building come from redeploying and weaving together school and community resources (including family human and social capital). The process must be guided by a carefully defined and broad intervention framework and an operational infrastructure that is designed to develop, implement, and sustain the system. A broad intervention framework and dedicated operational mechanisms can facilitate school-community collaboration in ways that a) minimize counterproductive competition for sparse resources and (b) redeploy and integrate resources to fill critical gaps in keeping with high priority needs (e.g., see *Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf> ).

This type of new directions work is taking root in several state departments of education (e.g., Louisiana, Iowa). At the school district level, our Center's public-private collaboration with the community affairs unit of Scholastic, Inc. is working with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) to establish a lead district in each of four states (Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, and Louisiana), and our Center currently is introducing the work into the Tucson Unified School District and the Columbus (OH) City Schools. (See *Where's It Happening* online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm> .)

### **Concluding Comments**

As John Maynard Keynes cogently stressed: *The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones.*

With this in mind, we suggest the following are prevailing old ideas that policy makers need to escape in order to move in new directions:

(1) Prevailing policy reflects the notion that effective school improvement can be accomplished despite the marginalization in school improvement policy and practice of efforts to address barriers to student learning and teaching.

(2) Prevailing policy reflects the notion that addressing barriers for the many students in need can be accomplished by continuing to overemphasize one-on-one direct services and paying sparse attention to classroom and school wide interventions that can reduce the need for such services.

(3) Prevailing policy reflects the notion that improving student and learning supports mainly involves enhancing coordination of interventions instead of transforming the enterprise into a comprehensive system that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice.

(4) Prevailing policy reflects the notion that adopting a continuum of interventions is a sufficient framework for transforming current student/learning supports.

(5) Prevailing policy reflects the notion that collocating community services on school campuses could be a sufficient strategy for filling critical intervention gaps at schools and for enhancing community and home engagement.

Escaping these old ideas is a first step toward ending the marginalization in school improvement policy of mental health and all other student and learning supports programs and services. And, embedding agenda for mental health and all other student and learning supports into a primary component is essential for moving in new directions to establish policy that supports development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students at school sites. Such policy must articulate the desired intervention framework and facilitate efforts to restructure, transform, enhance, and connect (a) school-owned programs and services and (b) community resources. To do less is a recipe for maintaining a terribly unsatisfactory status quo.

If you have any comments to share about all this, send them to us, and we will collate and post what we receive. Send to [smhp@ucla.edu](mailto:smhp@ucla.edu)

#### **ABOUT THE CENTER at UCLA**

The Center, co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology at UCLA, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563.

Permission to reproduce this document is granted. Please cite source.

*Can't find what you need?* Contact us by email at [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu) or call 310/825-3634.