

## **Preparing for ESSA?**

### **Start by Reviewing Analyses of What's been Wrong with School Improvement Efforts**

With ESSA in mind, note the new book from the National Education Policy Center entitled: *Learning from the Federal Market-Based Reforms* (Edited by W.J. Mathis and T.M. Trujillo).

Its 29 brief chapters are well worth a read. But we are distressed about a major gap in the work, and so rather than just reviewing what it includes, we are taking this opportunity to add a focus on a *fundamental* component of school improvement that is not presented.

To begin with the positive: Jeannie Oakes' comments in the forward to the book that the chapters bring together "compelling analyses of the failure of over two decades of test-based school reform policies." We readily agree.

We also appreciate that the work stresses that society cannot expect schools to end the achievement gap as long as there is an equity of opportunity gap stemming from the economic and social divides that plague us as a nation. And we couldn't agree more about the analyses underscoring the inadequacy of financial support for public schools in many locales.

That said, we are distressed by how the work perpetuates the long-standing marginalization of the role of student and learning supports in improving schools. Section IV does recognize that enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school requires addressing interfering factors and ensuring such reforms as expanded quality pre-k, detracking, smaller classes, connecting with community services, and organizing community support. However, just as market-based and other reforms have done, the book (1) pays little attention to in-depth analyses of the barriers to learning and teaching that arise daily at schools and (2) ignores the role of the many school staff who provide student and learning supports to address students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Thus, an implicit message conveyed is that the schools' role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students mainly involves improving instruction and establishing school-community partnerships that primarily focus on enhancing connections with community services.

### **The Challenge of Complex and Multifaceted Barriers to Learning and Teaching**

Decades ago, a Carnegie task force on education recognized that: *School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students, but when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.* What is the challenge? It involves effectively dealing with such realities as:

- at every school there are students who are not doing well
- there are many schools where the majority of students are not doing well
- improving instruction and school management are insufficient for addressing students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- student and learning supports are essential but currently are pursued in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner that is inadequate for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students
- substantial school resources are expended on addressing such problems. (At some schools, principals estimate the amount as about 25 percent of the school's resources.)

Add to this analyses indicating that improving instruction and management dominates school improvement planning. While everyone wants these components improved, their domination of planning has tended to marginalize efforts to improve student/learning supports. Analyses also suggest that this marginalization has contributed significantly to the widely recognized fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and limited effectiveness of current efforts at schools to address barriers to learning and teaching.

All this warrants considerably more attention by those discussing lessons learned about improving schools and making recommendations related to planning and implementing the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). Based on our lessons learned, below is our view of some new directions for school improvement.

## Transforming School Improvement from a Two- to a Three-Component Framework

As John Maynard Keynes stressed: *The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones. That certainly is the case with respect to policy for improving schools.*

Our Center's analyses over the last thirty years indicate that it is essential not just to tweak existing student/learning supports, but to transform existing efforts into a *unified, comprehensive, and equitable system*.<sup>\*</sup> Developing such a system requires moving beyond the current two-component framework for school improvement. That is, in addition to the instructional and management components, schools also need to fully develop a component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

Prevailing education policy reflects a primary commitment to improving (1) instruction and (2) how schools are managed and governed. This two component framework works fine for schools where few students encounter barriers to success. And some significant strides have been made with respect to both components. However, the two component framework is fundamentally insufficient for addressing the complex array of factors interfering with equity of opportunity for student success at schools, especially schools enrolling large numbers from economically disadvantaged homes.

Reformers need to escape the limitations of the two component framework by adding a third as primary and essential. Establishment of such a component provides a foundation for transforming student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable intervention system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.



Some states and districts are moving in the direction of developing the third component, but most places continue to marginalize student and learning supports in school improvement policy and planning. As states and districts revise school improvement policy and planning in the wake of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), it is time to make student and learning supports a primary component of school improvement policy and practice and move toward developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for directly and potently providing learning supports.

## Transforming Student and Learning Supports

The transformation of student and learning supports involves first unifying and weaving together all school resources currently expended for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. And then, the focus is on strategically braiding school and relevant community resources together to fill gaps and replace the current laundry-list of fragmented and narrowly-focused practices with a comprehensive and equitable system that can serve all students.

We know that systemic change of this magnitude involves significant social, political, and cultural commitment. Successful transformation requires effective coping with the politics of enactment and implementation and building on lessons learned from previous and ongoing endeavors.

As indicated above, a fundamental step for transforming schools is to *expand the policy framework* for school improvement from a two- to a three-component framework so that all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching are unified (e.g., as a Learning Support Component), with the third component prioritized and developed as primary and essential, and fully entwined with the Instructional and Management/Governance Components.

