



*Improving Schools,  
Engaging Students*

## *A Policy and Practice Analysis Brief*

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# *Learning Supports and Small Schools*

Spring, 2009

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563 Phone: (310) 825-3634.

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Center for Mental Health in Schools

UCLA Dept. of Psychology

P.O.Box 951563

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563

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## Preface

The focus of this report is on:

*How do small schools provide student and learning supports and how can they do it better?*

We begin with a brief description of the current movement toward establishing small schools. Then, we outline the problem small schools confront in trying to address barriers to learning and teaching. Finally, we offer some recommendations for how small schools can enhance learning supports.

This brief draws on previous policy and practice analyses done by the Center, other reports and analyses available online, and some perspectives solicited directly from colleagues working at state departments, districts and schools, and professional associations.

As always, we owe many folks for their contributions to this report, and as always, we take full responsibility for its contents and especially any misinterpretations and errors.

Finally, we want to acknowledge that portions of the work were done as part of a cooperative agreement funded by the Office of Adolescent Health, Maternal and Child Health Bureau (Title V, Social Security Act), Health Resources and Services Administration, Department of Health and Human Services. At the same time, it should be noted that the report is an independent work.

Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor  
Center Co-directors

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# Learning Supports and Small Schools

*Small schools can be crafted with an eye toward broad-based equity,  
or they can become creaming "tracks" within public secondary education.*

Michelle Fine

Small schools exist in every school district. Any survey of small schools shows that they differ from each other on a variety of dimensions that go beyond school size. They vary even with respect to the reasons why they are small. Some are small by choice; others are not. Over the last thirty years, the *small schools movement* has reified “small” as the standard for school improvement.

For all the good features of small size, a common downside is that, even in the best of times, budgets in small schools are too sparse to provide the type of student and learning supports found in larger schools. And, since what large schools do in this arena is inadequate, the lack of resources is not the only concern for small schools as they determine how to provide effective supports for students.

To enhance student supports, some schools seek better linkages with community public and private service providers. Unfortunately, this is not a realistic solution for schools, especially those in an economically disadvantaged locale. The reality is that public and private agencies cannot fill critical gaps because they have more referrals than they can accommodate. Moreover, their mission is to serve designated subgroups, not all children.

So, the problem for all schools is how to build an effective system of support to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Previous analyses done by our Center have explored this in general. The focus of this brief is on: *How do small schools provide student and learning supports and how can they do it better?*

We begin with a cursory description of the current movement toward establishing small schools. Then, we outline the problem small schools confront in trying to address barriers to learning and teaching. Finally, we offer some recommendations for how small schools can enhance student and learning supports. This brief draws on previous policy and practice analyses done by the Center, other reports and analyses available online, and some perspectives solicited directly from colleagues working at state departments, districts and schools, and professional associations.

## Small Schools as an Education Reform

One broad-based impetus for creating small schools as an education reform stems from a desire to improve instruction. Small schools are seen as able to do this through establishing a supportive learning community and school autonomy. School, family, and school engagement and collaboration usually are viewed as foundational. Implicit is the intent to enhance personal relatedness and support and a psychological sense of community among all stakeholders. As one respondent to our inquiries stated: “The best advantage of attending one of our small schools is that teachers and support staff know their students better, and vice versa. Students have a greater chance of forging stronger relationships with adults at school – an opportunity that is critical for some students.”

For some early leaders of the small schools movement, the aim has always gone beyond just improving academic achievement and establishing a better learning environment. They see small schools as “a strategy to reinvigorate public education.... At its best, the small schools movement was grounded in a set of radical educational and political principles,” including commitments to access, participation, democracy, equity, social justice, and social responsibility (Fine, 2005).

## **Are Small Schools Better?**

At their best, small schools are seen as enhancing strong personal bonds, home and community involvement, improved instructional quality and accountability, and improved teacher working conditions and job satisfaction.

In their 2009 review of empirical evidence about school size effects, Leithwood and Jantzi conclude that the weight of the evidence “clearly favors smaller schools. Students who traditionally struggle at school and students from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds are the major benefactors of smaller schools.”

Others who are proponents of small schools state:

“Research evidence documents that when socioeconomic factors are controlled, children in smaller schools: (1) Are more academically successful than those in larger schools. (2) Have higher graduation rates. (3) Are more likely to take advanced level courses. (4) Are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities (Cotton, 1996). In addition, small schools are frequently the glue that binds together small communities, serving as their economic and social hub” (Jimerson, 2006).

“Student achievement goes up and the gap between poor students and their more affluent peers is narrowed. Students are known by their teachers, and as a result, discipline problems and dropout rates go down, while attendance goes up. The cost per graduate is lower in small schools compared to large comprehensive high schools” (Small Schools Project website, 2009).

*Creating small schools is about so much more than smallness.*

Shields & Miles

A more complex perspective on small schools as an education reform is found in Fine’s 2005 article entitled: “Not in Our Name: Reclaiming the democratic vision of small school reform” in *Rethinking Schools*.

“We have learned much in the last 20 to 30 years about growing, deepening, and sustaining the complex and exhausting work of small schools. Small schools are not a quick fix, an easy strategy, a silver bullet. As a simple idea alone, they are certainly not sufficient to transform a whole district. Sitting beneath “small” lays a set of inextricably connected commitments about curriculum, pedagogy, equity, sustainability, teaching, and learning. Taken together, these elements can help provide answers to the devastating failures of large, comprehensive high schools in urban America.

As small schools are appropriated as “systemic reform” we are witnessing the collateral damage of top-down reform without educator and community participation, fracturing along the fault lines of inequity....

They can embody a collective vision enacted with commitment by educators and community, or they can

represent a mandate enacted by the 'entrepreneurial,' imposed on a community that has neither been consulted nor respected, with none of the collective passions of more authentic efforts. Small schools can be crafted with an eye toward broad-based equity, or they can become creaming "tracks" within public secondary education. Small schools can be the door to a revitalized public sphere for poor and working-class students or they can usher in privatization in the form of privately managed charters, choice, and religious affiliation. Small schools can stand strong as a project dedicated to poor and working-class youth, or they can be a bonus for young, gentrifying families....

The small schools movement has been carried by the force of students, educators, and community activists working within and across schools, late into the night and into weekends, who have dared to imagine quality education for poor and working-class students of color; dared to ask hard questions of educational policy, practice and politics; and have dared to resist and organize subversively for educational justice” (Fine, 2005).

Whatever the rationale for small schools, cautions have been raised about reports of positive outcomes. For example, focusing on the Gates Foundation \$2 billion initiative to promote the dissolution of large high schools and create small schools, Ravitz (2008) notes that Gates has funded “some 2,600 new small high schools in 45 states and the District of Columbia. New York City alone has more than 200 such schools.” What has been the result? Ravitz reports that: “On Nov. 11, the Gates Foundation convened a meeting of leading figures in American education to admit candidly that the new small high schools had not fulfilled their promise. The foundation acknowledged that “we have not seen dramatic improvements in the number of students who leave high school adequately prepared to enroll in and complete a two- or four-year postsecondary degree or credential.”

Proponents and critics of small schools agree that there is no silver bullet to solve the problems of schools serving students experiencing major barriers to learning.

Summarizing results from several sources, Ravitz stresses that evaluations found that “‘relevance’ was not correlated with the quality of student learning” and that while Gates-funded small schools had higher attendance rates, they had lower reading and math test scores than other high schools within the same school districts. And with respect to graduation rates, while early reports for the New York schools showed a 70% graduation rate compared to a district-wide average of 50%, these schools “were permitted to restrict the admission of English-language learners and disabled students, meaning that the large schools got a disproportionate share of students with high needs.” She also notes that “some of New York City’s small schools achieved higher graduation rates by practicing ‘credit recovery,’ meaning that students could get full credit for a course they had failed or never attended by showing up for an extra class for a few days or by finishing a project out of school.” And, she indicates that “even in New York City, Mr. Gates acknowledged, less than 40% of the graduates from the small high schools were ready for their college classes at the City University of New York.”

Ravitz concludes:

“The Gates Foundation's mistake was in believing that there is a silver bullet to solve the problems of inner-city schools, which enroll large numbers of students who are poor, have limited English language proficiency, and are more likely to require special education. ... Small schools ... do not offer the same menu of advanced courses and electives, extracurricular activities and vocational courses that most students associate with going to high school. And many students have health problems and issues related to their family's poverty that even the smallest of schools can't solve. ...”

### **Characteristics of Small Schools**

Because of the variability in their features, small schools are not readily characterized. As noted, even size varies. In their 2009 review, Leithwood and Jantzi conclude that elementary schools with large proportions of students from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds should be limited in size to not more than about 300 students, while those serving economically and socially heterogeneous or relatively advantaged students should be limited to about 500. For secondary schools serving exclusively or largely diverse and/or disadvantaged students, they propose limits of about 600 or fewer, and for those serving economically and socially heterogeneous or relatively advantaged students, the set limits at about 1,000.

Besides size, commonly cited attributes are autonomy for making decisions about the school, an instructional approach based on high standards and accountability, enhanced opportunities for interpersonal connection and support, and engaged involvement of home and community.

A commonly cited attribute is autonomy for making decisions about the school. Complications arise however in clarifying: Autonomy from who? Autonomy to do what?

