

Addressing Barriers to Learning

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Following the Florida school shooting, mental health in schools is being widely discussed. Here is our caution about not just pursuing another ad hoc set of interventions at schools. We offer a perspective for embedding mental health into school improvement policy and practice and enhancing school climate.

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Time for Straight Talk about Mental Health Services and MH in Schools

When you hear the term *mental health in schools* or *school mental health*, what comes to mind?

For most people, these terms conjure up images of students who have psychological problems and about what services they need and how schools don't provide enough of such services. This is not surprising given the widespread tendency for the term *mental health* to be thought of as referring to *mental disorders/illness* and for relevant *interventions* primarily to be viewed as *services* (e.g., counseling/therapy).

One result is that many well-intentioned initiatives and policy reports have focused mainly on expanding mental health *services* in schools. Bluntly stated, however, advocacy for more mental health *services* in schools often detracts from efforts to encourage policy makers to address the full range of mental health concerns confronting school staff, students, and their families.

Moving beyond a mental disorders and service mentality for mental health in schools requires an appreciation of the following:

- The concept of mental health encompasses a continuum of concerns ranging from *promoting positive social and emotional development to treating mental disorders*.
- Mental health *problems* are fully enmeshed with psychosocial and educational problems.
- Given the above, schools have a role to play in (a) promoting positive mental health (e.g., social-emotional development), (b) preventing learning, behavior, and emotional problems, (c) intervening as early as feasible when such problems arise, and (d) treating severe and chronic problems.
- However, since the mission of schools is education, a mental health agenda (and especially a clinical services agenda) *by itself* is too narrow to be a high priority for our society's schools.

Our policy analyses suggest that those concerned with enhancing the role of mental health in schools must guide policy makers to a clear understanding of

- the *many* factors interfering with learning and teaching,

- the large number of students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems,
- the fragmented and marginalized state of affairs related to existing services, programs, and initiatives currently provided as student/learning supports,
- the small proportion of students reached,
- the counterproductive competition for sparse resources.

All the above realities work against enhancing every student's civil right to *equity of opportunity* for success at school and beyond.

Given the unsatisfactory state of the art, it is time to focus on *transforming* student/learning supports. Doing so is fundamental to improving intervention effectiveness in ways that enhance equity of opportunity, promote whole child development, and engender a positive school climate. Accomplishing this requires ending the marginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and then framing and operationalizing them as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that weaves together school and community resources. In the process, a broad definition of mental health in schools can be embedded into school improvement policy and practice.

Appropriate Transformation of student/learning supports will

- reduce the unrealistic and often inappropriate call for more and more one-on-one direct services
- counter the mistaken view that collocating community services on school campuses can ever be a sufficient approach to filling critical intervention gaps at schools and for enhancing community and home engagement
- increase classroom, school-wide, and community interventions that can reduce the need for one-on-one services
- facilitate the weaving together of school, home, and community resources to gain economic benefits and enhance outcomes
- enhance coordination and cohesion of all resources (school, community, family) intended to support young people.

The bottom line for equitable policy is to move beyond just providing a small number of sites with a few more health and social services. This only establishes a few islands of excellence (demonstrations, pilots) and "Cadillac models." With over 90,000 public schools in the U.S.A. and so many students who are not doing well, the scale of need demands moving quickly in fundamentally new directions. It is time to embed mental health in schools into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. This will enhance the fit with the mission of schools and contribute in a powerful way to schools playing a role in fully promoting social-emotional development and comprehensively addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

About Embedding Mental Health into a Learning Supports Component

Several years ago, the importance of embedding mental health in schools into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports was recognized by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP),¹ and 29 national and state organizations signed on to the policy recommendation that NASP and our Center prepared.²

¹"Promoting the Critical Role of Learning Supports in Policy, Practice, and School Improvement" by Anastasia Kalamaros Skalski – in the National Association of School Psychologists' *NASP Communique*, Vol. 39, #5, January/February 2011. Online at: <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/periodicals/communique/articles-by-topic?filter=taxonomy%3D1%252fCommunique%2BTopics%252fAdvocacy%2Bin%2BAction>

²See the brief four-page document that highlights the message for policy makers: online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enhancingtheblueprint.pdf>

In writing for the *NASP Communiqué*, here is some of what Anastasia Kalamaros Skalski stated:

Sometimes in the world of public policy, people read something that resonates with them in a new and unexpected way and results in a change in the way we do business. Some call this a paradigm shift, while others say they've had an epiphany. Whatever the assessment, when we start to be able to see the forest through the trees, it helps us successfully navigate our path to our destination.