Then, the need it to *operationalize the third component* by reframing student and learning support interventions into a system that plays out in classrooms and school-wide.

As illustrated below, a prototype intervention framework has been developed that encompasses

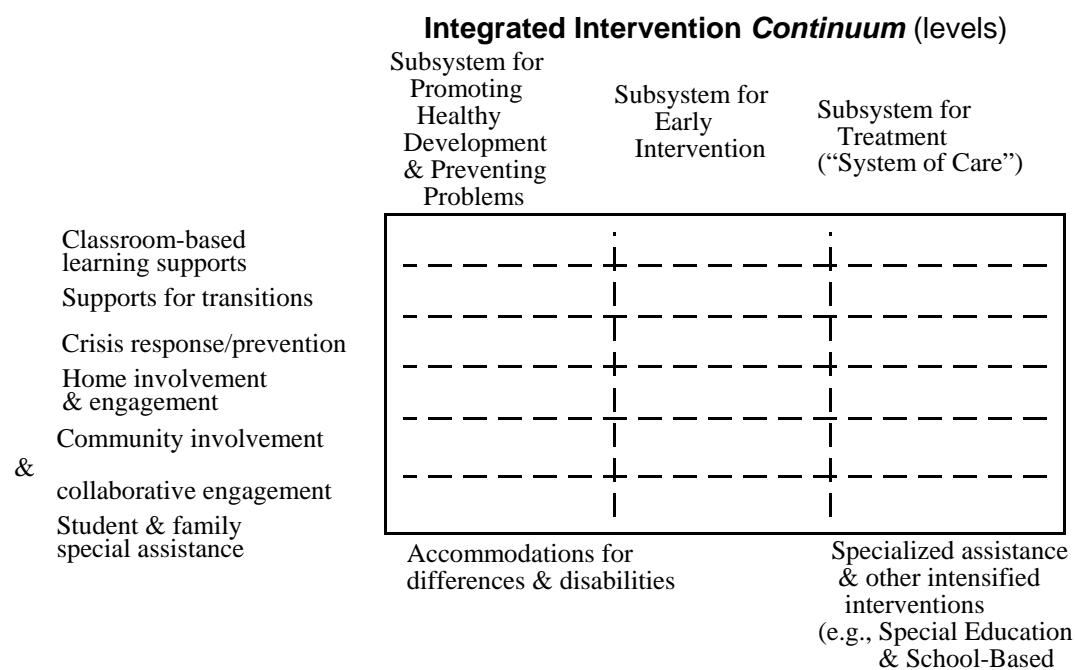
>a continuum of school-community interventions consisting of subsystems for

- promoting effective schooling and whole child development
  - preventing problems experienced by teachers and students
  - addressing such problems as soon as feasible after they arise
  - providing for students who have severe and chronic problems.

and

>a cohesively organized and delimited set of “content” arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students in the classroom and school-wide. These arenas encompass the range of concerns a school copes with each day.

## ***Prototype Intervention Framework for the Third Component***



Note: The prototype's continuum moves beyond current Multi-tier System of Support (MTSS) thinking by being one facet of an intervention framework that guides development of a total system designed to unify the resources a school devotes to student and learning supports and blending in a wide range of community resources to fill critical gaps.

*Implementing the third component involves*

- reworking the operational infrastructure to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching;
  - enhancing mechanisms and strategic approaches for systemic change in ways that ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability;
  - developing standards and expanding the accountability framework to account for the third component and to do so in ways that encompass both formative and summative evaluation.

None of this is easy, but given the degree to which public education is under attack, we suggest that all of it is essential.

## **Concluding Comments**

Given how many powerful economic and political forces are in pursuit of conflicting agenda for public schools, improving schools always requires a powerful coalition of school and community advocates. This is especially so for transforming how schools play their role in addressing factors that produce inequities of opportunity.

Given sparse resources, schools and communities must collaborate to better address the many barriers to development, learning, and teaching that confront young people, and their families, schools, and neighborhoods. Clearly, much more is involved than just connecting a few community services to schools. The need is to work together to establish a three component school improvement framework and use the third component as a catalyst for blending together a wide range of resources in order to develop (over a period of several years) a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports at every school. If schools and communities do not work collaboratively and strategically to transform all three components, we will inevitably continue the slide into a three-tiered set of K-12 institutions – one tier for the poor, one for the wealthy, and another for everyone else.

\*References to the Center's analyses are online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/> or by request. This document was prepared by Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor, co-directors, Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.