A more detailed picture comes from a study of nine high performing, small urban schools published by Education Resource Strategies (Shields & Miles, 2008). The report indicates that these schools: “(1) create customized strategic designs that organize resources — people, time, and money — to advance a clearly defined instructional model, (2) share a common set of high-performing practices — investing in teaching quality, using student time strategically, and creating individual attention — that advance their instructional models, (3) work within small school size and funding level constraints to prioritize core academics and professional community over program diversity, and (4) require flexibility from traditional administrative practices and union contracts around hiring, staffing, and time to implement their strategic designs.” The report concludes: “creating small schools is about so much more than smallness. It is about the way schools create Strategic Designs by taking advantage of size and rethinking the high school experience for urban students. These designs begin with clearly defined instructional models, and they organize people, time, and money in high-performing ways to invest in teaching quality, use student time strategically, and create individual attention.” With respect to individual attention, it is noteworthy that the approach to learning and teaching emphasizes: “*Core academics*: a rigorous core academic college-preparatory program for all students; *Relevance*: a curriculum that is relevant to student interests



and/or the world in which they live; and *Personalization*: personal relationships between adults and students are fostered to ensure all students are known well by at least one adult.”

Jimerson (2006) review of research concludes the following are elements of smallness that are most associated with academic and/or social and emotional benefits for students:

1. There is greater participation in extra-curricular activities, and that is linked to academic success.
2. Small schools are safer.
3. Kids feel they belong.
4. Small class size allows more individualized instruction.
5. Good teaching methods are easier to implement.
6. Teachers feel better about their work.
7. Mixed-ability classes avoid condemning some students to low expectations.
8. Multiage classes promote personalized learning and encourage positive social interactions.
9. Smaller districts mean less bureaucracy.
10. More grades in one school alleviate many problems of transitions to new schools.

### **Small Schools as Centers of their Communities**

The movement to increasingly guide schools to becoming centers of the community is especially relevant to small schools. From our perspective, a key facet of this is bringing school, home, and community resources together in ways that can create a comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

To enhance what small schools can offer and for economic considerations, some small schools already share facilities with community entities (Nathan & Thao, 2007). Examples of such sharing include co-location of health and social services, libraries, adult education, recreation and youth development facilities, and much more.

How schools become centers of the community, of course, is complex. A six-year study by the Annenberg Institute documents how low-income communities of color have organized to improve their local schools and have pushed for small schools. In an Annenberg report entitled: *Building a District-wide Movement for Small Schools Reform*, Shah, Mediratta, & McAlister (2009) stress that: “Community organizing for school reform is deeply entwined in the complex dynamics of communities, politics, and schools.” They describe the success of Oakland (Calif.) Community Organizations (OCO) in building a district-wide movement that after “years of on-the-ground organizing – community meetings, relationship building, and public actions – led to the creation of forty-eight new small schools, fundamentally transforming the district landscape.”

As a result of OCO’s organizing efforts, the report states that teachers and principals agree that small schools give students more individualized academic supports; teachers and parents say school climate – school safety in particular – has improved, as has parent-teacher relationships. And, teachers report that positive gains in shared faculty decision-making. Because of the district-wide nature of this work, excerpts from the report are provided in Exhibit 1.

*Where schools truly  
become centers of  
the community, great  
things happen.*

Arne Duncan

## Exhibit 1

### **"Building a District-wide Movement for Small Schools"**

[Excerpts from the report by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University prepared by S. Shah, K. Mediratta, & S McAlister (2009). Online at [http://www.annenberginstitute.org/pdf/Mott\\_Oakland\\_high.pdf](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/pdf/Mott_Oakland_high.pdf) ]

"Many researchers have noted the failure of traditional approaches to education reform to bring about deep and lasting school improvement. Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton, for example, attribute the "sorry and familiar story of school reform gone awry" to educators' singular focus on changing the internal "technical aspects" of schooling, without adequately attending to the political, social, and cultural dimensions of schooling. Oakes and Lipton argue,

The logic and strategies employed in social and political movements – in contrast to those found in organizational change models – are more likely to expose, challenge, and if successful, disrupt the prevailing norms and politics of schooling inequality. ... Without attention to these dynamics, such reforms are abandoned entirely or implemented in ways that actually replicate (perhaps in a different guise) the stratified status quo. (Oakes & Lipton 2002, p. 383)

Oakes and Lipton's analysis reflects an increased interest from both practitioners and researchers in understanding the potential role of community organizing in contributing to sustainable improvements in education."

#### **Rationale for Community Organizing for School Reform**

"Even the most well-intentioned of policies (and politicians) are often insufficient to bring about desired outcomes. Political will and political power are necessary forces to carry those good intentions forward and to hold political actors accountable when those intentions go unrealized.

In low-income neighborhoods..., political power is not attained through wealth or status. Rather, power comes from numbers – from bringing together ordinary people to identify critical community concerns and to act collectively and strategically for improvements to their communities, neighborhoods, and schools."

"Neither community organizing nor public education activism is new in the United States. But increasingly in the last fifteen years, community organizations have used organizing as a focused and deliberate strategy for school improvement, particularly within low- and moderate-income communities.

Instead of relying on more traditional forms of parent and community involvement (getting involved in school activities or serving on district-sponsored committees, for instance), organizing groups mobilize parents, youth, and community members for local school improvement and districtwide reform, often applying pressure from the outside to generate the political will necessary to adopt and implement reforms. In the process, these organizing efforts aim to equalize power dynamics between school and district administrators and low-income parents and community members, who may otherwise feel marginalized or powerless to challenge educational inequities.

Nationally, it is estimated that more than 200 community groups are engaged in organizing for better schooling (Mediratta & Fruchter 2001; Gold, Simon & Brown 2002). These organizing groups have responded to a variety of parental and youth concerns, including unsafe environmental and facilities conditions, overcrowded schools, dangerous school crossings, inadequate school funding, unresponsive administrators, and inexperienced teachers."

(cont.)

## Processes and Guidelines

The report summarizes community organizing for school reform as

- Bringing together public school parents, youth and community residents, and/or institutions to engage in collective dialogue and action for change
- Building grassroots leadership by training parents and youth in the skills of organizing and civic engagement
- Building political power by mobilizing large numbers of people around a unified vision and purpose
- Focusing on demands for accountability, equity, and quality for all students, rather than on gains for individual students
- Aiming to disrupt long-standing power relationships that produce failing schools in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods and communities of color
- Using the tactics of direct action and mobilization to put pressure on decision-makers when necessary

Policy guidelines for development of the schools as summarized call for

- *Diversity and Consistency:* All create their own vision and philosophy for the schools. Schools hold their children to high academic expectations in an intimate, caring, and safe learning environment. Emphasis on parent involvement is expected.
- *Choice:* All must be a “school of choice” for parents, students, and teachers.
- *Admissions priorities:* Priority is given to students from schools designated as overcrowded and low performing; admissions must reflect district demographics.
- *School Employee equity:* Teachers and other staff receive the same salary, benefits, and protections of their comprehensive school counterparts.
- *Shared Decision Making and Site-based Management:* The schools determine their own schedule, program, staff duties, leadership structure, and calendar within a set of broad guidelines. Budgets are created at the school level.
- *Opportunities for stakeholder growth:* Opportunities for networking and professional development available to teachers, school design teams, and parents.
- *Sites for New Schools:* Sites are either newly created or exist in renovated schools with a new outlook and goal.

## How the Oakland Community Organizations Influenced School District Policy

*Policy.* Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) “worked tirelessly to ensure that the supports necessary for the successful development of small schools were in place and to create the political will to sustain the reform within a turbulent political environment”.

*Parent and Community Engagement.* OCO “helped integrate more nuanced and meaningful forms of parent and community engagement into district and school practices. Parents have been at the front and center of the small schools reform, involved in every step of the process, from advocating for the small schools to participating in design teams and leading school-based organizing committees.”

*Infrastructure.* “OCO’s advocacy led to the creation of new school facilities, the development of new school district departments and staff positions, and increased philanthropic spending in the school district.”

(cont.)

*School Climate.* “Teachers and parents report that school climate, especially school safety, parent-teacher relationships, and shared decision making, was positively influenced by the organization’s work.”

*Professional Culture for Teachers.* “Teachers in the new small schools reported greater input in school decision making, a stronger sense of collective responsibility, and higher norms of collaboration and joint problem-solving than teachers in large schools.”

*Student Progress.* “Teachers and principals report that students have more individualized academic supports, thus enhancing prospects for better educational outcomes.” “Small schools in Oakland are outperforming the large schools from which they emerged. In particular, students are completing more rigorous coursework and dropping out at lower rates, compared to the large schools.”

The trajectory of OCO’s organizing is described as offering “a powerful example of how persistent organizing – especially the intentional development of relationships between parents, community members, teachers, and administrators – can result in equitable districtwide reform. Grassroots pressure and subsequent public will to address overcrowding in Oakland schools was as essential as the participation of parent leaders, teachers, and administrators in design meetings and day-to-day implementation of creating forty-eight new small schools. Remarkably, even though this organizing took place in a period of significant fiscal and political turbulence, OCO’s persistent focus on equity and outcomes helped to protect and sustain the small schools reform.

OCO’s organizing yields important lessons about how communities and educators can come together to generate reform efforts, the challenges and opportunities associated with reforms when they are scaled up, and the importance of community engagement in sustaining reform over time.”

### **Cited References**

Gold, E., Simon, E. & Chris Brown, C. (2002). *Successful community organizing for school reform*. Chicago, IL: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform.

Mediratta, K.& Fruchter, N. (2001). *Mapping the field of organizing for school improvement*. New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University.

Oakes, J. & Lipton, M. (2002). Struggling for educational equity in diverse communities: School reform as social movement, *Journal of Educational Change*, 3, 383–406.

## Providing Supports in Small Schools to Enable Learning

While small schools have promise, for many students small is not enough. These youngsters require significant learning supports.

Exhibit 2 highlights what we mean by supports to enable learning. (See Appendix A for more and Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, 2006b for an indepth presentation.) Such supports generally are acknowledged as imperative for all schools and especially schools in communities where many students are encountering barriers to learning.

