School Improvement Requires Addressing Staff Concerns at the Right Time

S chools have a yearly rhythm – changing with the cycle of demands that regularly arise throughout the year. With this in mind, school improvement plans need to address factors that interfere with staff performance at these times.

The following examples illustrate the need and provide some resources for addressing concerns during designated months.

August

Planning Welcoming and Social Support to Start the Year Off Right

Enhancing school climate begins with welcoming students and families at the beginning of the year (or whenever newcomers enroll) and then ensuring they make a good adjustment over the first weeks. As a start in focusing on this concern, see the following brief resource:

>*Welcoming Strategies for Newly Arrived Students and Their Families*
   http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/welcomingstrategies.pdf

September

Enhancing Collaboration to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Personalizing instruction and enhancing special assistance to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems in a classroom requires bringing student support staff and volunteers into the classroom to collaborate with the teacher. As a start in focusing on this concern, see the following brief resources:

>*Involving Teachers in Collaborative Efforts to Better Address Barriers to Student Learning*
   http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/08 involving teachers in collaborative efforst to better address.pdf

>*Volunteers as an Invaluable Resource*
   http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/voluntresource.pdf

October

Focusing on Reducing the Impact of Class Size

School improvement calls for learning communities that are personalized and caring. In classrooms, this requires small groupings that promote positive relationships between the adults and students and among the students and that facilitate learning. As a start in focusing on this concern, see the following brief resource:

>*Turning Big Classes into Smaller Units*
   http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/small classes.pdf

November

Deepening Relationships

By this time in the school year, it is evident that good relationships among students and with the teacher are not universal. It is time for an in-depth focus on the matter. As a start in focusing on this concern, see the following brief resource:

>*Improving Working Relationships Inside the Classroom*
   http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/relations.pdf

December

Promoting Social and Emotional Development to Reduce Problems

As schools focus on the whole child, there is increased interest in social emotional learning (SEL). Much of this is translated into formal curriculum strategies. At the same time, schools need to place greater emphasis on strategies that can capitalize on *natural* opportunities to promote social and emotional development during the school day and to minimize transactions that interfere with positive growth. As a start in focusing on this concern, see the following brief resource:

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

January

Pressure to Increase Attendance?
Help Staff Improve Student Engagement and Enhance Learning Supports

After the holidays is a good time to move from reactive approaches to addressing attendance problems. This involves focusing on enhancing student engagement, improving strategies for reengaging disconnected students, and taking steps to intensify student/learning supports. As a start in focusing on this concern, see the following brief resource:

>*School Attendance: Focusing on Engagement and Re-engagement*
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolattend.pdf

February

Broadening and Personalizing Professional Development

For too long, schools have planned professional development mainly in terms of teachers. But the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) recognizes that teachers cannot and should not be expected to address barriers to learning and teaching all by themselves. Teachers require a range of student/learning supports to help counter the impact of the various external and internal factors that pose pervasive and entrenched challenges to learning and teaching, particularly in chronically low performing schools. While ESSA primarily stresses professional development for teachers and "school leaders," it is noteworthy that training for specialized instructional support personnel and interested community members is mentioned at several points. Schools that have not been focusing on the professional development of *all* staff need to do so by this time. As a start in focusing on this concern, see the following brief resources:

>*Enhancing Professional Development to Better Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/persdevel.pdf
>*Personalizing* Personnel Development at Schools
    http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagement.pdf

March

Deepen and Celebrate Collaboration for *Addressing Barriers to Learning/Teaching*

Many teachers are confronted with a large proportion of students who are not motivated and ready to learn what is on the teaching agenda for the day. Most educators acknowledge the wide range of factors that interfere with students learning and teachers teaching. One aspect of addressing such factors is a continuous effort to strengthen collaborations at school and with the home and community. As a start in focusing on this concern, see the following brief resource:

>*Teachers Can't Do it Alone!* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/alone.pdf

April

Countering Staff Burnout

Any focus on minimizing burnout at a school site begins with an appreciation of the causes. This leads to an understanding that some of the problem arises from environmental stressors, and some of the problem stems from characteristics and capabilities individuals bring to the situation. This month is a good time for a whole staff study and discussion session to get a handle on this complex concern. As a resource, see the following introductory packet which covers sources and symptoms of burnout and identifies ways to reduce environmental stressors, increase personal capability, and enhance social support to prevent burnout.

>*Understanding and Minimizing Staff Burnout*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/burnout/burn1.pdf

Also see:

>*Improving Teacher Retention, Performance, and Student Outcomes*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newteach.pdf

May

Helping with Slumping Students

While a second semester slump may have a small effect on motivated and successful students, there is a sense of mounting frustration for students who aren't doing well (socially, emotionally, academically) that can lead to problems in attendance and effort. For some, it is just that the school year seems so long and their motivation lags. For others, it is clear that they aren't doing well and are unlikely to catch up. For those in their last year at a school, a version of "senioritis" hits, and they hope to coast through and survive the last few months. All this presses on school staff. As a start in focusing on this concern, see the following brief resource:

>*Spring as an Especially High Risk Time for Students*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mar19.pdf

June-July

Plan a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports

Ultimately, proactively addressing the above concerns requires designing and developing a comprehensive system of student and learning supports to more effectively address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage disconnected students. Trailblazing schools, districts, and state departments across the country are pioneering this work. See the following resources:

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

>*Improving School Improvement*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

Also see the *System Change Toolkit* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm
It contains resources such as:

> *Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports at a School: Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf

>*Mapping a School's Resources to Improve Use in Preventing and Ameliorating Problems*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/53 mapping a schools resources to improve1.pdf

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