

Improving ESSA Planning for Student and Learning Supports

As we continue to analyze the ESSA state plans and other initiatives being developed around the country, it is clear that the following matters are of major concern:

(1) *Support for students continues to be fragmented and marginalized as states respond to sections of federal guidance.* References to student and learning supports are scattered throughout five sections and are combined with “well rounded education” in Section 5, *Supporting All Students* (i.e., **Section 5.A. Well Rounded Education and Support for Students**). Also, short shrift is given to student and learning support personnel. Moreover, too little attention is being given to how to pull together parallel and redundant interventions and how to reduce the counterproductive competition for sparse resources for student and learning supports. All of this is a recipe for continuing the unsatisfactory status quo and poor outcomes related to enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school by addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

To ensure a deeper focus on student and learning supports to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students, we are recommending introducing an emphasis on a three component framework for school improvement and splitting “Section 5.A. Well Rounded Education and Support for Students” in two as follows:

5.A.1 Well-Rounded Education

5.A.2 Support for Students

(2) *The focus on the multitier student support (MTSS) model is not accounting for its severe limitations as a framework for student and learning supports.* The problems with MTSS include that

- it is an inadequate depiction of an intervention continuum (e.g., delineating levels of school interventions, rather than subsystems of school-community interventions)
- it does not systematically organize the content of what schools do each day to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

We are recommending a framework for unifying and then developing a comprehensive and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

We encourage stakeholders (especially those concerned with enhancing equity of opportunity, those concerned with addressing barriers to learning and teaching, those concerned with the waning focus on student and learning supports) to bring the above concerns and recommendations to the planning process.

In response to our series of briefs and notes about ESSA planning, it has been suggested that we draft an example of how a plan might address the above concerns. So we have sketched out the following to convey a way of including (a) an expanded policy framework in the introduction and (b) the framework we recommend for a section 5.A.2 on support for students. We hope these draft ideas will be helpful.

As always, everyone should feel free to adopt/adapt from the following resource.

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For Your Consideration:

A Draft Example for ESSA Planning Related to Student and Learning Supports

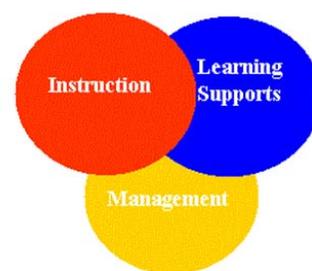
[To incorporate an innovative school improvement *policy* foundation for student and learning supports, the following could be adopted/adapted into the plan's introduction.]

At no time in our history has the imperative for educating *all* children been so crucial. The aim of ESSA is to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. With this in mind the legislation supports whole child development and recognizes that significant numbers of students require supports to successfully meet challenging state standards.

Reframing Policy

Given the implications of ensuring every student succeeds, it is essential to expand the policy framework for school improvement. Previous school improvement plans have reflected a tendency primarily to emphasize instruction and management and to focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a *secondary* concern.

With the move to more local control, we will expand our school improvement policy framework to encompass three primary components: (1) instruction, (2) governance/management, *and* (3) addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Establishing this third component of school improvement as a *primary* school policy commitment and ensuring it is well-integrated with the other components will help ensure development of the type of unified, comprehensive, and systemic approach necessary for enhancing equity of opportunity for all students. We view the third component when operationalized effectively (see Section 5.A.2) as the missing element in efforts to close the achievement gap, enhance school safety, reduce dropout rates, shut down the pipeline from schools to prisons, and promote well-being and social justice.



Note: The current trend is to refer to the third component as a learning supports component.

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To avoid marginalizing planning related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, we have split section 5.A in two as follows:

5.A.1 Well-Rounded Education

5.A.2 Support for Students

5. Supporting All Students

...

5.A.2 Support for Students

We know that not every student comes to school motivationally ready and able to learn what is to be taught that day. Even the best schools find that too many youngsters are growing up in situations where significant external barriers regularly interfere with their reaching full potential. And for some youngsters, intrinsic conditions make learning and performing difficult.

As a result of extrinsic or intrinsic interfering factors or both, there are students at every grade level who manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Because of this, direct and innovative interventions to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students are a school improvement imperative.

