27 years & counting

Addressing Barriers
to Learning

New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link

New Directions for Student and Learning Supports:
Breaking Through

July 2013 News Release Montgomery, Ala. — *As part of a steadfast commitment to ensure a world-class education for all students, the Alabama State Department of Education is releasing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports design document and district roll-out plan. . . .*

The announcement from Alabama heralds a major breakthrough in efforts to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. And, for our colleagues who are particularly concerned about enhancing mental health in schools, the breakthrough underscores fundamental implications for that agenda.

As a national center involved in advancing how schools address mental health concerns, we get many inquiries about the best way to do this. Given that schools are not in the mental health business, our answer is that mental health concerns must be embedded into the public school mission to educate the young. From a policy perspective that means avoiding the counterproductive competition that arises from pushing a separate, narrow agenda for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The competition for resources resulting from separate advocacy for discrete programs and services is contributing to the continuing marginalization and resultant fragmentation of such endeavors and the fact that they reach only a small proportion of the many students who should be beneficiaries.

It is generally acknowledged that prevailing, long-standing approaches to addressing the many factors contributing to student learning, behavior, and emotional problems do not meet the scale of need in public education. Widespread inequities are evident. Thus, the long-standing call for new directions.

Over many years, a major facet of our Center's work has focused on fully integrating new directions for student and learning supports into school improvement planning. The aim is fundamental systemic transformation. The first goal is to *unify* the piecemeal and ad hoc laundry list of programs and services that characterizes student and learning supports in most districts and schools. Unifying the activity necessitates more than just improving coordination and integration;

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it requires fundamental changes in school improvement policy, practice, and infrastructure. Once such unification is accomplished, the focus turns to developing student and learning supports into a comprehensive system by weaving together school and community resources.

> **With Alabama's dramatic move forward, we are taking this opportunity to further highlight that state's breakthrough and provide a brief overview of trailblazing and pioneering places across the country that have paved the way for it.***

Early Explorers and Trailblazers

Early efforts to move in new directions offer an intriguing glimpse into the potential of transforming student and learning supports. Some places developed plans and design documents; some took first implementation steps. The early failures to generate the type of momentum necessary to produce full blown systemic change provide invaluable lessons learned.

The first state that attempted to make the type of systemic changes that we promote was Hawai'i. The stimulus for their effort was a court consent decree in the 1990s. In the mid 1990s, the state's department of education designated the initiative for responding to the court's concerns as a *Comprehensive System of Student Supports.* In 1999, the state enacted legislation to promote the work. Over the years, the terminology has been maintained, but the intent of the legislation has not faired as well.

> **The initial work in Hawai'i sparked the interest of other states (e.g., California, Iowa, Minnesota, New York, Washington) and a number of districts and schools.**

The next state that moved in this direction was Iowa. In 2004, the Iowa Department of Education worked with the Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development to create a design document entitled: *Enhancing Iowa's Systems of Supports for Development and Learning.* As Judy Jeffrey, former chief state school officer for Iowa stated in the introduction:

> "Through our collective efforts, we must meet the learning needs of all students. Not every student comes to school motivationally ready and able to learn. Some experience barriers that interfere with their ability to profit from classroom instruction. Supports are needed to remove, or at least to alleviate, the effects of these barriers. Each student is entitled to receive the supports needed to ensure that he or she has an equal opportunity to learn and to succeed in school. ...
>   If every student in every school and community in Iowa is to achieve at high levels, we must rethink how student supports are organized and delivered to address barriers to learning. This will require that schools and school districts, in collaboration with their community partners, develop a comprehensive, cohesive approach to delivery of learning supports that is an integral part of their school improvement efforts."

By 2009, the state department of education in Louisiana recognized the need to braid and develop all available resources in ways that would better address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. The work was driven by the realization that those responsible for school improvement efforts needed new directions if they were to effectively reduce dropout rates and close the achievement gap. The department produced a design document for its *Comprehensive Learning Supports System* and began an implementation process that ended prematurely.

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*For details about the work undertaken in each of the places mentioned, see *Where's It Happening? Examples of New Directions for Student Support & Lessons Learned*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/nind7.htm

In Hawai`i, Iowa, and Louisiana, the developmental efforts were substantively put aside as new administrators replaced their trailblazing predecessors.

