



# Addressing Barriers

# to Learning



New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link

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[Note: Considerable controversy surrounds discussion of a mayor's role in public education. From a policy perspective, however, it is essential that every mayor help improve schools. And, like everyone else, we have some suggestions about what needs to be done. So here is a letter to our mayor and yours.]

Open letter

## To the Mayor

Dear Mayor,

If you really want to help close the achievement gap and reduce dropout rates, you will have to directly zero-in on matters that are keeping too many students from connecting effectively with good instruction.

Good instruction, of course, is essential! It's a truism that schools continuously need to improve the quality of teaching. And, a logical role for you in this is to contribute to efforts to enhance the recruitment, preparation, ongoing capacity building, and retention of good teachers.

But, as you know, better instruction alone cannot ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Indeed, focusing *mainly* on improving instruction is a recipe for maintaining a very unsatisfactory status quo for too many students in urban schools and in poor rural areas. So, focusing on instruction is not where you can make your greatest contribution.

You are in a unique position to help develop policy and practice to improve how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

This is a concern that has had so little attention that it can only be described as grossly *marginalized* in policy and practice. As a result, there continues to be an amazing disconnect between the rhetoric and the reality of leaving no child behind.

The failure of policy is manifested in the gaps in school improvement planning and in the token and often poorly conceived initiatives for linking community resources to schools. All this is clear from analyses of what schools are currently doing (see attached list of references).

Most school districts offer a range of programs and services oriented to student needs and problems. Some are provided throughout a school district, others are carried out at or linked to targeted schools. Some are owned and operated by schools; some are from community agencies. The interventions may be for all students in a school, for those in specified grades, for those identified as "at risk," and/or for those in need of compensatory or special education. Looked at as a whole, a considerable amount of activity is taking place and substantial resources are being expended. But, it is widely recognized that the whole enterprise is not well conceived, practices are fragmented to the point of dysfunction, and school planners continue to treat the work as nonessential.

Into the mix comes the good offices of the Mayor.

For various reasons, you may be tempted to focus narrowly on specific matters such as parent involvement, school safety, mentoring, and coordination of services. These types of efforts often are referred to as low-hanging fruit by politicians looking to show they are "doing something." Unfortunately, such a piecemeal and

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ad hoc approach tends to increase the widespread problems of fragmentation, inappropriate redundancy, and counterproductive competition for resources. In turn, this can exacerbate, rather than reduce the marginalization of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and can make a mockery out of stated commitments to close the achievement gap and reduce dropout rates.

Instead of tinkering around the edges, you should focus on the big picture and the central policy question:

*How can school and community resources be braided together to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive systemic approach for addressing barriers to learning and development?*

And in this respect, it is important to remember that you are the mayor of the entire community – not just a leader of publicly funded service agencies. So, you need to lead the way in coalescing and focusing *all the resources* in the community that have overlapping missions and concerns about ensuring children and adolescents have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and in adult life.

The Figure on the next page highlights aspects of such an approach in terms of a public health continuum. The illustrated continuum encompasses efforts to enable academic, social, emotional, and physical development and address learning, behavior, and emotional problems at every school. As noted, most schools have some programs and services that fit along the entire continuum. However, the tendency to focus mostly on the most severe problems has skewed things so that too little is done to prevent and intervene early after the onset of a problem. The result has been characterized as a “waiting for failure” approach.

Policy that helps schools and communities move forward in developing the full continuum is the only way to stem the tide of students who are referred for learning, behavior, and emotional problems and who eventually dropout or are pushed out of school.

Such policy must effectively establish a *comprehensive intervention framework* that can be used to map, analyze, and set priorities. It must call for *rethinking infrastructure* so that there is leadership and mechanisms for building a system of learning supports at every school and for connecting school and community resources. And, it must provide guidance for the difficulties inherent in facilitating major *systemic changes*.

The key then is to end the policy marginalization of direct efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

In doing so, you will have taken great strides toward ending the fragmentation of current practices and toward establishing a unified and fully integrated system of learning supports.

Clearly, you will want to work closely with the school board and the superintendent to accomplish this. In addition, you will want to consider working with other Mayors in the state on legislation so that there are statewide standards and accountability indicators related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

And the coming year will see the U.S. Congress discussing the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. Your voice along with other Mayors across the country is needed to focus Congress on what amounts to a fundamental gap in the Elementary and Secondary Education law.

In moving forward, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. See, for example, the following comprehensive approaches formulated at the state level in Hawai'i, California, and Iowa:

>Hawai'i Department of Education (2004).

*Comprehensive Student Support System.*

Overview online at: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/wheresithappening/hawaii.pdf>

>California's Proposed Legislation (2005).