After reading a policy analysis issued by the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools: Program and Policy Analysis ..., it became clear to several of NASP's public policy leaders and staff, including myself, that we needed to reframe our work from the viewpoint of the forest versus the trees. ... The report asserted that real meaningful policy reforms were not likely to be achieved based upon current proposals because their primary focus was almost exclusively on two components: instructional (e.g., standards, high quality instruction, teacher quality, etc.) and organizational (e.g., accountability, budgets, governance, resource and facility management, etc.). While these two components of schooling are critical, the researchers' analysis determined that this focus alone is insufficient to achieve the true policy and practice reforms necessary to ensure that all students learn. In short, a child who is struggling to overcome barriers to learning (e.g., poverty and homelessness, school climate and safety, student engagement, and individual learning and mental health challenges) will not be fully available for instruction, even with strong curricula, highly qualified teachers, and a rigorous accountability system. A new approach is needed.

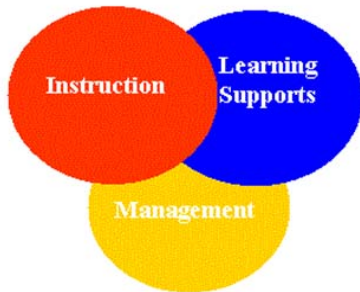
The UCLA researchers propose that a three component framework ... be advanced that balances instruction, management, and a third component – learning supports for students. Learning supports are defined as "the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school by directly addressing barriers to learning and teaching and by reengaging disconnected students." Federal policy that almost exclusively addresses issues related to only two components essential to school reform is the equivalent of trying to successfully sit upon a two legged stool. Much attention has been given to instructional and organizational issues over the past decade, yet our schools have not attained the goal of high achievement and school completion for all students. The only essential component of education that has not been fully integrated into policy, and hence practices, is that which encompasses learning supports. Without equal attention to this critical third leg, schools will continue to fall short of their mission for every student to learn and succeed in school. Further, programs and initiatives within this third component, such as school wide positive behavior supports, response to intervention, school-community partnerships, social-emotional learning, and other learning support types of programs will compete for the remaining resources resulting in fragmentation and marginalization of services and supports. Despite the wonderful work represented by all of these programs, no single learning support program can meet every student need. "Comprehensive and coordinated" learning supports that reflect a full continuum of learning support services and personnel are essential to school improvement and in order for these to be effective, the importance of learning supports must become integral to every school improvement discussion and dialogue.

It's Time to Move Forward

The time has come for ending the counterproductive competition that arises from efforts that push separate, narrow agenda for student and learning supports. As the NASP statement underscores, no single program or service can address the range of factors interfering with equity of opportunity to succeed at school for the large number of students affected. And the counterproductive competition for sparse resources resulting from separate advocacy for such programs and services is contributing to (a) the continuing marginalization and resultant fragmentation of such endeavors and (b) the fact that only a small proportion of the many students who should be beneficiaries are reached.

The current unsatisfactory state of affairs underscores the need to move in new directions. By embedding mental health into a transformed system of student/learning supports, schools and the community at large can better serve more students and their families.

About New Directions



Expanding school improvement policy to a three component framework and embedding mental health into the proposed third component (e.g., a learning supports component) establishes an essential foundation for ending marginalization of mental health in schools. The component's focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students provides a unifying approach for pursuing a wide range of mental health and psychosocial problem-focused interventions. And the overlap with the instructional component facilitates the focus on positive mental health concerns.

Operationalizing the third component involves developing a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of supports. The resources for system building come from redeploying and weaving together school and community resources (including human and social capital). The process must be guided by a carefully defined intervention framework and an operational infrastructure designed to develop, implement, scale-up, and sustain the system. Such a process can facilitate school-community (including family) collaboration in ways that (a) minimize counterproductive competition for sparse resources and (b) redeploy and integrate resources to fill critical gaps in keeping with high priority needs.

