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Learning Supports: Is it Really New?

W.L. 'Trey' Holladay July 25th, 2016

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Spring and summer in Alabama—when the landscape bursts with color—are beautiful times of the year. I personally enjoy these seasons most because they allow me to indulge my love of yard work. Yes, I am one of those "nuts" that likes to do this type of work. I don't necessarily love the work itself, but it is one of the few times that I can find solitude. No phone, email, television, computer or questions. No one wants to help me or tell me how they can do it better. It is the perfect time for me to do *reflective thinking*.

> "The common thread among older methods of supporting students and new, systemic models is simply the love of students!"

In leadership, space for reflective thinking is imperative for the growth of your organization. **Reflective thinking lets me assess, and reassess; to examine what we're doing, discern what is working, and what we need to change.** It gives me the chance to consider my own values and beliefs about education and the students we serve.

In one of my recent opportunities for reflection, I thought about how education has changed and how the work we do as educators has changed. *Learning Supports* is one of those areas that we discuss as a new concept, resulting from how the educational landscape has changed; but I beg to differ! Growing up the son of educators in the 1960s and '70s in rural Alabama, **I can personally attest that "learning supports" have definitely been a part of the educational system for the last fifty years.**

As society and culture have changed, what was once considered to be the norm—staying late to help a student, lunch ladies allowing second helpings, or ensuring students had clothes and supplies—has now become the exception, considered irregular, or have been regulated out of existence.

So during a recent opportunity for outdoors reflection, I started to consider the common thread between the old "learning supports" and the new Learning Supports. Why are veteran educators having to build frameworks that show novice teachers there is more to education than content knowledge and teaching strategies? I don't mean to understate the importance of academics, but if you think a child who's hungry or hasn't had but four hours of sleep the night before is worried about math and English, we have a lot to work on.

The common thread among older methods of supporting students and new, systemic models is simply the love of students! The bottom line is that if you love teaching, then you love kids, and you want them to succeed. **And we know that we must support the whole child as we set goals for our students' academic success.**

The Learning Supports framework gives our system the ability to address the shifting changes in society and culture. Addressing chronic absenteeism, lack of basic living essentials, language barriers, disabilities, and family needs are not something that can be done by school counselors or the administration alone. It is the work of the entire school, and must be ubiquitous in the school culture and embraced by the entire community.

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A learning supports framework gives us the very best opportunity to ensure *all* our students are prepared to receive the education they need to be successful. We love our students; we have just learned to spell love in a new way: L-E-A-R-N-I-N-G S-U-P-P-O-R-T-S.

The Athens City Schools System Framework

As a district, we are working diligently to create the infrastructure needed to proactively address barriers to student learning by developing a comprehensive system of supports.

Organizing: Our first step was to reorganize our central office into the three-component model: Instruction, Management and Learning Supports. This was important because it helped our school community understand that **a systemic shift in culture was occurring**; this was not just another initiative.

Mapping: Next, we formed a system-wide team (with central office and school representatives) and mapped our school and community resources for addressing learning, behavioral, emotional and physical problems. We realized that we already had many supports in place, but their effectiveness was compromised by fragmentation. **Each school was reacting to student needs, but lacked a comprehensive approach.**

The mapping process enabled us to take a close look at what was working and could be expanded, and what was not working and needed to be changed or removed. We too often do things because "we've always done them that way." Now we are being very thoughtful about why we do what we're doing, and we're not afraid to change policies, procedures, interventions, strategies, etc.

Using Data to Clarify, Then Respond to Students' Needs: In our first year, we targeted attendance issues, and this has remained a focus for us. When looking at our overall attendance rate, the problem was not obvious in the numbers, but we had too many students at risk of failure. As we drilled into the data, we realized we needed some alternatives to our "traditional" school program. We needed a framework that would allow us to be proactive.

Now we are more flexible and offer multiple blended learning and virtual opportunities to meet various needs, and ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed in school. There is a constant focus at both the school and district level on addressing absences quickly and keeping students engaged.

Through our mapping process and while analyzing student data, we realized we had a number of students who needed counseling services but had been unable to travel to receive those services. In response, we have partnered with United Way and the Mental Health Center to provide at-risk counseling services within our schools. And for prevention, we are now developing curriculum for a redefined student advisory program to put comprehensive supports in place.

Although we had advisory and mentoring programs in place, the review and audit process helped us realize we needed more. **One of the most important components in our redefined program is to ensure that every student has a personal relationship with an adult who will strive to connect students with school and community services** they need before they become at-risk.

As I said earlier, reflection is imperative to ensuring quality programs that are flexible and responsive enough to support all our students. Each year, we analyze our progress and needs to determine gaps and priorities. We will continue to expand systemic supports to eliminate barriers to student learning and promote whole child development and a positive school climate that keeps students engaged in their learning. We are committed to the continuous enhancement of our "new" system of learning supports.

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