Even when state departments did not take the lead, districts across the country used our center's resources to explore new directions.* This included such diverse districts as Berkeley (CA), Cedar Rapids (IA), Detroit (MI), Harrisburg (PA), Indian River County (FL), Los Angeles (CA), Madison (WI), Multnomah County (OR) Richland 2 (Columbia, SC), Sabine Parish (LA), St. Paul (MN), Somerset County (MD), and Tucson (AZ).

While these early efforts were short circuited, we learned invaluable lessons about making the type of fundamental systemic changes necessary for establishing new directions for student and learning supports. First and foremost, wherever the move toward new directions is initiated, attention must turn as soon as feasible to enlisting a broad-based policy commitment. Such policy minimally must ensure

- adoption of a unifying and comprehensive intervention framework

- redesign of operational infrastructure (including job roles and functions) to weave together school and community resources into a unified system and develop the system into a comprehensive approach over time

- strategic planning and capacity building for the type of systemic changes required for effective implementation, replication, and going-to-scale.

To do less is to ensure that initial efforts to pursue fundamental new directions for student and learning supports are not sustained.

Current Explorers and Adopters

In recent years, several more states have begun to develop guidelines and initiate activity related to unifying and developing a *Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*.

> For example, in 2007, Ohio's State Department of Education developed a set of Guidelines for a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports. More recently, so has Illinois' State Department of Education.

> And increasingly, districts are working directly with us to move in new directions. These include Bloomington (MN), Gainesville (GA), Grant Parish (LA), Stillwater (MN). The last three districts are part of a Learning Supports Lead District Collaborative developed through our collaboration with Scholastic and the American Association of School Administrators (see Exhibit A). In addition to these, La Crosse (WI) and Phoenix (AZ) report they are moving in new directions using our frameworks.

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*See the center's System Change Toolkit – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm

Exhibit A

Collaborating with Scholastic and AASA to Advance New Directions

In 2006, the publishing company, Scholastic, through its non-profit community affairs unit reached out to the Center to form a collaboration to advance the work. As part of the work, this collaboration joined with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) in 2009 to establish a Learning Supports Leadership Initiative. One facet of this initiative has been development of three Learning Supports Lead Districts: Gainesville City Schools (GA), Stillwater Areas Schools (MN) and Grant Parish Schools (LA). These districts are meant to play a role in the nationwide effort to help education leaders transform school improvement by developing a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

Gainesville City Schools District has been able to move forward rapidly and is reporting promising outcomes. For example, findings from 2007 to 2011 indicate:

- The graduation rate increased from 73.3 to 87.2 percent.
- At each school, more students than ever before scored in the "exceeding expectations" category in state testing.
- Students scores improved on SAT, ACT and AP tests.
- Teen pregnancies declined by 40 percent.
- The proportion of students absent for more than 10 days during the school year decreased from 21 to 5 percent; students coming to class tardy declined by 11 percent.
- The use of "disciplinary tribunals" to address student misbehavior decreased 27 percent.
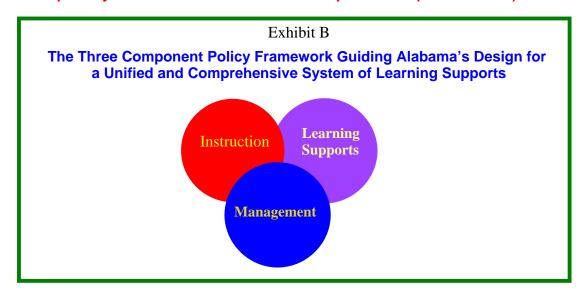- Parental satisfaction increased from 78 to 93 percent.

Regarding how this approach helped improve attendance, the Gainesville's Superintendent Merrianne Dyer states:

> "Prior to having a learning supports system in place, we addressed attendance by placing expectations in parent/student handbooks and reinforcing them through parental notification and referrals for chronic absentees and tardies. Now, we identify and address the root causes of 'why' students are missing school while at the same time are continuously working on our preventative strategies to reach all students. We are focused on important 'transitions' such as having a welcoming and inviting start to the school day as well as improving the ways we engage students and families who are new to the district. At the high school level, we've designed flexible schedules with blended learning for students who need to balance school and work. Most importantly, we have shifted from 'compliance mode' to a unified and integrated system of learning supports that addresses all barriers to learning. By doing so we've created a positive school climate where children and families not only feel safe and welcomed but are present and fully engaged as learners and partners."

Alabama: A Major Breakthrough

Upon his appointment, State Superintendent Tommy Bice reorganized the leadership of the department with a focus on learning supports as a major departmental support initiative. Dr. Linda Felton-Smith, Director of the Office of Learning Support, was charged with implementing the initiative as part of the department's strategic plan, Plan 2020. With support systems as one of the four pillars of Plan 2020, the development of a design document for the Alabama framework was critical to move the work forward to local schools districts. The work is driven by the reality that school improvement efforts need leadership and guidance to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school, thereby increasing the graduation rate and closing the achievement gaps. The design team recognized the untiring efforts to improve instruction, but also the need to develop better ways for schools, families, and communities to support learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The department currently is implementing the new design for Learning Supports with the first cadre of ten districts: Bessemer City, Chickasaw City, Etowah County, Butler County, Decatur City, Perry County, Calhoun County, Dothan City, Shelby County, and Lauderdale County. Other districts will be phased in over the coming years.

By ensuing that a learning supports component is a fundamental pillar of Alabama Plan 2020, efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching are elevated to that of a third primary and essential facet of school improvement (see Exhibit B).

Exhibit B

The Three Component Policy Framework Guiding Alabama's Design for a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

Learning supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports that directly address barriers to learning and teaching, and that re-engage disconnected students.

To be most effective, learning supports are unified and then developed into a comprehensive system that provides supportive interventions in classrooms and school-wide and is fully integrated with efforts to improve instruction and management at a school.

The learning supports intervention framework combines both an integrated and systemic continuum of school and community interventions and a multifaceted and cohesive set of six content areas. The continuum is designed to

- promote positive development and prevent problems
- intervene as early after the onset of problems as is feasible
- provide special assistance for severe and chronic problems.

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The continuum is embedded into the following six content areas:

- *Classroom-based approaches to enable learning* (e.g., ensuring classrooms have necessary supports and create and maintain a positive climate)

- *Support for transitions* (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate hurdles to enrollment, adjust to school, grade, and program changes, make daily transitions before, during, and after school, access and effectively use supports and extended learning opportunities, and so forth)

- *Home and family engagement* in schooling (e.g., increasing and strengthening the home and its connections with school)

- *Community engagement* (e.g., outreach to develop a greater community support from a wide range of entities. This includes agency collaborations and use of volunteers to extend learning opportunities and help students-in-need.)

- *Crises assistance and prevention* (including ensuring immediate assistance in emergencies, providing follow-up care as necessary, developing prevention programs, creating a caring and safe learning environment and countering the impact of out-of-school traumatic events)

- *Student and family interventions* (facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance on campus and in the community as needed).

Combining the continuum with the six areas provides a matrix framework to represent a uified and comprehensive system of learning supports (see Exhibt C).

Exhibit C

**Combined Continuum and Content Arenas:
Alabama's Framework for a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports**

Levels of Intervention

Learning Supports Content Areas	Systems for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	Systems for Early Intervention (Early after problem onset)	Systems of Care
Classroom-based approaches to enable learning			
Crisis assistance & prevention			
Support for transitions			
Home & family Engagement in Schooling			
Community Engagement			
Student & Family Interventions			

Concluding Comments

Policy makers are finally moving beyond the rhetoric of no child left behind. This, in part, is due to the widespread recognition that the current focus of school improvement policy and practice is too limited to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. More positively stated, it is being widely recognized that providing effective student and learning supports for all students is a public education, public health, and civil rights necessity.

A broadened focus is essential in order to significantly stem the tide of student learning, behavior, and emotional problems, reduce student (and teacher) dropout rates, close the achievement gap, improve low performing schools, and generally make schools safer and more nurturing. All this requires the type of transformational agenda called for by the *New Directions for Student and Learning Supports initiative.*

As the result of trailblazing and pioneering efforts over a couple of decades, state and district policy makers have shown a way forward. And with the work underway currently in Alabama, a major breakthrough has been achieved.

Now it is time for policy makers and lobbyists who are involved in shaping the reauthorization of the federal *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) to build on such work. By doing so, they can ensure that addressing barriers to learning and re-engaging disconnected students is a primary and essential component of every school improvement agenda.

