

School Policy Alert

Improving Outcomes for Students and Schools Requires a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

"The truth is that we don't know exactly how to turn around schools. The truth is also that excuses and inaction don't help students who are trapped in these schools. It's a real dilemma, not a fake one. But at the department, our feeling is that we have some models of success on which to build and we need to step up to the plate and start working on it."

Joanne Weiss, U.S. Department of Education

"It is not enough to say that all children can learn or that no child will be left behind; the work involves achieving the vision of an American education system that *enables* all children to succeed in school, work, and life."

(From the 2002 mission statement of CCSSO –
the Council for Chief State School Officers – italics added)

Enhancing equity of opportunity by *enabling* students to succeed at school is fundamental to turning around, transforming, and continuously improving schools.

Ensuring Equity of Opportunity: What's still Missing in Policy and Practice?

In *A Blueprint for Reform*, the U. S. Department of Education indicates that enabling equity of opportunity requires "moving toward comparability in resources between high- and low-poverty schools," "rigorous and fair accountability for all levels," and "meeting the needs of diverse learners ... by providing appropriate instruction and access to a challenging curriculum along with additional supports and attention where needed." Unfortunately, the blueprint gives sparse attention to "additional supports and attention where needed." This neglect is underscored by analyses of initiatives such as the U.S. Department of Education's *Race to the Top* and prevailing school improvement policy and practice and reflects the long-standing policy trend that treats student/learning supports as *auxiliary services* and usually as an afterthought.

Because student and learning supports are given short shrift in federal, state, and local policy, the work is *marginalized* when it comes to identifying and correcting fundamental *systemic* deficits in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and intervene to re-engage disconnected students. As a result, current policy tinkers with rather than transforms how schools intervene when targeting student diversity, disability, and differences.

The marginalization becomes poignantly evident when school improvement policy and practice is viewed through two lenses: (1) how schools try to directly *address barriers* to learning and teaching and (2) how they try to *re-engage students* who have become disconnected from classroom instruction. These two lenses bring into focus the considerable resources currently expended on student and learning supports (e.g., underwritten by general funds, compensatory and special education, special intra and extramural projects, community contributions). Together, these lenses guide the type of analyses that illuminates fundamental flaws in how these resources are used. And, they help expand understanding of the full range of systemic changes needed not only to prevent and reduce the problems cited in *A Blueprint for Reform*, but that are essential to reducing student (and teacher) dropout rates, narrowing the achievement gap, countering the plateau effect related to student population achievement scores, and in general, alleviating inequities.

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The reality is that many overlapping factors can interfere with learning and teaching. Teachers in low performing schools point to how few students appear motivationally ready and able to learn what the daily lesson plan prescribes. Teachers in the upper grades report that a significant percentage of their students have become actively disengaged and alienated from classroom learning. And, “acting out” behavior, especially bullying and disrespect for others, is rampant. (So is passivity, but this attracts less attention.) One result of all this is seen in the increasing number of students misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorders (ADHD). Another result is the many dropouts and pushouts.

Needed: A Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

As Judy Jeffrey, then chief state school officer for Iowa, stresses in introducing Iowa’s design for a comprehensive system of supports:

“Through our collective efforts, we must meet the learning needs of all students. Not every student comes to school motivationally ready and able to learn. Some experience barriers that interfere with their ability to profit from classroom instruction. Supports are needed to remove, or at least to alleviate, the effects of these barriers. Each student is entitled to receive the supports needed to ensure that he or she has an equal opportunity to learn and to succeed in school. This [design] provides guidance for a new direction for student support that brings together the efforts of schools, families, and communities.

If every student in every school and community in Iowa is to achieve at high levels, we must rethink how student supports are organized and delivered to address barriers to learning. This will require that schools and school districts, in collaboration with their community partners, develop a comprehensive, cohesive approach to delivery of learning supports that is an integral part of their school improvement efforts.”

Analyses of school improvement policies, plans, and practices substantiate the systemic deficits in dealing with factors leading to and maintaining students’ problems, especially in schools where large proportions of students are not doing well. The picture that emerges is one of ad hoc, fragmented, and flawed policies and practices.

Comprehensiveness = more than coordination. The tangential solution to the widespread fragmentation continues to be a call for improving coordination, communication, and coherence and flexibility in use of resources. While these are important attributes in improving student and learning supports, this emphasis stops short of establishing the type of expanded school improvement policy and practice needed to develop and fully integrate a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

The need is for *system building* within and across a *continuum of intervention*. This encompasses integrated *subsystems* designed to

- promote healthy development and prevent problems
- respond as early after problem onset as is feasible
- provide for those whose serious, pervasive, and chronic problems require more intensive assistance and accommodation.