ESSA clearly underscores that student and learning supports are essential to enabling every student to succeed. However, the legislation continues the problems that have long permeated the Elementary and Secondary Education Act by scattering references to such supports throughout the various Titles, Parts, Subparts, and Sections. That is, ESSA focuses on addressing barriers to learning and teaching in a piecemeal and mostly indirect manner and thus conveys a fragmented picture and a lack of coherence with respect to essential supports. In effect, it is a recipe for the unsatisfactory status quo in providing student and learning supports.

Expanding the school improvement policy framework to include learning supports as a primary component provides a strong foundation for transforming state and districts efforts to guide schools in addressing students who need essential supports to enable learning, development, and well-being. Developing and implementing the component requires

- (a) reframing traditional student and learning supports
- (b) reworking the organizational and operational infrastructure to enable the development, implementation, and sustainability of the new approach.

(a) Reframing Current Student and Learning Supports

The aim is to help districts and their schools unify all efforts to prevent and minimize the impact of problems interfering with learning and teaching. This includes programs, services, initiatives, and projects that promote and maintain safety, physical and mental health, school readiness and early school-adjustment services, social and academic supports, and compensatory and special assistance interventions provided prior to referral for special services and those for meeting special needs. The point is to move away from stand-alone programs designated for specific learning, behavior, and emotional problems manifested by students. The reality is that students have complex and overlapping problems, and schools require a comprehensive system to address the complexity.

Strategically, given limited resources, the emphasis is on deploying, redeploying, and weaving together all existing resources used for student and learning supports. This involves first unifying and weaving together all *school* resources currently expended for student and learning supports. *And then*, the focus is on discriminatively *braiding school and relevant community resources* together to strengthen interventions and fill gaps. In this way, rather than pursuing yet another discrete program focused on a specific pressing concern, districts and their schools will have a system in place where they already are or can readily embed such concerns.

In reframing student and learning supports, a major emphasis is placed on developing a system for addressing all students and the full range of barriers to learning and teaching. Minimally, student and learning supports must address barriers that are interfering with the learning of a majority of students. However, while addressing barriers is essential, it is not a sufficient approach to enhancing equity of opportunity and enabling learning at school. As we have stressed, also essential is a potent approach for *re-engaging students in classroom instruction*. Any conceptualization of a learning supports component must encompass both these concerns.

Research and development has produced a intervention prototype for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system to address barriers and re-engage students. The prototype has two facets:

- one conceptualizes levels of intervention as a full continuum of integrated intervention subsystems that interweave school-community-home resources.
- the second organizes programs, services, and specific activities into a circumscribed set of content arenas.

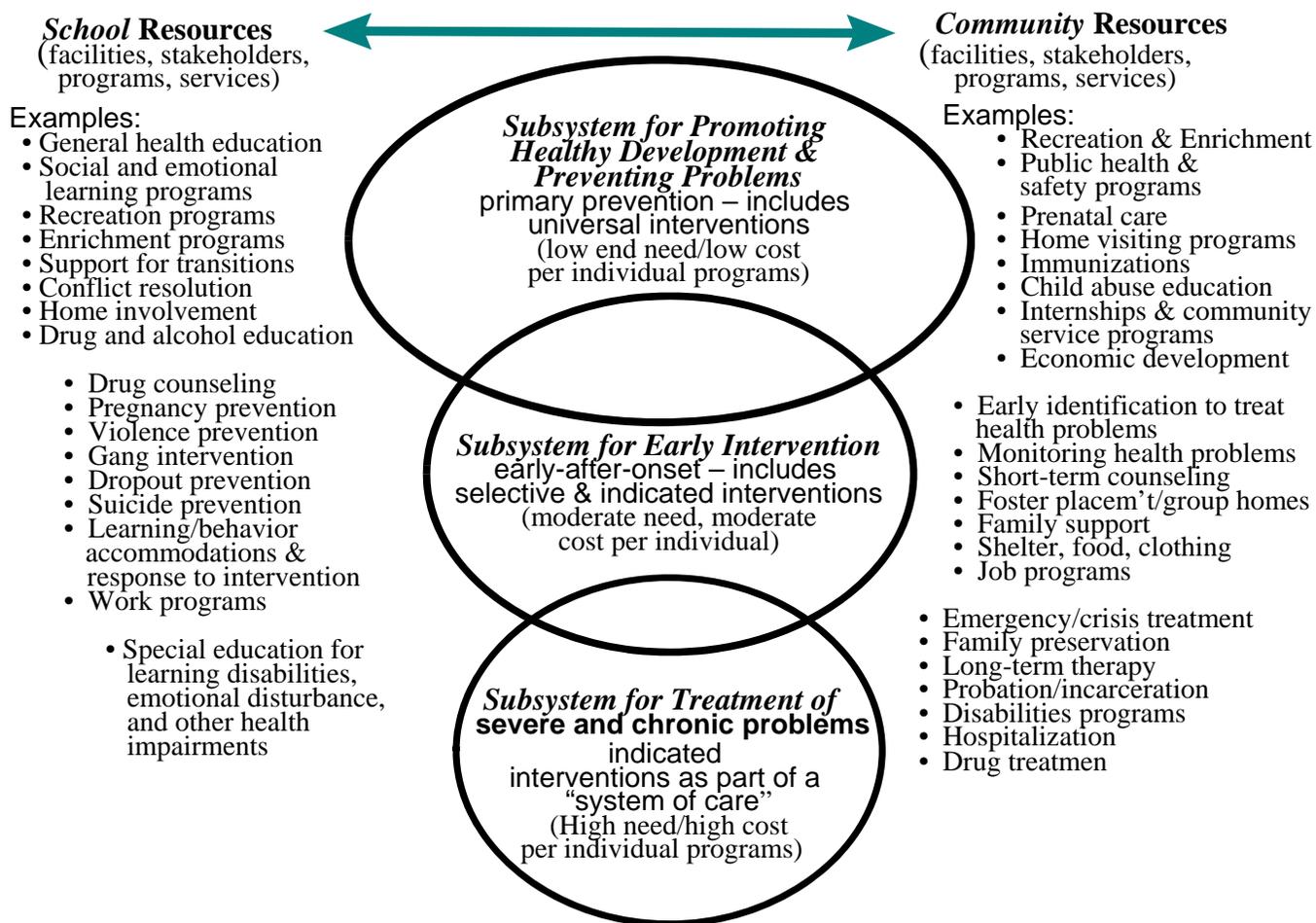
Conceptualizing a Continuum of Intervention

The Every Student Succeeds Act mainly emphasizes use of a schoolwide tiered model (also referred to as a multitier system of supports) as a framework for preventing and addressing behavior problems. The tiered model is defined as “a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students’ needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making.”

Few will argue against the notion that conceptualizing a continuum of intervention as a *starting point* for framing the nature and scope of student and learning supports. However, the multitier student support (MTSS) model is not the best way to depict such a continuum, and it is an insufficient organizing framework for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

An example of another way to conceive the levels is in terms of what they aim to do and as an interrelated and overlapping continuum of braided school and community subsystems. The subsystems focus on promoting effective schooling and whole child development, preventing problems experienced by teachers and students, addressing such problems as soon as feasible after they arise, and providing for students who have severe and chronic problems.

Exhibit A. Reframing MTSS’ Levels into a School-Community Intervention Continuum of Interconnected Subsystems



As illustrated in Exhibit A, we operationalize these as three subsystems. Each subsystem is seen as weaving together a wide range of school and community resources. The interrelated and overlapping subsystems are illustrated as tapering from top to bottom to indicate the view that if the top is well designed and implemented, the numbers needing early intervention are reduced and then, as more are helped through early-after-onset assistance, fewer students will need “deep-end” interventions.

Note: Efforts to enhance positive development and improve instruction clearly can improve readiness to learn. However, it is frequently the case that preventing problems also requires direct action to remove or at least minimize the impact of barriers, such as hostile environments and intrinsic problems. Without effective direct intervention, such barriers can continue to get in the way of development and learning.