Leadership Coaching and Mentoring for New Directions: It's About Systemic Change

Homeostasis, fear, and push-back make change on any scale a real challenge.

Rock & Donde

In transforming education, well-designed leadership coaching and mentoring can make a critical difference in effectively building capacity for systemic change. Both internal and external coaches and mentors play key roles. Over time, the aim is to prepare a cadre of internal leaders so they become the primary system change agents and capacity builders for replicating and sustaining new directions on a large scale. For example, in working with a SEA and regional agencies, a coach/mentor should enable the leadership to facilitate strategic planning, development of system change mechanisms, and capacity building at LEAs. In turn, leaders at LEAs can learn how to do all this at schools.

Coaches and Mentors: Overlapping Functions, Different Roles

In discussions of coaching and mentoring, it is not uncommon to hear: "It's all about relationships!" Certainly a good *working* relationship is essential. However, relationships that don't achieve organizational aims are superfluous at best and sometimes are counterproductive. The key to good working relationships is carefully defined roles and functions and well-designed mechanisms for planning, implementation, and formative and summative evaluation.

With specific respect to transforming education, the emphasis is on major systemic changes at SEA, regional, LEA, and schools levels. Leadership preparation for such systemic change requires developing an in-depth understanding of and commitment to the adopted new directions and related skills for effecting the necessary systemic changes. These are matters coaches and mentors usually are called upon to address.

Coaches and mentors have overlapping functions and usually share a range of abilities. However, their roles differ. Coaching generally is a short term process focused on specific tasks. Mentoring is expected to be a longer term process focused on deepening understanding, offering guidance, and anticipating and addressing problems.

As coaches and mentors attend to the complexities of facilitating large scale systemic change (e.g., across a school district, all districts in a state), the work requires continuous capacity building. For external coaches and mentors, this involves working with leaders to solidify and deepen their understanding and commitment to desired new directions. As part of this work, time is devoted to ensuring the transformative vision is translated into a "design" document. This is followed by in-depth help focused on developing a strategic systemic change plan to guide the process. Strategic planning stresses (a) developing and implementing the work in phases, (b) fidelity to the essential features of the new directions, (c) ways to account for differences among and within agencies (at regional, district, school levels), and (d) sustainability. Based on the strategic plan, coaches and mentors assist in establishing and building the capacity of the set of mechanisms required to accomplish transformative change. As the work proceeds, the need is for appropriate monitoring of process and progress and related problem solving and refinements.

All this calls for at least weekly contact/support (note: the coaching literature underscores the value of e-coaching for this), followed by periodic (e.g., monthly) onsite visits.

Developing and Implementing a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: Examples of Fundamental Capacity Building Concerns

As noted, the capacity building concerns confronting coaches and mentors overlap. The following examples are from work on transforming current student and learning supports into a unified and comprehensive system.

The first concerns are ensuring basic understanding of the system to be developed and creating a high level of commitment among a critical mass of those responsible for making it a reality. The next set of concerns involves ensuring these leaders have a substantive understanding of and can build capacity for what must be done to get from here to there.

Introductory presentations begin the process of addressing the first concerns. Introductory presentations, of course, are not sufficient. Subsequent coaching and mentoring must be done in ways that deepen understanding, interest, and commitment to moving forward.

In addressing the second set of concerns, again the initial work involves presentations that specifically clarify the processes involved in system change, as well as some of the problems that usually arise. Subsequent coaching and mentoring helps clarify tasks to accomplish and guides preparation of a design document, a strategic plan for systemic change, and establishment of the essential mechanisms and processes required to carry out the work.

> As aids for strategic planning, *Exhibit A* highlights tasks to be addressed; *Exhibit B* illustrates a set of mechanisms for accomplishing the work.

About the Mechanisms

Mechanisms specifically established to facilitate systemic change are temporary ones put in place until the transformation is successfully made. The mechanisms and tasks need to be customized with respect to differences at state, regional, district, and school levels and differences within regions, districts, and schools. The customization is done in ways that ensure that capability for accomplishing major tasks is not undermined.