Comprehensive approaches to student and learning supports involve much more than enhancing availability and access to health and social services. The need is to reframe services and integrate them and other piecemeal and ad hoc initiatives for addressing barriers to learning, development, and teaching. Just as efforts to enhance instruction emphasize well delineated and integrated curriculum content, so must interventions to address external and internal factors that interfere with students engaging effectively with that curriculum. At schools, the *content* (or curriculum) for

addressing a full range of interfering factors can be coalesced into six classroom and school-wide arenas. These focus on:

- (1) *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)
- (2) *supporting transitions* (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
- (3) *increasing home and school connections*
- (4) *responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises*
- (5) *increasing community involvement and support* (outreaching to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- (6) *facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.*

Too often, what is being identified as *comprehensive* is not comprehensive enough, and generally the approach described is not about *developing a system* of supports but only about enhancing coordination of fragmented efforts. Many times the main emphasis is on health and social services, usually with the notion of *connecting* more community services to schools. In some instances, the focus expands to include a variety of piecemeal programs for safe and drug free schools, family assistance, after-school and summer programs, and so forth. All these programs and services are relevant. But, most proposals to improve supports still fail to escape old ways of thinking about what schools need to develop a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Moving to a Three Component Framework for School Improvement Policy

Analyses of current policy indicate school improvement initiatives are dominated by a two component framework. That is, the main thrust is on improving (1) instruction and (2) governance/management. Where there are student support programs and services, they are marginalized in policy and practice and pursued in piecemeal and fragmented ways. School improvement policy has paid little or no attention to rethinking these learning supports. Continuing this state of affairs works against ensuring *all* students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

Policy for improving schools needs to shift from a two- to a three-component framework. The third component encompasses student and learning supports designed to address barriers to learning and teaching, including re-engagement of disconnected students. This third component becomes the unifying concept and umbrella under which all resources currently expended for student and learning supports are woven together. Its adoption represents a paradigm shift in school improvement policy – from a *marginalized and fragmented* set of student support *services* to development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive *system* that enables students to benefit from improved instruction.

As with the other two components, such an enabling or learning supports system must be treated in policy and practice as primary and essential in order to combat the marginalization and fragmentation of the work. Furthermore, to be effective it must be fully integrated with the other two components. Properly conceived, the component provides a blueprint and roadmap for transforming the many pieces into a comprehensive and cohesive system at all levels and in no way detracts from the fact that a strong academic program is the foundation from which all other school-based interventions must flow. Indeed, an enabling or learning supports component provides an *essential* systemic way to address factors that interfere with academic performance and achievement.

Many places are referring to third component elements as *learning supports*. And increasingly, learning supports are being defined as the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical,

social, emotional, and intellectual supports intended to *enable* all pupils to have an equal opportunity for success at school. Whatever the component is called, it is a transformational concept.

Various states and localities in the U.S.A. are moving in the direction of a three component approach for school improvement. In doing so, they are adopting different labels for their enabling component. For example, Hawai'i uses the term *Comprehensive Student Support System*; Louisiana's initiative is called a *Comprehensive Learning Supports System*; Iowa refers to their *System of Supports for Learning and Development*.

In operationalizing the third component, the focus is on weaving together what schools already are doing and enhancing the effort by inviting in home and community resources to help fill high priority systemic gaps related to (1) the *continuum* of interconnected systems of interventions and (2) the multifaceted set of *content arenas* that are cohesively integrated into classrooms and school-wide interventions.

Concluding Comments

As the Carnegie Task Force on Education has stressed:

*School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students.
But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.*

Teachers need and want considerable help in addressing barriers to student and school success. Unfortunately, the help they currently receive is poorly conceived and designed in ways that meet the needs of relatively few students. This inadequate response to their needs is the product of two-component thinking. Such a framework ignores ways to transform student and learning supports by moving toward *a comprehensive system* that enables all students to learn and all teachers to teach effectively. While the lowest performing schools probably are most in need of developing such a system, it is evident that all high poverty, low performing schools and most other schools are expending significant resources on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students with too little payoff and accountability.

In this time of need and change, it is essential that policy makers move to a *three-component framework* for turning around, transforming, and continuously improving schools. The third component will provide a unifying concept and an umbrella under which districts and schools can weave together all interventions specifically intended to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

Only by unifying student and learning supports will it be feasible to develop a *comprehensive system* to directly address many of the complex factors interfering with schools accomplishing their mission. And only by developing such a system will it be feasible to facilitate the *emergence* of a school environment that fosters successful, safe, and healthy students and staff. (It is important to remember that *school climate is an emergent quality* that stems from how schools provide and coalesce on a daily basis the components dedicated to instruction, learning supports, and management/governance.)

Pioneering work to enhance student and learning supports heralds movement toward a comprehensive system for addressing factors interfering with learning and teaching. Thus, whether or not the impending reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in the U.S.A. incorporates a three-component blueprint, we anticipate more and more movement in this direction at state, regional, district, and school levels. The call for ensuring equity and opportunity for all students demands no less.

For more on all this, see the *National Initiative; New Directions for Student Support* online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm>