



Is the School Year Off to a Good Start?

Online at: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/goodstart.pdf>

Another school year begins, and the intent is to increase achievement, close the achievement gap, reduce student (and staff) dropouts, ensure schools are safe, enhance well-being, and much more.

With these goals in mind, this is the time to review school improvement action plans with an eye to whether what is planned is sufficient and how well plans are being implemented. In doing so, it is especially important to do the review through the lenses of

- ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school
- addressing barriers to learning and teaching
- engaging and re-engaging students in classroom instruction

Using these lenses, consider the following *five* major concerns that require particular attention at the beginning of a school year. A quick monitoring will indicate how well a school is attending to each.

(1) Welcoming and Ongoing Social Support

Starting a new school is a critical transition period and, as with all transitions, specific supports often are needed. Those concerned about student, family, and staff engagement and well-being can play important prevention and therapeutic roles by helping a school establish a welcoming program and mechanisms for ongoing social support.

There must be capacity building (especially staff development) so that teachers, support staff, and other stakeholders can help establish (a) welcoming procedures, (b) social support networks, and (c) proactive transition supports for family members, new staff, and any other newcomers.

Special attention must be directed at providing office staff with training and resources so they can create a welcoming and supportive atmosphere to everyone who enters the school

A couple of useful resources:

- > *What Schools Can Do to Welcome and Meet the Needs of All Students and Families* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/WELMEET/welmeetcomplete.pdf>
- > *Understanding & Minimizing Staff Burnout* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Burnout/burn1.pdf>

(2) Addressing School Adjustment Problems

It is only a matter of weeks (sometimes days) after students enter a new school or begin a new year that it is clear to most teachers which students are experiencing difficulties adjusting (e.g., to new content and standards, new schools, new teachers, new classmates, etc.). It is particularly poignant to see a student who is trying hard, but is having problems. If the problems are not addressed, student motivation dwindles and behavior problems increase.

The start of the year is the time to be proactive. This is the time for staff development to focus on strategies for responding quickly to address the problem. This is the time for student support staff to work with teachers in their classrooms to intervene before problems become severe and pervasive and require referrals for out-of-class interventions.

A few useful resources:

- > *Addressing School Adjustment Problems* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/adjustmentproblems.pdf>
- > *Enabling Learning in the Classroom* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/enabling.htm>
- > *Re-engaging Student in Learning* – <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/quicktraining/reengagingstudents.pdf>
- > *Support for Transitions* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transition_tt/transindex.htm

> *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transition_tt/transindex.htm

For more, see the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on the topic of *Transitions* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm

(3) Responding as Early After Problem Onset as Feasible

Some students may make a reasonable start, but a month into the school year it becomes evident that they have significant learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems. Schools have long been accused of a “waiting for failure” policy. Clearly needed are strategies for effectively intervening as soon after problem onset as is feasible. Such strategies can be readily build on the foundation of interventions established to address school adjustment problems. Of particular concern for such students is that the focus is broadened to ensure specific attention to addressing a wider range of factors interfering with (re)engaging the student at school and particularly in classroom activity. Three policy and practice initiatives support responding early after problem onset: (a) the focus on *Response to Intervention*, (b) the emphasis on *Early Intervening* in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and (c) the imperative to develop a more comprehensive *system to address barriers to learning and teaching* at a school.

In addition to the resources noted above, see:

> *Response to Intervention* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Newsletter/fall06.pdf>

> the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on the topic of *Response to Intervention* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/responsetointervention.htm>

> *The Implementation Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning* (2006) by Adelman, & Taylor – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/corwin/bookannouncement.htm>

(4) Planning to Address Common Concerns that Arise from the School Calendar

Schools have a yearly rhythm – changing with the cycle and demands of the school calendar. There is the “Season of Hope” as the school year starts; then comes homework discontent, conferences of concern, grading and testing

crises, newspaper attacks, worries about burnout, and the search for renewal. In keeping with all this, the Center has put online a set of month-by-month themes and strategies to enhance support for students, their families, and staff, along with links to other resources for more in-depth follow up. See:
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/schoolsupport.htm>

This material also is available as a resource aid entitled: *Improving Teaching and Learning Supports by Addressing the Rhythm of a Year* which can be downloaded – at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rhythms.pdf>

(5) Establishing a Work Group to Design a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

It doesn't take too much monitoring to determine how well a school improvement plan focuses on enhancing student outcomes by comprehensively addressing barriers to learning and teaching. For many students, such a focus is essential to (re)engaging them in classroom instruction and enabling classroom learning. And, such (re)engagement is essential to increasing achievement, closing the achievement gap, reducing student (and staff) dropouts, ensuring schools are safe, and enhancing well-being.

The straight forward psychometric reality is that in schools where a large proportion of students encounter major barriers to learning, test score averages are unlikely to increase adequately until barriers are effectively addressed. So, it is time for schools to establish a work group to focus on designing and developing the type of comprehensive system for addressing barriers that can enable them to be more effective.

A few resource aids:

> *Steps and Tools to Guide Planning and Implementation of a Comprehensive System to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/stepsandtoolstoguideplanning.pdf>

> *A Toolkit for Rebuilding Student Supports into a Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>