In this section, we underscore the difficulties small school have in providing essential learning supports and explore what can be done to improve the situation. As noted, we draw on previous Center policy and practice analyses, reports and analyses available online, and perspectives garnered from colleagues working at state departments, districts and schools, and professional associations.

### **Common Concerns About What's Being Done**

Not surprisingly, large and small schools experience the same types of concerns when it comes to developing learning supports. For example, it was stressed in the responses we received from colleagues: “Large schools and districts tend to spread staff too thin to be effective, creating the same situation as being a small or rural school.” This reflects the low policy priority given to learning supports which translates into little attention in school improvement design and planning. Low priority results in an inadequate budget, little attention to capacity building, and almost no consideration when standards and accountability indicators are formulated.

Critical differences for small as contrasted with large schools are not in substance but in degree.

Small schools have

- >fewer dollars available for learning supports and relatedly fewer staff members available to focus on developing essential learning supports for all (not just special education) students
- >little or no priority for developing such supports
- >little guidance and capacity building support from the district and regional and state educational agencies to help them develop a *system* of learning supports

A few comments on each of these matters will help clarify the problems related to developing a system of learning supports at small schools.

### *Funding/Staffing*

Obviously, the fewer students, the fewer the dollars allocated to the school by the district. For small schools, this translates into little or no staff with primary responsibility for developing and implementing a system of learning supports. As a result, the focus related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching is first and foremost on dealing with mandates and crises (e.g., meeting special education and Title I

## Exhibit 2

### What are Learning Supports?

**L**earning supports are 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 by addressing barriers to and promoting engagement in learning. Just as efforts to enhance instruction emphasize well delineated and integrated curriculum content, so must efforts to address external and internal factors that interfere with students engaging effectively with that curriculum. At most schools currently, learning supports are not well designed.

To ensure equity of opportunity, schools must first coalesce existing learning supports and over time develop them into a comprehensive system (an enabling component) that is fully integrated with instructional efforts.

### Framework for a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

Based on research of what schools need in order to effectively address barriers to learning and teaching, learning supports can be coalesced into six categories of classroom and school-wide support, each of which is organized along an integrated intervention continuum. The six categories are:

- *enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning* (e.g., improving instruction and classroom management to enhance engagement and re-engage students who have become disengaged from learning at school and to pursue response to intervention strategies for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems)
- *supporting transitions* (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
- *increasing home and school connections*
- *increasing community involvement and support* (outreaching to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers and linkages to community resources that can fill priority gaps in the system of supports)
- *responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises*
- *facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.*

The integrated continuum spans intervention 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

### Designing and Implementing the System

Establish

- a policy commitment.
- an operational infrastructure that fully integrates learning supports into planning and decision making processes
- priorities for planning and implementing the first set of learning support interventions at the school.

requirements, responding to emergencies). Next comes campus safety and student discipline. Other student and learning support needs are discussed periodically in staff meetings; some are crowded into staff development workshops as specific problems rise to the surface; some become salient when a special project is funded.

While some small schools have tried to enhance their resources through sharing and co-location, the concept of and mechanisms for weaving together (pooling, braiding) the resources of a family of schools and of school-home-community have not been widely appreciated and implemented.

*Low Priority for  
Developing a System of  
Learning Supports*

A premise of the small school movement is that fewer students at a school and in a classroom allow teachers to bond with students and their families, and the reduced numbers along with the bonding are sufficient conditions to enable students to learn and teachers to teach. This assumption reinforces the general tendency in education reform circles to view student supports as only tangentially connected with raising achievement test scores. This marginalization of student and learning supports results in their neglect in the design of many small schools.

*Little Support for  
Guidance and Capacity  
Building*

State departments directly or through regional agencies provide a range of guidance and capacity building support to school districts. The nature, quantity, and quality of the support varies. In the past, almost all the emphasis was on compliance and monitoring of federal and state requirements. Increasingly, movement toward playing a major role in capacity building is being explored. As part of this exploration, initiatives are underway to ensure a high priority focus on building the capacity of districts/schools to develop a system of learning supports.

At this juncture, however, for schools in general, and certainly for small schools, the reality with respect to developing a *system* of learning supports is that few receive guidance and support from state and regional education agencies and often none from the district. For example, most of the guidance for education leaders neglects the matter; frameworks for strategically developing such systems are widely ignored; little attention is paid to mapping and redeploying resources for student and learning supports. All this reflects the fundamental disconnect between the need for system development and capacity building to make it happen.

There are, of course, exceptions. For example, in Iowa, the state department of education has a Learning Supports Team that interfaces with Learning Support leads/teams at the regional units, with the intent of having the regional units help districts and schools establish local Learning Support Teams to guide development of systems of learning supports. Respondents to our inquiries offer other examples. From New York City: "On sites with multiple small schools there is a Building Council (composed of the Principals of each of the small schools on the site). There is a school safety plan for the entire building. While collaboration across schools is encouraged, it is up to the Principals.

Each school can buy their own school support organization. On some campuses each school may have a different student support organization. On other campuses, the Principals have agreed to contract with the same support organization so that there is consistency across the site.” The different support organizations in the New York City boroughs are described online as follows:

- >*School Support Organization* – “Eleven internal and external organizations offer packages of differentiated instructional supports that each school purchases with new funds. They help schools achieve their accountability targets, provide professional development support, design programs for high need populations, and attract and support high quality teachers.”
- >*Integrated Service Centers* – “Each borough has an ISC which offers schools one shop assistance with mandated and operational services related to human resources, payroll, budget, and procurement, transportation, food services, facilities and extended use, grant management, technology, health and safety, student suspensions, youth development, and some elements of special education.”

### **Making it Happen at a Small School**

In Exhibit 3 we highlight other examples and related comments respondents shared about staffing and mechanisms for managing and enhancing learning supports for small schools (see Exhibit 3).

### *Moving Forward with What Can be Mustered*

While small schools have the advantage of fewer students, the only way they can eliminate the need for student and learning supports is to inequitably select and push out students. If they are to play a transformative role in educational reform, small schools must come to grips with how best to address barriers to learning and teaching. And, for any school to become the center of the community, school improvement planning and implementation must fully integrate development of a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Whatever the budget, small school designers have to choose whether to continue addressing barriers to learning and teaching reactively or approach the situation as an opportunity to proactively build for the future. The reactive stance perpetuates what has long been recognized as a waiting for failure policy. That is, nothing potent is done until students manifest severe and pervasive problems, and then they are provided specialized assistance of a highly personalized and costly nature. Because of the costs, relatively few students are helped, and these few quickly consume whatever funds are available at the school and at community public agencies.

Rather than reacting in this way, small school designers can proactively choose to take some *first steps* in developing a comprehensive system of learning supports. Despite sparse resources, they can *begin* to integrate mandates for special and compensatory education (e.g., IDEA



### Exhibit 3

#### **Information about Staffing and Mechanisms for Managing and Enhancing Learning Supports for Small Schools – from Respondents Around the Country**

The following information is excerpted and edited from the responses to our inquiries:

>“Tapping into community agencies and professionals to provide services that cannot be provided by the school staff involves building coalitions and determining how resources can be shared to serve the needs of common clients.”

>“Everyone on staff is a “key collaborator” to others. That means that every person on staff is willing to be the “go-to person” for a particular range of issues. Each agrees to look up and then share practices related to specific concerns (e.g., aggressive students) when others ask for assistance.”

>“There should be a Learning Support Team for multiple campuses in order to maintain consistency. That Team meets [at least] quarterly with input and/or representation from the school teams and look for patterns that might lead to systemic interventions, rather than dealing with one student at a time. For example, if there are lots of referrals for inattention, perhaps that might suggest the need for professional development and training around classroom management and interventions for that concern, thereby equipping teachers with tools to use with many students and perhaps reducing future referrals.”

>“Small schools don’t have enough personnel to have many committees. So, a teacher assistance team, or data review team, needs to meet periodically to review school-wide issues and data rather than focusing on individual students.”

>“If a school's enrollment does not warrant a full-time or a part-time position, the services are coordinated through the complex area, where the service providers are complex area-based rather than school-based.”

>“Our state does not have regional resource centers operated through the state for both trainings and services. We are thinking about working with a group of our county superintendents to focus more on the development of student learning supports. Some of our rural areas contract with consortiums for provision of mandated services, such as special education evaluations. We also have a consortium of psychologist supervisors, making it possible for districts to hire interns when supervision would not have been available. And, we are discussing making more training web-based.”

>“Small schools in our state are mostly organized into supervisory unions. Supervisory unions usually are composed of multiple, geographically separated elementary schools, a union middle school and high school. Principals in the supervisory unions meet once or twice a month as an administrative team. This group usually loosely coordinates activities, but rarely rises to the level of collaboration needed to actively manage learning supports across a supervisory union. The coordination seems tighter in our single districts which mostly consist of the schools in a single town/city where there may one elementary school, a middle school and a high school. We have found the level of coordination and collaboration to be dependent on the leadership of the superintendent and not defined by a system that would continue even when the leadership changes.”

>“For training in rural areas and for small schools on any given training topic (e.g., RtI) the state department provides coaches to support school-based teams through email, phone calls and site visits.”

(cont.)

With respect to small schools on a multi-site campus:

>“Student support staff such as counselors in our small schools on a multi-site campus are assigned to several schools. Vice Principals for a small school also have duties for the campus as a whole. To ‘connect the dots’ on a management level, all the administrators meet twice a week. Student support staff also meet together and discuss their work as a whole. To provide a full range of learning supports for students, many of our supports for health, mental health, families, college career, etc. are shared across the entire campus. Special education is spread out across the campus, and the case managers work throughout. Because of the challenges of operating on the same campus in the same small community, start times, end times, requirements about class times, lunch times, etc. are all the same.”