It is essential that these mechanisms not be created as just another staff assignment. As each mechanism is established, the focus of coaches and mentors is on

- enlisting a broad enough range of key leaders (e.g., those leaders directly involved with student and learning supports and others such as leaders for strategic planning, instruction, school improvement, data/evaluation)

- ensuring group/team members understand each mechanism's functions and interrelationship

- providing the type of capacity building that ensures members understand the essence of what needs to be accomplished and are committed to the importance of the work

- assisting in development of clear action plans.

A couple notes of caution: Initially, some on the team will see the work as distracting/ competing with their current focus and efforts. Coaches and mentors need to watch for this and spend enough time to (a) help members see how the work is fundamental to school improvement and successful instruction for many students and (b) elicit their strong

commitment and leadership in developing the new directions. Also, it is common for leaders to start strong but given the many challenges of their jobs and the complexities of systemic transformation, they need well-focused ongoing support that keeps them from becoming distracted and/or overwhelmed.

Concluding Comment

The announcement for a recent webinar offered by Education Week and the American Institutes for Research on the topic of *Leadership Coaching* stated: "Strong leaders who set and maintain direction are the heart of a successful school turnaround. A single person, however, cannot effectively create the kind of change required in consistently underperforming schools. Effective turnaround and transformation processes require developing district leadership and creating an effective school leadership team." It is evident that a single person is an insufficient change agent mechanism. And, while a leadership team at the school level is necessary, we hope that the above discussion makes it clear that transformative systemic changes involve tasks requiring more than the efforts of one team.

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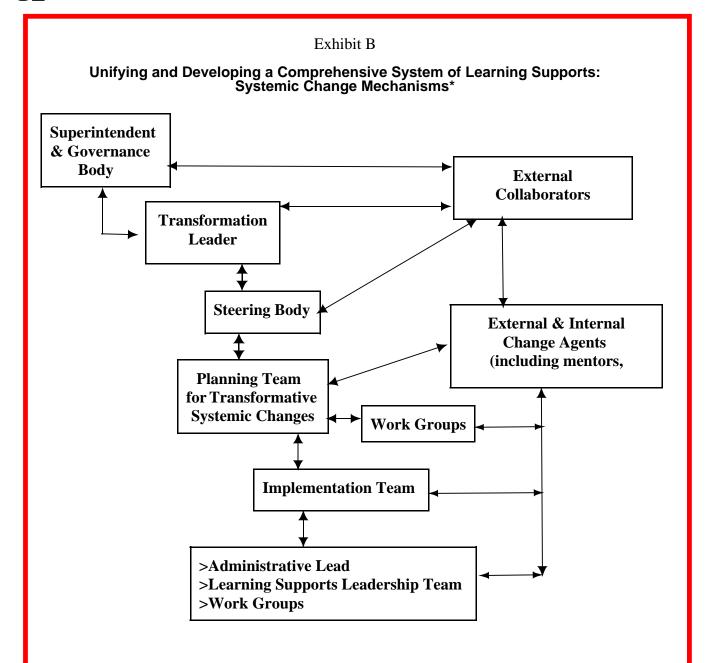
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Exhibit A

**Some Major Tasks for Coaches/Mentors to Help Address as
a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports is Established**

Coaches and Mentors can prepare leaders to

- Deepen the understanding of and enhance committed readiness for what is involved in
  >unifying & developing a comprehensive learning supports system
  >making systemic changes

- Establish and build the capacity of the administrative leader for the learning supports
  component and a Learning Supports Leadership Team

- Engage a critical mass of key stakeholder groups (building interest and consensus for the work
  and garnering feedback and support)

- Guide development of a design document and strategic system change plan

- Establish and build the capacity of a set of system change mechanisms

- Build the capacity of work group(s) to
  >map prevailing status of student and learning supports within the district (e.g., current
    activity, gaps, redundancies, priority needs, etc.) using the intervention framework in the
    design document
  >analyze the resource map and priority needs and recommend
      >>how to unify the work into a system
      >>yearly priorities for developing the system into a comprehensive approach
  >analyze and recommend changes that fit with the design for a unified and
    comprehensive system of learning supports with respect to
      >>current policies (bulletins, guidelines, etc.)
      >>current operational infrastructure
      >>current programs and initiatives
      >>possible ways to redeploy resources
      >>adapt benchmarks & mechanisms to monitor progress at district/school levels

- Provide a set of recommendations for change that will be submitted to the agency head (e.g.,
  changes in policy and operational infrastructure)