New directions involves moving beyond the limited intervention framework outlined by most adaptations of a multi-tiered support system (MTSS). A key facet of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable intervention system stresses an organized set of student/learning supports, including personalizing classroom instruction and providing special assistance in the classroom as well as school-wide.

Personalized instruction with the addition of special assistance as needed provides a two step sequential approach for addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Such a sequential approach enables schools to account for a wider range of individual differences and facilitates intervening as soon as problems are noted, thereby preventing some problems and keeping others from becoming worse.

Special assistance often is an extension of general strategies; sometimes, however, more specialized interventions are needed. In either case, the objective is to improve the match with a learner's motivation and capabilities. The interventions are guided by a student's response to intervention (including accommodations). The assistance not only overlaps regular instructional efforts, the practices add value to prevailing efforts to improve instruction and ameliorate learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Properly implemented, the approach re-engages disconnected students and enhances intrinsic motivation for learning. It is an essential step before referrals are made for specialized services and can reduce unnecessary referrals and misdiagnoses of learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

In sum, adopting a three component framework for school improvement policy provides the foundation for revamping in-classroom and school-wide interventions into a unified system for addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Such a system is an essential aspect of enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond. (For more details and in-depth discussion of new directions, see the references cited at the end of this article.*)

Of course, as John Maynard Keynes cogently stressed:

The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones.

(See the old ideas that need to be escaped on the following page.)

Need to Escape these Old Ideas

In order to move in new directions, we need to escape prevailing policy notions that suggest:

- effective school improvement can be accomplished despite the marginalization in school improvement policy and practice of efforts to address barriers to student learning and teaching
- addressing barriers for the many students in need can be accomplished by continuing to overemphasize one-on-one direct services and paying sparse attention to classroom and school wide interventions that can reduce the need for such services
- improving student and learning supports mainly involves enhancing coordination of interventions instead of transforming the enterprise into a comprehensive system that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice
- adopting a continuum of interventions is a sufficient framework for transforming current student/learning supports
- collocating community services on school campuses could be a sufficient strategy for filling critical intervention gaps at schools and for enhancing community and home engagement.

Escaping these old ideas is a first step toward ending the marginalization in school improvement policy of mental health and all other student and learning supports programs and services. The next step is to adopt a three component framework that embeds agenda for mental health and all other student and learning supports into a primary component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

*For more on the above points, see

- >Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2010). *Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- >Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2012). Mental Health in Schools: Moving in New Directions. *Contemporary School Psychology*. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contschpsych.pdf>
- >Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2017). *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*. access from the Center's homepage at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>
- >Center brief (2011). *Moving Beyond the Three Tier Intervention Pyramid: Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Student and Learning Supports*. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/threetier.pdf>
- >Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2018). *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System*. San Diego: Cognella Academic.
<https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html>
(An earlier version entitled *Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports* is online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf>)

Also, see the resources cited as part of the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html> .

Note: New directions for student/learning supports are moving forward across the country.

See *Where's It Happening?* – online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm> .

If you have any comments or questions, let us hear from you. Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu.

Improving School Climate Starts with Understanding it is an *Emerging Quality*

The concept of school climate currently is playing a major role in discussions about the quality of school life, teaching, learning, and support. School and classroom climates range from hostile/toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year.

A variety of studies indicate that a positive climate can have a beneficial impact on students and staff; a negative climate can be another barrier to learning and teaching. Analyses of research suggest significant relationships between classroom climate and matters such as student engagement, behavior, self-efficacy, achievement, and social and emotional development, principal leadership style, stages of educational reform, teacher burnout, and overall quality of school life. Studies report strong associations between achievement levels and classroom goal-direction, cohesiveness, and organization. Research also suggests that the impact of classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and on groups that often are discriminated against.

What the research doesn't articulate well is that school and classroom climate are *emerging qualities*. That is, climate is a temporal, fluid quality of the immediate setting, and it *emerges* from the complex transaction of many factors.