>“Our multiple school campuses have a building wide intervention team. The team maps what’s in each school and provides continuity across ages and to community outreach to providers for before, after, and lunch services. In small rural schools, we have used the time students are traveling on the buses to provide activities.”

>“Each small school on the campus contributes money for an Enrollment Center. We hire several counselors who are supervised by one credentialed person. Two schools are sharing a school psychologist, the district funds this position.”

>“We have several facilities housing multiple small schools. In general, these schools don't share personnel around student support. However, they do vary the roles and use their budget autonomy to emphasize student support and expand the amount of student support services within the school. For example, rather than guidance counselors, many have Student Support Coordinators, many with social worker backgrounds who engage with students and their families in different ways and leverage in health, counseling, and mental health services into the school, while teachers take on advisory roles to students, playing some of the traditional guidance counselor role. What many schools sharing a facility do is to share strategies and practices in which they are respectively engaged with each other, so that schools "living together" are learning from one another. This happens both formally (scheduled building coordination meetings) and informally (among both administrators and faculty).”

and Title I activity, including stimulus funds) and initiatives such as Response to Intervention, Early Intervening, Positive Behavior Supports, Coordinated School Health, Safe and Drug Free Schools, student assistance and after school programs, and so forth. And, by establishing effective collaboration with home and community resources, they not only can enhance and accelerate system development, they can become true centers of the community.

*Note that the point is not simply to improve coordination of activity.* The aim is to adopt a comprehensive intervention framework and use it as a basis for designing a system of school-wide and classroom-based student and learning supports. Moreover, the intent is to develop the system by fully integrating it into school improvement policy and practice and braiding school, home, and community resources. Such a system is

essential for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and enhancing student (re)engagement at school and in classroom instruction. The goals are to reduce behavior, learning, and emotional problems, promote social/emotional development, effectively re-engage disengaged students, and transform the school into a community treasure. Specific results will be increased attendance, reduced misbehavior, a closing of the achievement gap, a reduction in the number of students inappropriately referred for special education or specialized services, and increased graduation rates.

### *Establishing Priorities*

What is mandated always comes first, but mandates can be pursued simultaneously with taking steps to develop a *system* of learning supports. However, moving forward with sparse resources always calls for establishing priorities. Well-conceived priorities stem from a well-designed gap analysis. With respect to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging students, this means an analysis that uses a comprehensive intervention framework to answer: What is most needed? What must be done? What is likely to produce a significant impact? What is feasible given sparse resources? (See *Moving toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: Mapping & Analyzing Learning Supports* for a tool to guide such an analysis. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf> )

Note that our research not only stresses a full continuum, it delineates intervention content in six arenas. These six arenas are briefly highlighted in Exhibit 4 to provide a context for the following discussion. (Also see Appendix A.)

Identify  
fundamental  
concerns  
interfering  
with learning  
and teaching

Most schools have long-standing and overlapping priorities in all six arenas. Given hard times, all such priorities suffer. However, there are some fundamental concerns that all schools must continue to address and these provide opportunities to move forward with development of a comprehensive system of learning supports. Appendix A outlines a set of first priorities for planning and implementing learning supports at a small school. In Appendix B, we discuss in more detail the following three:

*>countering classroom and school adjustment problems*

*>preventing conflicts that lead to crises and responding after a crisis*

*>strengthening two way communications among home-school-community and outreaching to recruit volunteers and braid resources*

Every school already has something in place related to these concerns. In moving forward, the initial emphasis can be on strengthening what is weak. This requires enhancing *staff capability* by expanding and personalizing on-the-job development related to student and learning supports. Particular emphasis is given to helping staff learn more about how to work as a team with colleagues and how to integrate others who are willing to help (e.g., students, family members, volunteers, and a wide range of community resources).

## Exhibit 4

### Major Examples for Each of Six Basic Content Arenas\*

#### (1) Classroom-Based Learning Supports

- Opening the classroom door to bring in supports, curricular enrichment, and adjunct programs
- Redesigning classroom approaches to enhance teacher capability to prevent and handle problems and engage and re-engage students to reduce the need for out-of-class referrals
- Enhancing and personalizing professional development

#### (2) Support for Transitions

- Welcoming & social support programs for new students, families, staff, community stakeholders
- Enhancing interventions for facilitating daily transitions, articulation to next grade, summer learning
- Programs to ensure successful school-to-career and higher education transitions

#### (3) Home Engagement at School

- Addressing specific support and learning needs of family
- Improving mechanisms for communication and connecting school and home
- Reaching out to students and families who don't come to school regularly
- Involving homes in student decision making
- Enhancing home support for learning and development
- Recruiting families to strengthen school and community

#### (4) Community Outreach to Engage Collaborative Support

- Planning and implementing outreach to recruit a wide range of community resources
- Systems to recruit, screen, prepare, and maintain community resource involvement
- Building links and collaborations to strengthen students, families, schools and neighborhoods and enhance a sense of community

#### (5) Crisis Assistance and Prevention

- Enhancing school crisis team response planning (including follow up care)
- Mobilizing staff, students, and families to anticipate response plans and recovery efforts
- Ensuring immediate assistance in emergencies so students can resume learning
- Developing prevention programs
- Working with other local schools and the community to integrate response and prevention plans and ensure a safe and caring learning environment

#### (6) Student and Family Assistance

- Providing extra support as soon as a need is recognized and doing so in the least disruptive ways
- Timely and personalized referral of students & families based on response to intervention
- Enhancing access to direct interventions for health, mental health, and economic assistance
- Care monitoring, management, information sharing, and follow-up assessment to coordinate individual interventions and check whether referrals and services are adequate and effective
- Enhancing mechanisms for *resource* coordination and integration
- Enhancing stakeholder awareness of programs and services

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\*In each arena, there is broad involvement of stakeholders in planning the system and building capacity. Emphasis at all times in the classroom and school-wide is on enhancing feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to others at school and reducing threats to such feelings as essential facets of engagement and re-engagement and creating and maintaining a caring and supportive climate.

*Reworking  
Infrastructure to  
Enhance System  
Capability*

The operational infrastructure at small schools and multisite campuses must be reworked. This includes ensuring leadership and establishing work groups for planning and implementing priorities. Content and resource-oriented operational mechanisms enable development of programs and services by weaving together existing school, home, and community resources and establishing a comprehensive system of student and learning supports over time. Properly designed infrastructure mechanisms enable an increasingly cohesive, cost-efficient, and equitable use of resources.

Reworking the infrastructure *at a small school* is a good beginning (see Exhibit 5). Then, adding a mechanism to connect a *family of schools* (on the same campus, feeder pattern complex) allows for developing economies of scale. Eventually, infrastructure changes are needed at the district level and for school-community collaboratives. Note that the changes at each system level require that staff adopt some new roles and functions and that parents, students, and other community stakeholders enhance their involvement.

Prototype frameworks have been formulated to guide establishment of leadership and groups to develop and maintain a comprehensive system of learning supports (see references at end of this article). In brief, we stress three mechanisms needed at a school for developing a system of student and learning supports: a designated leader, a resource-oriented team, and work groups for generating practices. A fourth mechanism connects a family of schools.

A few points will help clarify each of these elements:

- (1) *Leadership*. Developing a system of learning supports requires advocates/champions who have leadership roles. Essential is an administrator with responsibility and accountability for ensuring the vision for the school as a center of the community is not lost. Usually, this is an assistant principal or a lead staff person who sits at decision making tables.
- (2) *Learning Supports Resource Team*. The administrator meets with and provides regular input to what we designate as a *Learning Supports Resource Team*. Every school that wants to improve its systems for providing student and learning supports needs such a mechanism to focus specifically on improving *resource* use and enhancement.

Most schools have case-oriented teams that focus on individual student/family problems (e.g., a student support team, an IEP team). These teams focus on such functions as referral, triage, and care monitoring or management. In contrast to this case-by-case focus, a school's *Learning Support Resource Team* takes responsibility for enhancing use of all resources available to the school for addressing barriers to student learning and promoting healthy development. This team ensures component cohesion, integrated implementation, and ongoing development. This includes analyzing how existing resources are deployed, involving the community with a view to integrating human and financial resources from public and private sectors, and clarifying how they can be used to build a comprehensive, multifaceted,

Properly designed infrastructure mechanisms enable an increasingly cohesive, cost-efficient, and equitable use of resources.