*Comprehensive Pupil Learning Support System.*

Online at: [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ab171\(1-20-05\).pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ab171(1-20-05).pdf)

>Iowa State Department of Education working

with the Iowa Collaborative for Youth

Development (2005). *Fulfilling a Promise,*

*Investing in Iowa's Future: Enhancing Iowa's*

*Systems of Supports for Learning & Development.*

Brief Summary online at:

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/iowabriefsummaryofdesign.pdf>

Full document online at:

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/iowasystemofsupport.pdf>

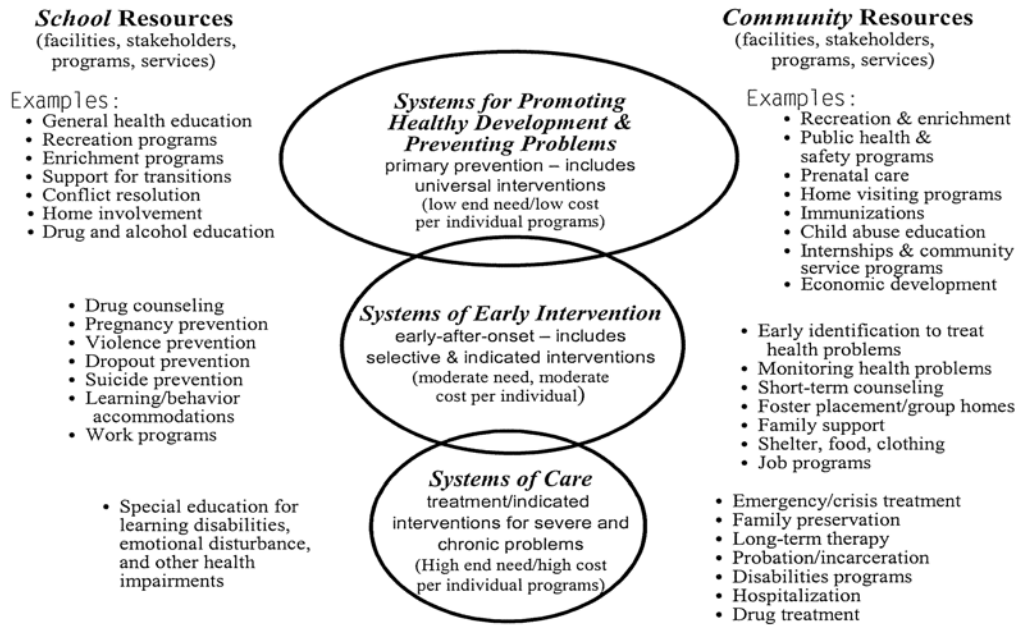
Well, that's it for now. We sincerely thank you for playing a role in the best interests of students and their schools.

And, if you want us to help as you move forward with the agenda for school improvement, we are ready to do our part.

## Interconnected Systems for Meeting the Needs of All Students

Providing a *CONTINUUM OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PROGRAMS & SERVICES*

Ensuring use of the *LEAST INTERVENTION NEEDED*



Systemic collaboration is essential to establish interprogram connections on a daily basis and over time to ensure seamless intervention within each system and among *systems for promoting healthy development and preventing problems, systems of early intervention, and systems of care.*

Such collaboration involves horizontal and vertical restructuring of programs and services

- within jurisdictions, school districts, and community agencies (e.g., among departments, divisions, units, schools, clusters of schools)
- between jurisdictions, school and community agencies, public and private sectors; among schools; among community agencies

If the Mayor's staff wants to review some references, here are a few from our work:

- Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2002). So you want higher achievement test scores? It's time to rethink learning supports. *The State Education Standard, Autumn*, 52-56. (Journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education)
- Adelman, H. S. & Taylor, L (2006). School and community collaboration to promote a safe learning environment. *The State Education Standard*, 7, 38-43. (Journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education)
- Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006a). *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006b). *The implementation guide to student learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Center for Mental Health in Schools (2005). *School improvement planning: What's missing?* Los Angeles: Author at UCLA . <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolimprovement/whatsmissing.pdf>
- Center for Mental Health in Schools (2005). *Addressing what's missing in school improvement planning: Expanding standards and accountability to encompass an enabling or learning supports component*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enabling/standards.pdf>
- Center for Mental Health in Schools (2005). *Another initiative? Where does it fit? A unifying framework and an integrated infrastructure for schools to address barriers to learning and promote healthy development*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infrastructure/anotherinitiative-exec.pdf>
- Center for Mental Health in Schools (2006). *Legislation in Need of Improvement: Reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act to Better Address Barriers to Learning*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/nclbra.pdf> report.