- Fully integrate the system as a primary and essential component of school improvement

- Enhance component visibility, communication, sharing, and problem solving (e.g., within the
  district and beyond)

- Establish a system for continuous quality improvement and evaluation of impact and integrate
  it into regular planning, evaluation, and accountability

- Connect resources to enhance effectiveness and achieve economies of scale (e.g., weaving
  resources at SEA and LEA levels; connect a "Family" of schools/a feeder pattern)

- Enhance outreach to establish formal collaborative linkages with community resources

- Update and deepen resource mapping and analyses

- Plan and implement continuous capacity building and technical assistance

- Celebrate progress

Exhibit B

**Unifying and Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports:
Systemic Change Mechanisms***

Superintendent & Governance Body

External Collaborators

Transformation Leader

Steering Body

External & Internal Change Agents (including mentors,

Planning Team for Transformative Systemic Changes

Work Groups

Implementation Team

**>Administrative Lead
>Learning Supports Leadership Team
>Work Groups**

*These mechanisms are needed at the SEA and at LEAs. At the SEA, the focus is on changes in the department and planning and facilitating roll-out and roll-on at LEAs.

At each level, any given staff member may be part of several of the above mechanisms.

For the functions related to each of the above mechanisms, see *Guide for Planning Coaching for SEAs/LEAs to Establish a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coaching.pdf

**It's Time to Start a Discussion about Developing a
Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports**

Here's what you can do:

(1) Circulate a brief introductory document to the district leadership team – see for example,

  ***Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and
  Teaching*** – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf)

  (Note: if this document doesn't seem to fit the local situation, there are others to choose
  from in Section A of the Center's Rebuilding Toolkit –
      http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm)

(2) Follow-up by providing information about a few of the other places that have
    pursued development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.
        Specifically, refer to the following:

>***Brochures from Districts and State Departments***
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita1a.htm

>***Examples of State and District Design Documents***
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb1a.htm

(3) To answer typical questions raised in the process, see and share as needed material from

>***Q & A Talking Points*** (in Section A of the Center's Rebuilding Toolkit)
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita2.htm

(4) Review the documents:

>***Developing a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports:
    First Steps for Superintendents Who Want to Get Started***
    http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/superstart.pdf

>***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

**If you want more information about the new directions work or if you want to share the
work being done at state and district levels to develop a unified, comprehensive, and
systemic approach to addressing barriers and re-engaging disconnected students,
please contact us at Ltaylor@ucla.edu .**

Center News

Latest Guide

Planning Coaching for SEAs/LEAs to Establish a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coaching.pdf

New Publication

Adelman, H. S., Taylor, L., & Nelson, P. (2013) Native American Students Going to and Staying in Postsecondary Education: An Intervention Perspective. Special issue of the American Indian Culture and Research Journal on *Reducing Barriers to Native American Student Success in Higher Education: Challenges and Best Practices, 37*, 29-56

Working with partners

ASCD asked us to post the following on their Whole Child Blog: See
Resilience, Addressing Problems, and Promoting Healthy Development
http://www.wholechildeducation.org/blog/resilience-addressing-problems-and-promoting-healthy-development

School Practitioner Community of Practice Interchange: Weekly Listserv

Here is a sample of some recent topics:
- *How can schools do better in connecting with families?*
- *Supporting teachers who face overwhelming situations*
- *Can a campaign to prevent bullying actually backfire and increase bullying?*

Want resources? Need technical assistance?

For the latest Center resources and activities, go to *What's New* at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu

For technical assistance, e-mail ltaylor@ucla.edu

From the Center's homepage, access:
>Upcoming conferences & workshops   >Calls for grant proposals & presentations
>Training and job opportunities   >Upcoming and archived webcasts
       If you would like to add information to these, send specifics to ltaylor@ucla.edu

If you're not directly receiving our resources such as this Quarterly e-journal/newsletter, our monthly electronic newsletter (*ENEWS*), or our weekly *Practitioners' Interchange*, send your E-mail address to smhp@ucla.edu

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I hear you got a zero on the test.

Yea, but it's O.K. I've developed my own zero tolerance policy.

The Center for Mental Health in Schools operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

Center Staff:
  Howard Adelman, Co-Director
  Linda Taylor, Co-Director
  Perry Nelson, Coordinator
  . . . and a host of students