## Exhibit 5

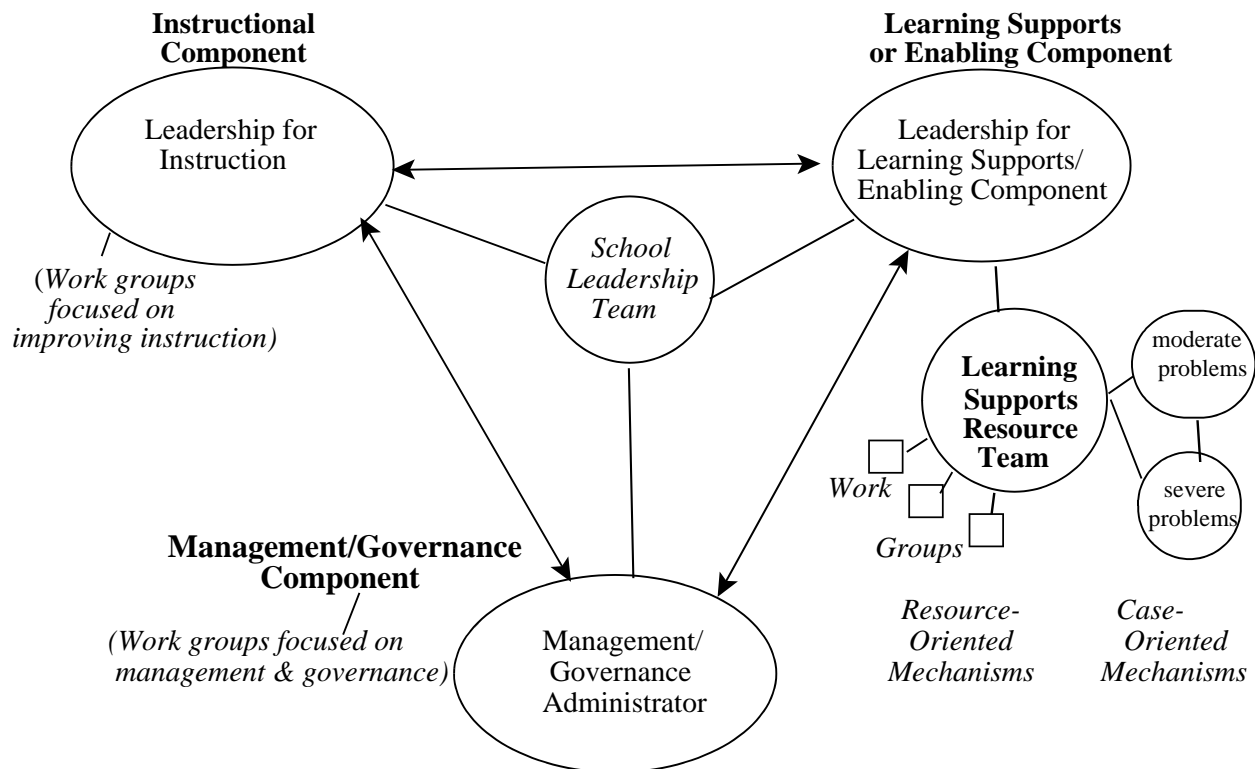
### Integrating Learning Supports into the Infrastructure of a Small School

Obviously, a small school has less staff and other resources than most larger schools. Nevertheless, the three major functions necessary for school improvement remain the same in all schools, namely (1) improving instruction, (2) providing learning supports to address barriers to learning and teaching, and (3) enhancing management and governance.

The challenge in any school is to pursue all three functions in an integrated and effective manner. The added challenge in a small school is how to do it with so few personnel. The key

is to use and, to the degree feasible, modestly expand existing infrastructure mechanisms.

The figure below is a modification for small schools of the school level infrastructure prototype we have proposed (see references). The illustration maintains the focus on all three major functions. However, rather than stressing the involvement of several administrative leaders and numerous staff members, the emphasis is on the role a *School Leadership Team* can play in establishing essential infrastructure mechanisms.



With less personnel, a principal must use who and what is available to pursue all three functions. Usually, the principal and whoever else is part of a school leadership team will lead the way in improving instruction and management/governance. As presently constituted, however, such a team may not be prepared to advance development of a comprehensive system of learning supports. Thus, someone already on the leadership team

will need to be assigned this role and provided training to carry it out effectively.

Alternatively, someone in the school who is involved with student supports (e.g. a pupil services professional, a Title I coordinator, a special education resource specialist) can be invited to join the leadership team, assigned responsibility and accountability for ensuring the vision for the component is not lost, and

(cont.)

provided additional training for the tasks involved in being a Learning Supports or Enabling Component Lead.

The lead, however chosen, will benefit from eliciting the help of other advocates/champions at the school and from the community. These all can help ensure development, over time, of a comprehensive system of learning supports.

A resources-oriented mechanism focused specifically on learning supports is needed to ensure component cohesion, integrated implementation, and ongoing development. If there are several staff at the school who are especially concerned with enhancing learning

supports (e.g. pupil services professionals, Title I coordinator, a special education staff, regular classroom teachers, outside agency staff working with the school), they can form a Learning Supports Resource Team. If there is no way to form a separate team, the agenda can become a periodic focus for a case-oriented team. If neither of these approaches is workable, the School Leadership Team needs to take on the essential set of resource-oriented tasks.

Finally, small work groups provide an opportunity to mobilize and utilize the talents of any and all school and community stakeholders. Because most schools have a great deal to do in developing a comprehensive system of learning supports, several such groups are desirable.

### **A Few References**

For more on all this, see:

*Toward a School District Infrastructure that More Effectively Addresses Barriers to Learning and Teaching.*  
Online: [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/toward a school district infrastructure.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/toward%20a%20school%20district%20infrastructure.pdf)

*Infrastructure for Learning Support at District, Regional, and State Offices.*  
Online: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/studentsupport/toolkit/aidk.pdf>

*Resource oriented teams: Key infrastructure mechanisms for enhancing education supports.*  
Online: [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Report/resource\\_oriented\\_teams.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf)

*Developing resource-oriented mechanisms to enhance learning supports - a continuing education packet.*  
Online: [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/developing\\_resource\\_orientedmechanisms.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/developing_resource_orientedmechanisms.pdf)

*About infrastructure mechanisms for a comprehensive learning support component.*  
Online: [http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infrastructure/infra\\_mechanisms.pdf](http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infrastructure/infra_mechanisms.pdf)

*Another initiative? Where does it fit? A unifying framework and an integrated infrastructure for schools to address barriers to learning and promote healthy development.*  
Online: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infrastructure/anotherinitiative-exec.pdf>

and cohesive approach. The team meets regularly to guide and monitor daily implementation and development of all programs, services, initiatives, and systems at a school that are concerned with providing learning supports and specialized assistance.

The number of team members varies with school size. Besides the administrator/lead for the component, anyone concerned with developing a system of supports would be welcome. Possible members are the student support staff at the school, a special education teacher, community stakeholders involved regularly with the school, and a student when appropriate and feasible.

- (3) *Workgroups.* Without workgroups, many tasks will not be accomplished. Ad hoc and standing work groups initially are existing “teams” for various initiatives and programs (e.g., a crisis team) and for processing “cases” (e.g., a student assistance team, an IEP team). Where redundancy exists, work groups can be combined. Others are formed as needed by the Learning Supports Resource Team to address specific concerns.
- (4) *Connecting a Family of Schools to Each Other, to the Central Office, and to the Community.* Small schools (and small districts) can connect a family of schools to each other and connect with community resources to work together to meet common needs and benefit from economies of scale. We designate such a mechanism as a *Learning Supports Resource Council*. This mechanism connects Learning Supports Resource Teams from across a cluster of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern). A comparable group at the district level provides oversight, leadership, resource development, ongoing support, and economies of scale. These councils are natural mechanisms for establishing and maintaining effective school-community collaboratives (see references in Exhibit 5)..

### **Expanding and Braiding Resources**

As noted above, a mechanism such as a *Learning Supports Resource Council* provides a natural mechanism for establishing and maintaining effective school-community collaboratives. Properly designed and implemented, a school-community collaborative provides an infrastructure for working on expanding and braiding resources within a neighborhood. Among the tasks of the collaborative’s work groups are mapping and analyzing resources; exploring ways to share facilities, equipment, and other resources; expanding jobs; developing pools of nonprofessional volunteers and professional pro bono assistance; making recommendations about priorities for use of resources; raising funds and pursuing grants; advocating for appropriate decision making; and working out agreements for weaving together resources for jointly pursuing areas of overlapping concerns. Elsewhere, we have described major examples of collaborations designed to connect schools, families, and the community (Adelman & Taylor, 2007).

With specific respect to small schools and small districts, in some locales small schools and districts are each contributing some funding to create a central learning support resource center to provide and broker services. An example of an early effort to pool funding for



Expanding and braiding resources requires establishing a mechanism dedicated to these functions

learning supports was introduced in 1999 in Washington, DC. Through the Student Support Center ([www.studentsupportcenter.org](http://www.studentsupportcenter.org)), a coalition of public charter schools pooled funding to create a system of student supports to serve all of the schools. The Center then was able to attract additional funding from federal, city, and private agencies. The Center's online description states: "We promote youth development and student achievement through a model that integrates behavioral health with academic and community supports. We work with all school populations – teachers, administrators, families, parents, and the surrounding community – to build healthy and supportive learning environments."

In Oakland, CA., the Oakland Small Schools Foundation focuses on "securing and managing resources and providing expert operational and fund-raising services for those Oakland small schools that serve primarily low-income students" ([www.smallschoolsfoundation.org/](http://www.smallschoolsfoundation.org/)) They note that "School leaders have identified numerous unfunded needs in their schools." The foundation staff works with each school to "tailor fund development campaigns -- with donor drives, fund-raising events, and grants development -- that fill the gaps in financing to meet the needs." Their work has helped fund: after-school comprehensive programs and collaborative, family support programs and resource center networking, counseling, arts integration, bi-lingual immersion, project-based learning, internships, teacher supports and supplies, small class sizes, and college tours and field trips.

Another example was shared by a colleague in response to our inquiries:

"With the exception of charter schools, which in our state do not have to follow many of the mandates of the other public schools, small districts have two options. 1) most "pool resources" and purchase services through our regional educational services centers (ESC's). There seems to be an economy of scale for some centralized services such as preschool programs, extended learning opportunities, and some ancillary services. Or, 2) small districts form their own consortium, again pooling resources to purchase services from the community.

One of the learnings to date is that many schools are leveraging existing community-based resources (already funded to provide some level of services to children and families) at no or reduced costs to the district. We have a couple of examples where the county boards of behavioral health have picked up the tab for a full-time school based therapist.

One of the challenges we have been working on is a funding data-base that would be searchable by strategy (e.g. funding for a mental health professional) which would provide schools with all the allowable funding sources, state and federal, that can be legitimately used for that purpose. A good example is parent involvement ... every title program requires parent involvement, but it seems like the Title 1 staff have a separate parent involvement strategy from, say the Title IV staff because they are different programs run by different people. We are trying to move folks away from a program mentality to a strategy mentality through this new product."