Toward Enhancing School and Classroom Climate

School and classroom climate reflect the influence of the underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, and traditions that constitute the school *culture*. And, of course, the climate and culture at a school also are shaped by surrounding political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

Key concepts for understanding school and classroom climate are social system organization; social attitudes; staff and student morale; power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures; curricular and instructional practices; communicated expectations; efficacy; accountability demands; cohesion; competition; "fit" between learner and classroom; system maintenance, growth, and change; orderliness; and safety. Moos groups such concepts into three dimensions: (1) relationship (i.e., the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment; the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other); (2) personal development (i.e., basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur); and (3) system maintenance and change (i.e., the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change).

Given the correlational nature of school climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. The broader body of organizational research does indicate the profound role accountability pressures play in shaping organizational climate. For example, pressing demands for higher achievement test scores and control of student behavior often contribute to a classroom climate that is reactive, over-controlling, and over-reliant on external reinforcement to motivate positive functioning.

A proactive approach to developing positive classroom climate requires enhancing the quality of life for students and staff not only in the classroom, but school-wide. Three major components of this are (1) a curriculum that promotes not only academic, but also social and emotional learning and fosters intrinsic motivation for learning and teaching, (2) a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that addresses barriers to learning and teaching and re-engages disconnected students in classroom learning, and (3) a governance/management approach that is inclusive of key stakeholders.

With respect to all this, there is considerable advocacy for establishing a healthy and attractive physical environment and a welcoming, caring, and hopeful atmosphere. This encompasses

- social and transition supports for students, staff, and families
- an array of options for pursuing goals
- meaningful participation in decision making by students, staff, and families
- personalized instruction
- transforming the classroom infrastructure from a big classroom into a set of smaller units organized to maximize intrinsic motivation for learning and not based on ability or problem-oriented grouping

- bringing student and learning support staff and volunteers into classrooms on a regular basis to help provide personalized special assistance in responding to problems
- use of a variety of strategies for preventing and addressing problems and crises as soon as they arise
- a range of ways for involving and engaging home and community.

Good schools and good teachers work diligently to create an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring, whole child development, a sense of community, and feelings of hope for the future. Such an atmosphere can play a key role in preventing learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems and promoting social and emotional learning and well-being.

An Emphasis on Caring

From a psychological perspective, learning and teaching are experienced most positively when the learner cares about learning and the teacher cares about teaching. *Moreover, the climate at a school benefits greatly when all the participants care about each other.*

Caring has moral, social, and personal facets. When all facets of caring are present and balanced, they can nurture individuals and facilitate the process of learning. At the same time, caring in all its dimensions should be a major focus of what is taught and learned. This means ensuring that the focus on fostering positive social and emotional development includes a balanced emphasis on empathy and compassion for others.

fostering positive social and emotional development with a balanced emphasis on empathy and compassion for others

To promote a sense of caring and community, schools can develop and institutionalize procedures that start when newcomers arrive (e.g., students, their families, staff, volunteers and others from the community). This involves an initial focus on welcoming and connecting them with those with whom they will be interacting. The process continues with an emphasis on ensuring social and academic support and guidance, mentoring, advocacy, and, if necessary, special assistance. Remember that all this applies to inducting and supporting school staff and others who come to help at a school.

There are a myriad of strategies that can contribute to students feeling positively cared for and connected in the classroom and school. Examples include practices such as personalized instruction, cooperative learning, regular student conferences, activity fostering social and emotional development and positive human relations, conflict resolution and restorative justice, enrichment activities, and opportunities for students to attain positive status.

The importance of home involvement and engagement in schooling also underscores the need to create and maintain an inviting, caring atmosphere for family members. This involves an everyday focus on welcoming, social supports, various forms of guidance and special assistance, volunteer opportunities, and participation in decision making.

About Diversity

Every classroom is diverse to some degree. Diversity arises from the intersection of many factors: gender, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, religion, capability, disability, interests, and so forth. In grouping students, it is important to draw on the strengths of diversity. For example, a multi-ethnic classroom enables teachers to group students across ethnic lines to bring different perspectives to the learning activity. This allows students not only to learn about other perspectives, it can enhance critical thinking and other higher order conceptual abilities. It also can foster the type of intergroup understanding and relationships essential to establishing a school climate of caring and mutual respect. And, of course, the entire curriculum and all instructional activities must incorporate an appreciation of diversity, and teachers must plan ways to appropriately accommodate individual and group differences.