Content Arenas of Activity

A system of student and learning supports requires more than conceiving a continuum of intervention. For example, “mapping” done with respect to the MTSS framework does not escape the trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level. Thus, in addition to the continuum, it is necessary to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited arenas that reflect the *content purpose* of the activity.

Our research and development efforts have categorized programs and services into six arenas of concerns that schools need to address each day. In organizing the activity, it becomes clearer what supports are needed in and out of the classroom so that teachers can enable the learning of students who are not doing well. The six arenas encompass:

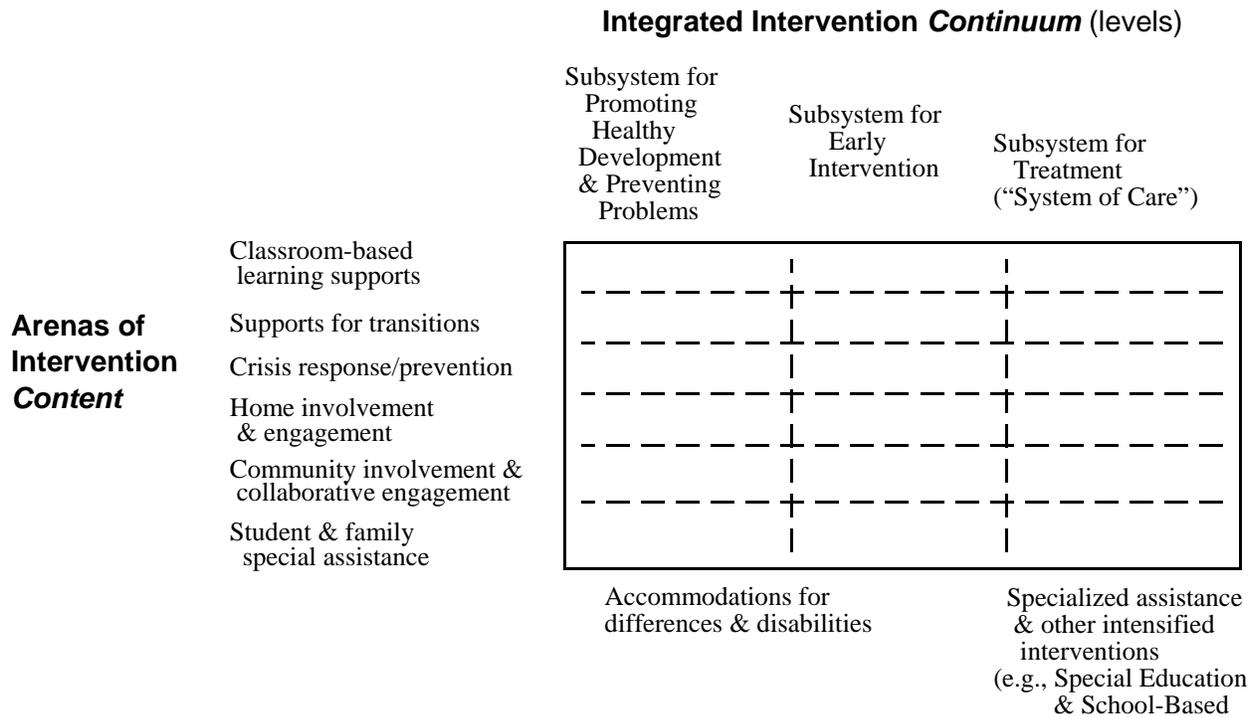
- *Enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning* (e.g., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems; includes a focus on prevention, early intervening, and use of strategies such as response to intervention)
- *Supporting transitions* (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
- *Increasing home and school connections and engagement*
- *Responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises*
- *Increasing community involvement and support* (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- *Facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed*

Some version of the six basic arenas has held-up over the last decade in a variety of venues across the country (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/nind7.htm>).

Continuum + Content

Combining the continuum and arenas of content activity moves MTSS thinking forward. It provides an intervention framework that can guide development of a total system designed to unify the resources a school devotes to student and learning supports, as well as braiding in community resources to fill critical gaps and strengthen the system (see Exhibit B).