## Concluding Comments

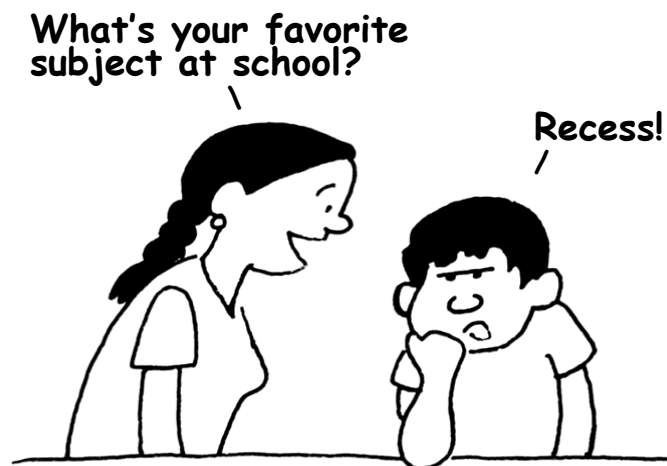
*When we try to improve schools, we are trying to improve society.*

Quartz & Washor

Movement toward small schools is not an end in itself. The aim is enhance the positive role schools play in our society. How that role is defined varies considerably depending on who is empowered to make decisions.

Whatever position is taken, all schools find themselves confronted with the problem of addressing barriers to learning and teaching and doing so in ways that promote positive development. For small schools in particular, this adds a considerable set of challenges.

This brief has highlighted the challenges. It has also offered examples and recommendations and referenced resources for moving forward in meeting them. The first step, of course, is for decision makers to understand that developing a comprehensive system of student and learning supports, over time, is an imperative and warrants high priority attention in school improvement planning. Every small school design should incorporate a system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching as an essential and primary component. To do less is to do too little to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. It is the ultimate in irony for a small school to emphasize social justice in its curriculum and fail to pursue social justice in ensuring equity of opportunity.



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### **Schools as Centers of the Community: Some Center Resources**

Over the years, the Center has generated various resources to aid those who are working to enhance school, home, and community communication and collaboration. These include sections of our online clearinghouse, policy analysis briefs and articles, guidebooks, and book chapters. Here are a few links:

- > *Collaboration - School, Community, Interagency* (Clearinghouse Quick Find)  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1201\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1201_01.htm)
- > *Community Outreach for Involvement and Support* (Clearinghouse Quick Find)  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/commoutreach.htm>
- > *School-Community Partnerships: A Guide*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/guides/schoolcomm.pdf>
- > *Community Schools: Working Toward Institutional Transformation*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/csinstitutionaltrans.pdf>
- > *Schools, Families, and Community Working Together: Building an Effective Collaborative* (Guidance Notes)  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/buildingeffectivecollab.pdf>
- > *School-Community Collaboration: A Self-study Survey*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/toolsforpractice/schoolcommunitysurvey.pdf>
- > *Volunteers to Help Teachers and Schools Address Barriers to Learning*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/volunteer/volunt.pdf>

### **Resources for Moving Forward**

Helpful guidance and resources for moving forward with development of a comprehensive system of learning supports have been generated from the National Initiative: New Directions for Student Support (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm>) and from our public-private collaboration with Scholastic, Inc.'s Rebuilding for Learning Initiative (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/rebuild/rebuilding.htm>).

See, for example, the free and easily accessible toolkit of resources for *Rebuilding Student Supports into a Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

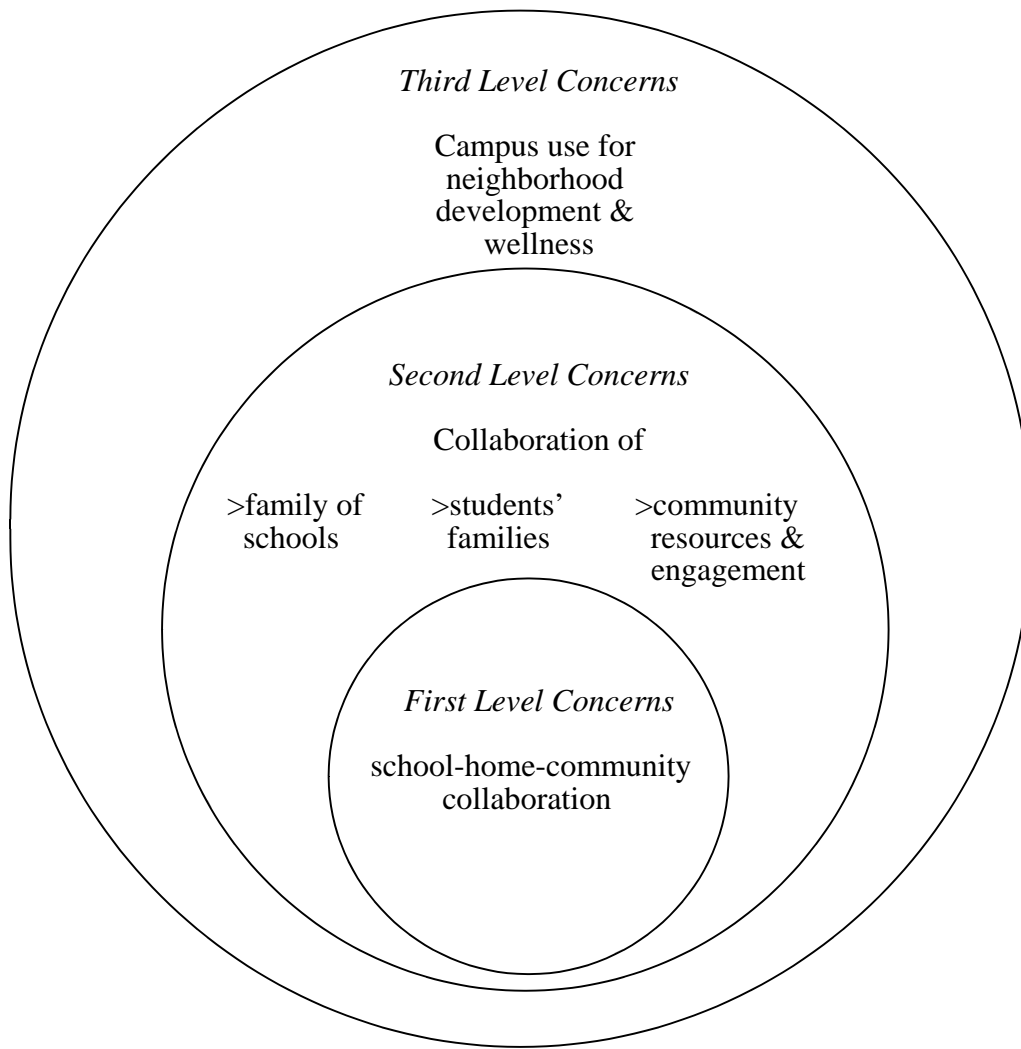
Also see: *Moving Toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: The Next Evolutionary Stage in School Improvement Policy and Practice* (Policy & Practice Brief) <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/paradigmshift.pdf>

## Appendix A

### Example of a Design for a System of Learning Supports at a Small School on a Multi-site Campus

Under the leadership of its Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, UCLA is working with the Los Angeles Unified School District to develop a small school that will be one of six on one school site. The school is called the *UCLA Community School*. Based on the work of our Center, the design team has incorporated plans for developing a *Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*.

In discussing design considerations, first, it was stressed that it is essential to think in terms of weaving together resources of the (a) school, (b) the other schools on the site, (c) the site as a whole, (d) students' families/guardians, and (e) the community (see Figure below). In addition, as a community school, it was stressed that the school would want to work with the other schools and the neighborhood to determine how the facilities of the entire site would be used to further neighborhood development and wellness.



## **Learning Supports at the *UCLA Community School* – Design Considerations**

Learning supports are 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 by addressing barriers to and promoting engagement in learning and teaching. Just as efforts to enhance instruction emphasize well delineated and integrated curriculum content, efforts to address external and internal factors that interfere with students engaging effectively with that curriculum must delineate the nature and scope of essential student and learning supports.

To ensure equity of opportunity, schools must first coalesce existing learning supports and overtime develop them into comprehensive system (an enabling component) that is fully integrated with instructional efforts. A unique facet of the Bruin Community School will be its commitment to developing a comprehensive system of learning supports to address barriers to and promote engagement in learning and teaching (see Exhibit A).

### **Intervention Framework**

Based on research of what schools need in order to effectively address barriers to learning and teaching, learning supports can be coalesced into six categories of classroom and school-wide support, each of which is organized along an integrated intervention continuum (see the Exhibit B and the table at the end of this Appendix). The six categories are:

As can be seen in Exhibit B, the six categories are:

- (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.*

The integrated continuum spans interventions designed to:

- (a) promote healthy development and preventing problems
- (b) respond as early after problem onset as is feasible
- (c) provide for those whose serious, pervasive, and chronic problems require more intensive assistance and accommodation

### **Operational Infrastructure**

Development of a comprehensive system of learning supports requires establishment of an operational infrastructure that is a fully integrated facet of a school's planning and decision making processes (see Exhibit 5 in the brief).