Enhancing Classroom Climate: Teachers Can't Do it Alone

Recently heard:

In some schools, it seems that teachers and students enter their classrooms ready to do battle. And at the end of the class, whoever is able to walk out "alive" is the winner.

This, of course, is a gross exaggeration. . . . Isn't it?

When teachers go into their classroom and shut the door, they are deprived of essential support and learning opportunities. Too often, negative classroom dynamics and the isolation from colleagues lead to feelings of alienation and "burn out." And, students are cut off from a variety of resources and experiences that can enhance equity of opportunity for success at school.

Isolated Teacher and Difficult Classroom Teaching Conditions

In too many schools, teachers are confronted with teaching conditions and classroom dynamics that are beyond one individual's ability to cope effectively. Here is how Jeffrey Mirel and Simona Goldin described the problem in an article entitled *Alone in the Classroom: Why Teachers Are Too Isolated*:

(excerpt from *The Atlantic* – <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/04/alone-in-the-classroom-why-teachers-are-too-isolated/255976/>)

On the first day of their first year teaching, new teachers walk into their schools and meet their colleagues. They might talk about the latest state assessments, textbooks that have just arrived, or the newest project the district is spearheading. Some veteran teachers may tell the newcomers "how things are done" at the schools. And then, as teachers have done since the founding of public education in the U.S., they take leave of one another, walk to their classrooms to meet their students, and close the door.

In his classic 1975 book, *Schoolteacher*, Dan Lortie described teacher isolation as one of the main structural impediments to improved instruction and student learning in American public schools. Lortie argued that since at least the 19th century teachers have worked behind closed doors, rarely if ever collaborating with colleagues on improving teaching practice or examining student work. "Each teacher," Lortie wrote, "... spent his teaching day isolated from other adults; the initial pattern of school distribution represented a series of 'cells' which were construed as self-sufficient."

This situation continues to the present day. A recent study by Scholastic and the Gates Foundation found that teachers spend only about 3 percent of their teaching day collaborating with colleagues. The majority of American teachers plan, teach, and examine their practice alone.

In other countries ... where students outperform those in the U.S. in international tests ..., collaboration among teachers is an essential aspect of instructional improvement. The problem is not that American teachers resist collaboration. Scholastic and the Gates Foundation found that nearly 90 percent of U.S. teachers believe that providing time to collaborate with colleagues is crucial to retaining good teachers.

So what would it take structurally to enable teachers to work collaboratively for improved learning outcomes? Answering this question demands changes in some longstanding American public school structures.

Because the negatives outweigh the potential gains, there are increasing calls for "opening the classroom door" to enhance collegial collaboration, consultation, mentoring, and enable use of a variety of expert assistance, volunteers, family members, and the community-at-large. These changes are especially important for preventing commonplace learning, behavior, and emotional problems and for responding early-after-the onset of a problem. Moreover, such fundamental changes in the culture of schools and classrooms are seen as routes to enhancing a caring climate, a sense of community, and overall teaching effectiveness.

Exhibit 1 and the following discussion offer some details to consider.

Exhibit 1

Working Together

The following matters have a robust history of support:

Teaching benefits from organizational learning

Organizational learning requires an organizational structure where stakeholders commit to deepening their understanding of the vision and mission and how to deal effectively with complexity. This is achieved by engaging in different tasks, acquiring different kinds of expertise, experiencing and expressing different forms of leadership, confronting uncomfortable organizational truths, and searching together for shared solutions.

Collaboration and collegiality

Collaboration and collegiality are fundamental to improving morale and work satisfaction and to the whole enterprise of transforming schools to meet the needs of individuals and society. Hargreaves stresses that *collaborative cultures* foster collaborative working relationships which are spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable.