Exhibit B. **Prototype Intervention Framework for the Third Component**



Note: The matrix illustrated in Exhibit B not only provides a guide for organizing and evaluating a system of student and learning supports, it is a tool for mapping existing interventions, clarifying which are evidence-based, identifying critical intervention gaps, and analyzing resource use with a view to redeploying resources to strengthen the system.

What the framework encompasses is essential to a school's ability to accomplish its instructional mission; it is not an added agenda to that mission. Moreover, the emphasis on classroom, school, home, and neighborhood helps create a school-wide culture of caring and nurturing. In turn, this helps students, families, staff, and the community at large feel a school is a welcoming, supportive place that accommodates diversity, prevents problems, and enhances youngsters' strengths and is committed to assuring equal opportunity for all students to succeed at school.

- *For more details on the framework and it’s research base, see
 - > *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/bookrev.pdf>
 - > *Addressing Barriers to Student Learning & Promoting Healthy Development: A Usable Research-Base* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/BarriersBrief.pdf>
 - > *What's the Research-base for Moving Toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports?* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/WhatstheEvidenceBase.pdf>

In sum, the intent is to unify and develop a comprehensive and equitable intervention system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Establishing such a system requires coalescing ad hoc and piecemeal policies and practices. Doing so will help end the fragmentation of student and learning supports and related system disorganization and will provide a foundation for weaving together whatever a school has with whatever a community is doing to confront barriers to equity of opportunity. This implementation of learning supports as a primary school improvement component is essential to the focus on whole child, whole school, and whole community (including fostering safe schools and the emergence of a positive school climate).

The framework will guide the embedding of supports for compensatory and special education, English learners, psychosocial and mental health problems, use of specialized instructional support personnel, adoption of evidence-based interventions, integration of funding sources, and braiding in of community resources as follows:

...
[Using the framework, go on to outline how the needs of mandated populations and others who need accommodations and special assistance will be met.]

(b) Reworking the organizational and operational infrastructure to enable the development, implementation, and sustainability of the new approach.

We know that none of this is easy, but no one who understands the complexity of enhancing equity of opportunity expects to accomplish essential systemic changes easily. Michael Fullan stresses that effective systemic change requires leadership that “motivates people to take on the complexities and anxieties of difficult change.” We would add that such leadership also must develop a refined understanding of how to *facilitate* and *sustain* difficult systemic change. That is, successful systemic transformation of established institutions requires organized and effective facilitation, especially when change is to take place at multiple sites and at several levels.

Because student and learning supports are so-marginalized, it is not surprising that the current operational infrastructure at schools reflects this status. A unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports clearly requires reworking the existing operational infrastructure at all levels. A learning supports component must have an administrative leader. The leader needs the support of a system development leadership team and workgroups. Together they ensure the component is (1) fully developed and integrated as a primary and essential facet of school improvement, (2) working with a family of schools, and (3) outreaching to the community to fill critical system gaps.

Thus, as the state and districts develop innovative plans to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students, the strategic plans will focus on

- *reworking operational infrastructures* to ensure effective daily implementation, ongoing development and sustainability of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching (i.e., we will define administrative and team leadership and workgroups whose primary role and functions are dedicated to this)
- *enhancing mechanisms and strategic approaches for systemic change and replication to scale* (e.g., coaches, mentors, collaborators for personalized personnel development, consultation, technical assistance; provision of guides and aids; use of technology to enhance needs assessments, communication, transparency, visibility, formative evaluation and problem solving, capacity building)
- *developing standards and expanding the accountability framework* to account for the third component and to do so in ways that encompass both formative and summative evaluation.

The process for accomplishing this has been discussed in previous sections of this plan. As noted, Title II will play a key role by facilitating personnel development as a key facet of building capacity for unifying and then developing a comprehensive and equitable system of student and learning supports and taking it systemwide.

Note: All this has implications for enhancing in-classroom student and learning supports by retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., student and learning support personnel – psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, Title I staff, dropout/graduation support staff, special educators, etc.). The jobs of these personnel need redefining to include working collaboratively with teachers *in classrooms* for part of each day. Improving student and learning supports in classrooms requires such collaboration, and such collaboration is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.