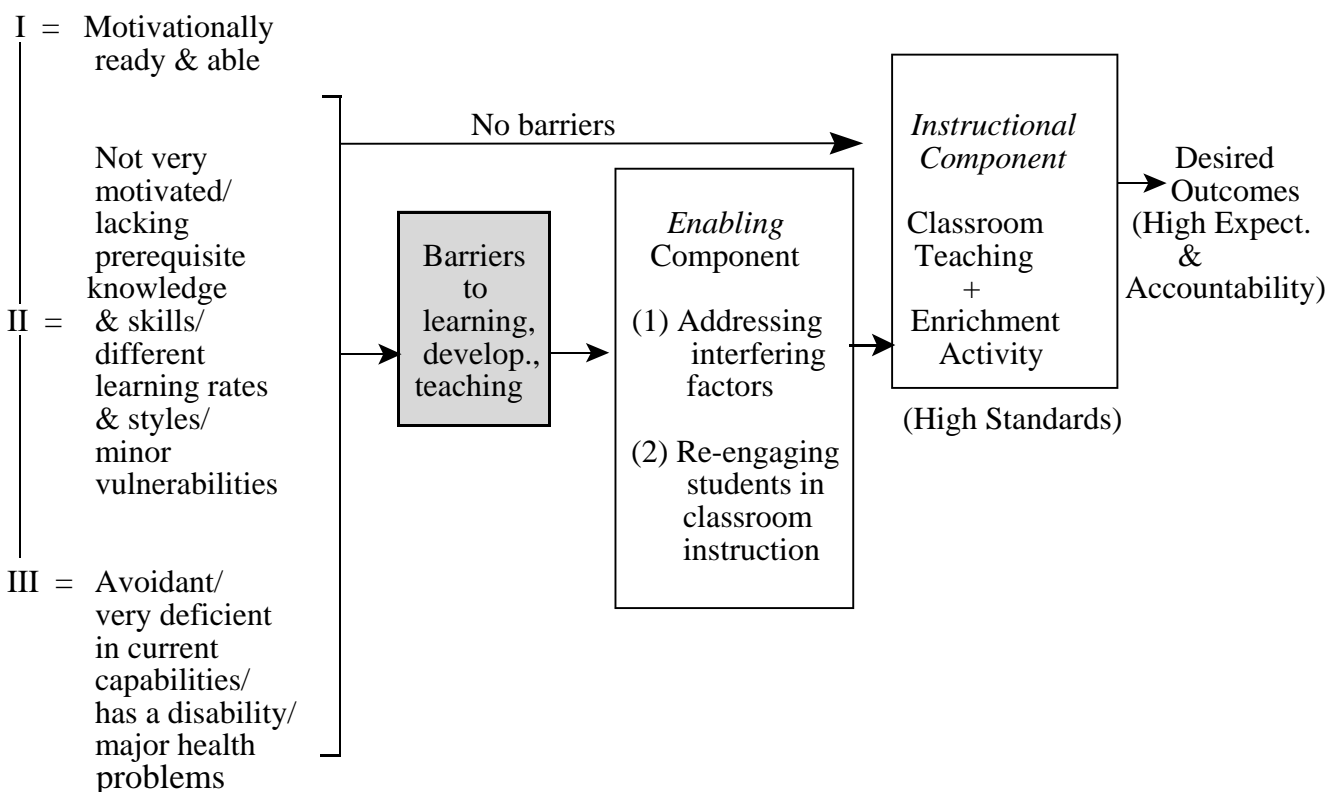
### **First Priorities**

Exhibit C outlines priorities for planning and implementing the first set of learning support interventions at the school.

Exhibit A

## An Enabling Component to Address Barriers and Re-engage Students in Classroom Instruction\*

**Range of Learners**  
(categorized in terms of their response to academic instruction at any given point in time)



\*In some places, an Enabling Component is called a Learning Supports Component. Whatever it is called, the component is to be developed as a comprehensive system of learning supports at the school site.

### \*Examples of Risk-Producing Conditions that Can be Barriers to Learning

Environmental Conditions**			Person Factors**
<i>Neighborhood</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>School and Peers</i>	<i>Individual</i>
>extreme economic deprivation >community disorganization, including high levels of mobility >violence, drugs, etc. >minority and/or immigrant status	>chronic poverty >conflict/disruptions/violence >substance abuse >models problem behavior >abusive caretaking >inadequate provision for quality child care	>poor quality school >negative encounters with teachers >negative encounters with peers &/or inappropriate peer models	>medical problems >low birth weight/neurodevelopmental delay >psychophysiological problems >difficult temperament & adjustment problems >inadequate nutrition

\*\*A reciprocal determinist view of behavior recognizes the interplay of environment and person variables.



Exhibit B

**Framework for a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports  
(an Enabling Component)\***

		Levels of Intervention		
		Systems for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	Systems for Early Intervention (Early after problem onset)	Systems of Care
Intervention Content Arenas	Classroom- Focused Enabling			
	Crisis/ Emergency Assistance & Prevention			
	Support for transitions			
	Home Involvement in Schooling			
	Community Outreach/ Volunteers			
	Student and Family Assistance			
		Accommodations for differences & disabilities		Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., Special Education & School-Based Behavioral Health)

## Exhibit C

### **Outline of Priorities for Planning and Implementing the *First Set of Learning Supports at the School***

#### **I. To promote positive engagement of students, families, and staff in developing a caring, nurturing, and safe learning community**

- >welcoming and social support interventions (including communication concerns)
- >strategies for daily guidance and support (increasingly personalized)
- >curricular & natural interventions for promoting social, emotional, and physical well being
- >before, during, and after school recreation, academic support, & enrichment programs

#### **II. To address learning, behavior, and emotional problems**

- >in classroom interventions designed to (1) minimize factors producing problems (including enhancing the range of individual difference accommodations) and (2) enhance strategies for preventing problems, and (3) increase the range of strategies for recognizing and responding as soon as a problem arises (all this will operationalize the current emphasis on Response to Intervention/RtI and early intervening)
- >school-wide interventions designed to (1) complement classroom efforts, (2) follow-up with student and family assistance\* when classroom efforts aren't successful enough, and (3) prevent problems
- >crisis response planning and team development
- >programs to strengthen the family and enhance home engagement
- >community outreach to recruit volunteers and development program
- >mapping community resources

#### **III. To meet federal and state mandates**

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\*Note: Student and family assistance involves such concerns as

- >*Establishing access to emergency assistance for basic life needs* (e.g., food, clothes, shelter, safety, emergency health care and dentistry, legal aid)
- >*Literary and extra academic support program* (e.g., family literacy, tutors, GED preparation, ESL classes, related software for computers)
- >*Social and emotional counseling* (support groups, individual and group counseling)

Student and family assistance usually involves identifying appropriate places for referral and establishing direct links to facilitate family access.

## Table

### **Expanded Examples of “Content” Arenas for a Component to Address Barriers to Learning\***

#### **(1) Classroom-Based Approaches**

- Opening the classroom door to bring available supports in (e.g., peer tutors, volunteers, aids trained to work with students-in-need; resource teachers and student support staff work in the classroom as part of the teaching team)
- Redesigning classroom approaches to enhance teacher capability to prevent and handle problems and reduce need for out of class referrals (e.g. personalized instruction; special assistance as necessary; developing small group and independent learning options; reducing negative interactions and over-reliance on social control; expanding the range of curricular and instructional options and choices; systematic use of prereferral interventions)
- Enhancing and personalizing professional development (e.g., creating a Learning Community for teachers; ensuring opportunities to learn through co-teaching, team teaching, and mentoring; teaching intrinsic motivation concepts and their application to schooling)
- Curricular enrichment and adjunct programs (e.g., varied enrichment activities that are not tied to reinforcement schedules; visiting scholars from the community)
- Classroom and school-wide approaches used to create and maintain a caring and supportive climate

#### **(2) Support for Transitions**

- Welcoming & social support programs for newcomers (e.g., welcoming signs, materials, and initial receptions; peer buddy programs for students, families, staff, volunteers)
- Daily transition programs for (e.g., before school, breaks, lunch, afterschool)
- Articulation programs (e.g., grade to grade – new classrooms, new teachers; elementary to middle school; middle to high school; in and out of special education programs)
- Summer or intersession programs (e.g., catch-up, recreation, and enrichment programs)
- School-to-career/higher education (e.g., counseling, pathway, and mentor programs; Broad involvement of stakeholders in planning for transitions; students, staff, home, police, faith groups, recreation, business, higher education)
- Broad involvement of stakeholders in planning for transitions (e.g., students, staff, home, police, faith groups, recreation, business, higher education)
- Capacity building to enhance transition programs and activities

#### **(3) Home Engagement in Schooling**

- Addressing specific support and learning needs of family (e.g., support services for those in the home to assist in addressing basic survival needs and obligations to the children; adult education classes to enhance literacy, job skills, English-as-a-second language, citizenship preparation)
- Improving mechanisms for communication and connecting school and home (e.g., opportunities at school for family networking and mutual support, learning, recreation, enrichment, and for family members to receive special assistance and to volunteer to help; phone calls and/or e-mail from teacher and other staff with good news; frequent and balanced conferences – student-led when feasible; outreach to attract hard-to-reach families – including student dropouts)
- Involving homes in student decision making (e.g., families prepared for involvement in program planning and problem-solving)
- Enhancing home support for learning and development (e.g., family literacy; family homework projects; family field trips)
- Recruiting families to strengthen school and community (e.g., volunteers to welcome and support new families and help in various capacities; families prepared for involvement in school governance)
- Capacity building to enhance home involvement

#### **(4) Community Outreach to Engage Collaborative Support**

- Planning and Implementing Outreach to Recruit a Wide Range of Community Resources (e.g., public and private agencies; colleges and universities; local residents; artists and cultural institutions, businesses and professional organizations; service, volunteer, and faith-based organizations; community policy and decision makers)
- Systems to Recruit, Screen, Prepare, and Maintain Community Resource Involvement (e.g., mechanisms to orient and welcome, enhance the volunteer pool, maintain current involvements, enhance a sense of community)
- Reaching out to Students and Families Who Don't Come to School Regularly – Including Truants and Dropouts
- Connecting School and Community Efforts to Promote Child and Youth Development and a Sense of Community
- Capacity Building to Enhance Community Involvement and Support (e.g., policies and mechanisms to enhance and sustain school-community involvement, staff/stakeholder development on the value of community involvement, “social marketing”)