Welcoming for new staff and ongoing social support for all staff

Just as with students and their families, there is a need for those working together at a school to feel they are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. Thus, a major focus for stakeholder development activity is establishment of a program that welcomes and connects new staff with others with whom they will be working and does so in ways that effectively incorporates them into the community.

Barriers to working together

Problems related to working relationships are a given. To minimize such problems, it is important for participants to understand barriers to working relationships and for sites to establish effective problem solving mechanisms to eliminate or at least minimize such barriers.

Rescue dynamics

A special problem that arises in caring communities are rescue dynamics. Such dynamics arise when caring and helping go astray, when those helping become frustrated and angry because those being helped don't respond in desired ways or seem not to be trying. It is important to minimize such dynamics by establishing procedures that build on motivational readiness and personalized interventions.

Opening the Door for Assistance and Partnerships

Opening the classroom door allows for the addition of a variety of forms of assistance and useful partnerships. As Hargreaves cogently notes:

the way to relieve the uncertainty and open-endedness that characterizes classroom teaching is to create communities of colleagues who work collaboratively [in cultures of shared learning and positive risk-taking] to set their own professional limits and standards, while still remaining committed to continuous improvement. Such communities can also bring together the professional and personal lives of teachers in a way that supports growth and allows problems to be discussed without fear of disapproval or punishment.

Teachers need to work closely with other teachers and school personnel, as well as with parents, professionals-in-training, volunteers, and so forth. Collaboration and teaming are key facets of addressing barriers to learning and enhancing school climate. Expanding and integrating social capital allows schools to improve resources and strategies for enhancing learning and performance in- and out-of-the-classroom. A few examples are highlighted in Exhibit 2 and 3.

Exhibit 2

Collaborative Teaming in Classrooms

The teaching community brings together many sources of talent who can team to enhance and enable teaching and learning.* Partnering with compatible others enables staff to complement each others' areas of competence and provide each other with nurturance and personal support, and allows for relief in addressing problems. And, with access to the Internet and distance learning, the nature and scope of collaborative teaming has the potential to expand in dramatic fashion.

Teaming may take the form of:

- *Parallel Teaching* – team members combine their classes or other work and teach to their strengths. This may involve specific facets of the curriculum (e.g., one teacher covers math, another reading; they cover different aspects of science) or different students (e.g., for specific activities, they divide the students and work with those to whom each relates to best or can support in the best way).
- *Complementary Teaching* – one team member takes the lead with the initial lessons and another facilitates the follow-up activity.
- *Special Assistance* – while one team member provides basic instruction, another focuses on those students who need special assistance.

Collaborating with Special Educators and Other Specialists – Almost every school has some personnel who have special training relevant to redesigning the classroom to work for a wider range of students. These specialists range from those who teach music or art to those who work with students designated as in need of special education. They can bring to the classroom not only their special expertise, but ideas for how the classroom design can incorporate practices that will engage students who have not been doing well and can accommodate those with special needs.

Volunteers – Volunteers can be a multifaceted resource in a classroom and throughout a school (see Exhibit 3). For this to be the case, however, the school staff must value volunteers and learn how to recruit, train, nurture, and use them effectively. When implemented properly, school volunteer programs can enable teachers to personalize instruction, free teachers and other school personnel to meet students' needs more effectively, broaden students' experiences through interaction with volunteers, strengthen school-community understanding and relations, enhance home involvement, and enrich the lives of volunteers. In the classroom, volunteers can provide just the type of extra support needed to enable staff to conference and work with students who require special assistance.

Working under the direction of the teacher and student support staff, they can help students on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. One-to-one assistance often is needed to establish a supportive relationship with students who are having trouble adjusting to school, to develop a positive relationship with a particularly aggressive or withdrawn student, to re-engage a student who has disengaged from classroom learning, and to foster successful task completion with a student easily distracted by peers. Volunteers can help enhance a student's motivation and skills and, at the very least, can help counter negative effects that arise when a student has difficulty adjusting to school.

Students as Part of the Team – Besides the mutual benefits students get from cooperative learning groups and other informal ways they help each other, students can be taught to be peer tutors, group discussion leaders, role models, and mentors. Other useful roles include: peer buddies (to welcome, orient, and provide social support as a new student transitions into the class and school), peer conflict mediators, and much more. Student helpers benefit their peers, themselves, and the school staff, and enhance the school's efforts to create a caring climate and a sense of community.

*When a classroom successfully joins with its surrounding community, anyone at a school and in the community who wants to facilitate student learning might be a contributing teacher (e.g., aides, volunteers, family members, students, specialist teachers, student support staff, school administrators, classified staff, professionals-in-training). Together the array of school and community people constitute a teaching community.

Exhibit 3 **The Many Roles for Volunteers in the Classroom and Throughout the School***

I. Welcoming and Social Support

A. In the Front Office

1. Greeting and welcoming
2. Providing information to those who come to the front desk
3. Escorting guests, new students/families to destinations on the campus
4. Orienting newcomers

B. Staffing a Welcoming Club

1. Connecting newly arrived parents with peer buddies
2. Helping develop orientation and other information resources for newcomers
3. Helping establish newcomer support groups

II. Working with Designated Students in the Classroom

A. Helping to orient new students

B. Engaging disinterested, distracted, and distracting students

C. Providing personal guidance and support for specific students in class to help them stay focused and engaged

III. Providing Additional Opportunities and Support in Class and on the Campus as a Whole

Helping develop and staff additional

A. Recreational activity

B. Enrichment activity

C. Tutoring

D. Mentoring

IV. Helping Enhance the Positive Climate Throughout the School – including Assisting with "Chores"

A. Assisting with Supervision in Class and Throughout the Campus

B. Contributing to Campus "Beautification"

C. Helping to Get Materials Ready

*Volunteers can be recruited from a variety of sources: parents and other family members; others in the community such as senior citizens and workers in local businesses; college students; and peers and older students at the school. There also are organized programs that can provide volunteers, such as VISTA, America Reads, and local service clubs. And, increasingly, institutions of higher education are requiring students to participate in learning through service. Schools committed to enhancing home and community involvement in schooling can pursue volunteer programs as a productive element in enhancing school climate.

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Improving Climate by Using Aides and Volunteers in Targeted Ways

Every teacher has had the experience of planning a wonderful lesson and having the classroom instruction disrupted by some student who is less interested in the lesson than in interacting with a classmate. The first tendency usually is to use some simple form of social control to stop the disruptive behavior (e.g., using proximity and/or a mild verbal intervention). Because so many students today are not easily intimidated, teachers find such strategies do not solve the problem. So, the next steps escalate. The teacher reprimands, warns, and finally sends the student to “time-out” or to the front office for discipline. In the process, the other students start to snicker about what is happening and the lesson usually is disrupted.

In contrast to this scenario, teachers can train their aides (if they have one) or a volunteer who has the ability to interact with students to work in ways that target such youngsters. The training of such individuals focuses on what the teacher wants them to do when a problem arises and what they should be doing to prevent such problems. In reaction to a problem, the aide or volunteer should expect the teacher to indicate that it is time to go and sit next to a youngster who needs special guidance and support. The aim is to quietly try to re-engage the student. If necessary, the volunteer can take the student to a quiet area in the classroom and initiate another type of activity or even go out for a brief walk and talk if this is feasible. It is true that this means the student won’t get the benefit of instruction during that period, but s/he wouldn’t anyway.

None of this is a matter of rewarding the student for bad behavior. Rather, it is a strategy for avoiding the tragedy of disrupting the whole class while the teacher reprimands the culprit and in the process increases that student’s negative attitudes toward teaching and school.

Moreover, using this approach and not having to shift into a discipline mode has multiple benefits. For one, the teacher is able to carry out the day’s lesson plan. For another, the other students do not have the experience of seeing the teacher having a control contest with a student. (Even if the teacher wins such contests, it may have a negative effect on the teacher-student relationship; and if the teacher somehow “loses it,” that definitely conveys a wrong message. Either outcome can be counterproductive with respect to a caring climate and a sense of community.) Finally, the teacher has not had a negative encounter with the targeted student. Such encounters build up negative attitudes on both sides which can be counterproductive with respect to future teaching, learning, and behavior. Because there has been no negative encounter, the teacher is likely to find the student more receptive to discussing things than if the usual consequences have been administered (e.g., loss of privileges, sending the student to time-out or to the assistant principal). This makes it possible to explore with the student ways to make the classroom a mutually satisfying place to be and prevent future problems.