#### **(5) Crisis Assistance and Prevention**

- Ensuring immediate assistance in emergencies so students can resume learning
- Providing Follow up care as necessary (e.g., brief and longer-term monitoring)
- Forming a school-focused Crisis Team to formulate a response plan and take leadership for developing prevention programs
- Mobilizing staff, students, and families to anticipate response plans and recovery efforts
- Creating a caring and safe learning environment (e.g., developing systems to promote healthy development and prevent problems; bullying and harassment abatement programs)
- Working with neighborhood schools and community to integrate planning for response and prevention
- Capacity building to enhance crisis response and prevention (e.g., staff and stakeholder development, enhancing a caring and safe learning environment)

#### **(6) Student and Family Assistance**

- Providing extra support as soon as a need is recognized and doing so in the least disruptive ways (e.g., prereferral interventions in classrooms; problem solving conferences with parents; open access to school, district, and community support programs)
- Timely referral interventions for students & families with problems based on response to extra support (e.g., identification/screening processes, assessment, referrals, and follow-up – school-based, school-linked)
- Enhancing access to direct interventions for health, mental health, and economic assistance (e.g., school-based, school-linked, and community-based programs and services)
- Care monitoring, management, information sharing, and follow-up assessment to coordinate individual interventions and check whether referrals and services are adequate and effective
- Mechanisms for *resource* coordination and integration to avoid duplication, fill gaps, garner economies of scale, and enhance effectiveness (e.g., braiding resources from school-based and linked interveners, feeder pattern/family of schools, community-based programs; linking with community providers to fill gaps)
- Enhancing stakeholder awareness of programs and services
- Capacity building to enhance student and family assistance systems, programs, and services

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\*In each arena, there is broad involvement of stakeholders in planning the system and building capacity. Emphasis at all times in the classroom and school-wide is on enhancing feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to others at school and reducing threats to such feelings as essential facets of engagement and re-engagement and creating and maintaining a caring and supportive climate.

## Appendix B

### Strengthening Three Forms of Learning Support: An Initial Focus for Small Schools

#### Countering School and Classroom Adjustment Problems

Countering adjustment problems begins with ensuring welcoming and social support programs are designed and implemented in ways that facilitate good induction of students and their families into daily living at the school. Then, the need is for interventions that can quickly identify and mobilize assistance when an adjustment problem is identified.

*Strengthening Welcoming and Social Support.* Moving forward in enhancing school and classroom adjustment begins with strengthening welcoming and social support. This begins with ensuring an inviting atmosphere is established school-wide (starting at the front door and in the front office) and in every classroom every day. Welcoming includes connecting students and their families to social support networks, such as peer “buddy” programs for students, families, staff, and volunteers. Going beyond brief orientations and welcoming activity, the goal is to ensure that everyone is connected with ongoing social supports.

Below are Center guides to strengthening welcoming and social support in school improvement planning:

- > *Easing the Impact of Student Mobility: Welcoming and Social Support*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/easimp.htm>
- > *What Schools Can Do to Welcome and Meet the Needs of All Students and Families*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/welcomeguide.htm>
- > *Welcoming and Involving New Students and Families*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/welcome/welcome.pdf>
- > *Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcoming (Quick Find)*  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm)

*Addressing Adjustment Problems.* Schools have long been accused of a waiting for failure policy. Teachers readily identify, within weeks, a number of students whose behavior and learning indicate they have not made a good adjustment to a new classroom. What’s often missing are strategies for effectively intervening as soon after identification as is feasible to prevent problems from escalating.

A focus on adjustment problems ties into and expands the current emphasis on *Response to Intervention*, *Early Intervening*, and *Positive Behavior Support*. Adjustment problems also underscore the need for team-based strategies to enhance engagement and re-engagement in classroom learning. Instruction must be supported by interventions focusing on matters such as support for transitions and various forms of special assistance – inside and, as necessary, outside the classroom (again see Appendix A).

If the *Response to Intervention initiative* is narrowly conceived as a matter of providing more and better instruction, it is unlikely to be effective for a great many students. However, if the strategies are understood as one part of a comprehensive system of classroom and school-wide learning supports, schools not only can address problems effectively early after onset, but can prevent many from occurring.

Below are Center guides to strengthening classroom approaches for addressing adjustment problems in school improvement planning:

- > *Enabling School Adjustment* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/atyourschool/oct02.htm>
- > *Classroom-Focused Enabling* (Quick Find) <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/classenable.htm>
- > *Motivation* (Quick Find) <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>
- > *Response to Intervention* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/responsetointervention.htm>

### **Preventing Conflicts That Lead to Crises and Responding After a Crisis**

Every school has a plan for responding to emergencies. Few have designed interventions to prevent the type of intergroup and interpersonal conflicts that too often precipitate crises.

*After it Happens.* School crisis response plans often are weak with respect to building capacity of staff (e.g., a crisis team) to respond in general and to provide psychological first aid in particular. When students and their families (and school staff) are exposed to traumatic events, the school must be prepared to play a role in providing psychological first aid. Psychological aid can be as important as medical aid. And while many schools can't provide follow-up care, they must be sensitive to the problems that linger in the aftermath of crises and respond with accommodations and, as necessary and feasible, with referrals.

*Countering Intergroup and Interpersonal Conflicts.* Some of the crises that arise at schools are predictable. They stem from intergroup and interpersonal conflicts and sometimes from conditions that make students feel alienated. Schools pay a significant price for failure to take steps to address the conditions that lead to preventable crises. At the core of addressing such conditions is creating not only a safe but also a caring and supportive learning environment. This overlaps nicely with strengthening welcoming and social supports school-wide and in the classroom and addressing adjustment problems. Also, a focus on minimizing and preventing interpersonal and intergroup conflicts fits into a school's goals for enhancing personal and social functioning (e.g., interventions for asset building, character education, social and emotional learning, promoting mental health, conflict resolution and mediation).

For Center guides to strengthening crisis response and prevention in school improvement planning, see the Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds:

- > *Crisis Response and Prevention* [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2107\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2107_01.htm)
- > *Safe Schools* [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2108\\_03.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2108_03.htm)

and the documents entitled

- > *Violence Prevention and Safe Schools* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/violence/violence.pdf>
- > *Natural Opportunities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning and MH*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/naturalopportunities.pdf>

### **Strengthening Two Way Communications among Home-School-Community and Outreaching to Recruit Volunteers and Braid Resources**

Schools cannot do it all. For example, with the economic downturn, more schools are finding it essential to connect with a variety of community resources to assist in addressing basic family survival needs. In some neighborhoods, schools have long-benefitted from community involvement in providing parents with opportunities to enhance literacy, job skills, English-as-a-second language, and more.

Over time, schools must establish working relationships with the home and community stakeholders and strive to braid school, home, and community resources to better meet the support and learning needs of families. All this begins with strengthening two way communications and with strategic and targeted outreach.

*The more schools are involved in meeting family needs, the more likely families will engage with the school and the more schools become centers of the community.*

*Enhancing Communication.* Schools always find ways to send essential information home. At the same time, a widely acknowledged fact is that schools need better ways to communicate in order to enhance connection and collaboration.

For example, schools need to go beyond general announcements to establish ways to deliver *personalized, helpful, and positive messages* to families and community stakeholders. Having developed opportunities for family and community members to network, learn, join in recreation and enrichment activities, and receive special assistance, schools need direct and personal ways to invite stakeholders to participate. Schools also can play a role in providing useful information about community activities and resources. And, of course, schools must increase the volume of personal, positive messages to families about their youngster. Finally, because communication is a two-way process, school must extend frequent invitations for stakeholders to relay comments and concerns.

All this calls for using a wide variety of delivery systems, such as frequent phone calls, e-mails, and informal notes from administrators, teachers, and other staff; hard copy and electronic newsletters; neighborhood flyers; family phone “trees;” students as postal carriers; websites; and more.

*Strategic and Targeted Outreach.* A priority in developing a comprehensive system of learning supports is to map and outreach to home and community to enhance connections and weave together resources. Even in economically depressed neighborhoods, the range of community resources that can be braided with those of schools is considerable.

Resources encompass not just dollars. Every neighborhood has human and social capital that can help strengthen students, families, schools, and neighborhoods. Examples include local residents; artists and cultural institutions, businesses and professional organizations; public and private agencies; colleges and universities; service, volunteer, and faith-based organizations; community policy and decision makers.

Among the benefits of mapping resources is identification of where to recruit *volunteers*. Developing a large pool of trained volunteers is a good starting place for enhancing school, home, and community connection and collaboration. Everyone knows that schools have a big job to do and even without the economic downturn, schools have too few resources with which to accomplish the work. From the front office to the classroom to the outside campus, before school, after school, and on weekends – volunteers can assist with a wide range of activities. Schools that have established a mechanism for recruiting, training, and maintaining a large pool of volunteers ease the burden on staff, improve the lot of students and their families, and establish valuable connections with the community.

## Response Form– Learning Supports & Small Schools

### Interested in Networking/Sharing/Learning More About the Matters Covered?

If you are interested in having a further in-depth interchange with our Center about these or other matters of mutual interest and concern, email us at: Ltaylor@ucla.edu.

Also, if you know of any small schools or small districts that are developing a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, please let us know so that we can contact them and let others know about them.

It is important to get the report into the hands of decision makers. You are free to share the report yourself. And, if there are others to whom you would like us to send the report, indicate their names and contact information below:

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_ Title \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ Fax (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

*Thanks for completing this form. Return by FAX to (310) 206-8716.*

The Center for Mental Health in Schools is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

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