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Opening the Classroom Door to Enhance and Personalize Staff Development

Personnel development is a critical element of school and classroom climate. New staff need as much on-the-job training and support as can be provided. All teachers need to learn more about how to enable learning in their classrooms. All school staff need to learn how to team in ways that enhance their effectiveness in supporting and learning from each other and improving student outcomes.

In opening the classroom door to enhance support and staff development, the crux of the matter is to personalize capacity building. This requires selective assignments for teaming, mentoring, and other collegial activity. It involves identifying what needs to be learned at this time in an individual’s learning curve. Again, as with students, it is a matter of meeting staff members where they are at and taking them the next step. And, it involves more than just talking and “consulting”. It requires modeling and guiding change (e.g., demonstrating and discussing new approaches, guiding initial practice and eventual implementation, and following-up to improve and refine).

Teaming with a mentor or a colleague provides a more intensive form of shared and personalized learning. Mentors and colleagues include teachers, specialist personnel (such as resource teachers and student support staff), and administrators. For teachers, optimal learning opportunities are those carried out in their classrooms and through visits to colleagues' classrooms. In this respect, instead of just making recommendations about what to do about student learning, behavior, and emotional problems, specialists need to be prepared to go into classrooms to model, guide, and team with teachers as they practice and implement new approaches. Videos and workshops on good practices can provide supplementary learning activities.

Opening the classroom door to teaming and collaboration is key to significantly improving inservice personnel development. Improving continuous staff development is essential to job satisfaction and enhancing a positive climate at school.

Concluding Comments

So, efforts to enhance school and classroom climate must address the many factors affecting the current climate. For a positive climate to emerge, stakeholders must work diligently to create an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring, whole child development, a sense of community, and feelings of hope for the future.

***I told her I lost my homework because my computer crashed.
So she gave both me and my computer an F!***



***Why do you think we'll do better
at school this year?***



***Because I heard that Congress
passed a law that says
every student will succeed!***

Hot Topics, Hot Issues, & Commentaries

In an effort to encourage widespread discussion of current concerns related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, we devote a section of our Center website to hot topics, issues, and commentaries. See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/hottopic.htm>.

Here are some recent entries:

Hot Topics

- About School Shootings
- MTSS: Strengths and Weaknesses
- EQUITY -- Which Schools are Taking Equity Seriously?
- Why is there so little attention in ESSA planning with respect to transforming student and learning supports?
- Don't Grade Schools on Grit
- Resegregation?
- Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child – The Implementation Problem
- About Integrating Student and Learning Supports: Integrating is Not the Main Point
- ESEA & Transforming Student and Learning Supports
- About the Value of Student and Learning Supports
- Making Analyses of How Well SEA, LEA, and School Websites Present Learning Supports

Hot Issues

- Can there be too much emphasis on gathering more data?
- Concerns about Personalizing Teaching
- Arguments About Overdiagnosis of ADHD
- Moving Beyond the Concept of Integrated Student Supports
- Special Education Disputes Continue to Reflect the Many Issues that Permeate the Field
- Maintaining Momentum for Sound Systemic Changes When the Superintendency Changes
- And Yet Another Discrete Initiative!
- Enabling Learning: It's a Bigger Policy Problem than Most Education Reformers Appreciate
- Reporting on Teacher Effectiveness: The Discussion Heats Up

Commentaries

- Test Scores Plateauing? Here's What's Missing in School Improvement Efforts
- School Reform is Failing to Address Barriers to Learning
- Getting Back to Real Policy Basics: Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child
- Improving Schools? Not Another Special Initiative!
- What is Personalized Learning?
- ESSA and new directions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching
- Equity of opportunity: A pressing concern for school improvement
- So much has changed; so little has changed --Where do schools go from here?
- Integrated Student Supports (ISS) initiatives need to be embedded into a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports
- About Threat Assessment

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or contact us – E-mail: Ltaylor@ucla.edu or Ph: (310) 825-3634

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

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... and a host of students