



Addressing Barriers

to Learning

New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link



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Congressional Education Committee Member's School Improvement Report Moves Policy Debate from a Two- to a Three-Component Blueprint

In May, Congresswoman Judy Chu issued a report entitled: *Strengthening Our Schools: A New Framework and Principles for Revising School Improvement Grants*. Rather than the usual limited two-component blueprint framework that focuses only on instruction and management/governance, Representative Chu's report adopts a three-component framework. This third component encompasses learning supports directly designed to remove barriers to student success and is presented as a primary and essential component of school improvement. Concerns related to mental health in schools are fully embedded in this component.

Below is an excerpt from Congresswoman Chu's report. This is followed by (1) a brief overview about moving from a two- to a three-Component approach for school improvement, (2) a commentary on the report, and (3) an illustration of what learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide can look like. We end this issue with what's new from the Center.

From Congresswoman Chu's Report on Strengthening Our Schools

(online at <http://chu.house.gov/SOS%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>)

“For students in many of our nation’s priority schools, going to a great school and having the best teacher may not be enough. . . . Are these students falling behind because their teachers and schools are bad? Perhaps, but it’s more likely that we aren’t addressing the underlying problems facing our students each day. Whether it is poverty, lack of parental involvement, language challenges, or any other factor, we cannot help all of our children succeed without tackling these fundamental social problems head on (Mass Insight, 2007; Economic Policy Institute, 2008). . . . Simply switching out principals and staff will not directly lead to student achievement. In fact, principals and teachers have thrived in turnaround situations when given the tools to succeed (Simmons 2010). . . .

Researchers at UCLA describe a systemic framework for turning around, transforming, and improving schools. ESEA Reauthorization should incorporate such a framework to promote flexibility and collaboration, remove barriers to student success, and foster teachers and school leaders.

By revising school improvement grants to choose from a menu of research-driven options, we can comprehensively rebuild for learning and put priority schools on a pathway to achievement. . . .

Systemic rebuilding cannot be done with school personnel alone. Parents, community leaders, businesses, and other stakeholders represent essential human and social capital that needs to be brought in and leveraged. Greater flexibility must be given to districts and schools to maximize their effective use of resources. It is essential to:

- ensure schools can use allocated funds flexibly
- enhance administrator recruitment, induction, mentoring, professional development and retention
- foster a sense of collaborative ownership by prioritizing buy-in from teachers, specialized instruction support personnel, principals, parents, and the community
- ensure multi-year investments to fully fund and sustain real reform
- enhance coordination and capitalize on economies of scale by facilitating linkages among pre-schools, elementary schools, secondary schools, and higher education institutions
- integrate community and family engagement and leverage funds allocated for overlapping concerns addressing student needs . . .



Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Students from disadvantaged groups are more likely to be a significant population of our lowest performing schools. Research shows that two-thirds of the achievement gap is still due to factors outside school. We have failed to provide an equal opportunity for these students to learn. The current school improvement strategy

largely ignores these fundamental problems. Without tackling environmental barriers to learning and teaching head on, our priority schools will always be doomed to fail.

There must be a shift towards recognizing that a student's life outside of the classroom plays a significant role in their and their classmates' academic success. Once this concept is recognized, schools can begin to devise strategies to make sure that students are motivationally ready and available to learn when they are in the classroom. An approach that maximizes flexibility will allow all stakeholders in a school to come together and design a program for success that actually addresses the school's circumstances. By tackling barriers to learning, we can get to the root of the problems that our schools face.

While most schools devote significant resources to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, the work is not conceived as a whole, is developed piecemeal, and implementation is fragmented. Examples of supports to address barriers include: positive behavioral supports, a system of response to intervention, assistance for students with special needs,

programs for safe schools, resources for ELL students, extended learning time, expanding school meals, well-rounded curriculums, wraparound services, mental health services, and much more. These student and learning supports need to be organized into a comprehensive system for a full continuum of interventions to enable every school to better address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. Key strategies include:

- building teacher capacity to re-engage disconnected students and maintain their engagement
- providing support for the full range of transitions that students and families encounter as they negotiate school and grade changes
- responding to, and where feasible, prevent behavioral and emotional crises
- increasing community and family involvement and support
- facilitating student and family access to effective services & special assistance as needed. . . .

Improving Learning and Instruction

Research consistently demonstrates that one of the most important factors in a student's education is their teacher. Additionally, principals are instrumental in navigating the complex process of rebuilding a school, attracting good teachers, and improving instruction. Blanket firings of the entire staff are not a solution. Priority schools need the resources to address their staffing needs, build capacity, and improve instruction, including strategies for:

- personalizing training to help the teachers reach out to students
- helping teachers and school leaders partner with families
- utilizing data informed instruction
- implementing a system of response to intervention for struggling students
- using specialized instructional support like school psychologists or speech pathologists within the classroom
- enhancing staff induction through mentoring and instructional support
- providing leadership training for principals to improve instruction
- continuously enhancing a positive school climate and a culture of rigorous standards and high expectations for students and all school staff.

Strengthening Our Schools: Guiding Principles

Strengthening our schools should follow guiding principles to steer school districts and schools in a clear direction, allow time for progress, and keep communities whole. Every priority school must start out by mapping and analyzing needs and assets. No systemic reform can be wisely undertaken without a proper evaluation of the school needs and school assets. It is a school's unique set of circumstances that determines its performance.

The current models do not give sufficient weight to this principle and could lead many schools down a path of false starts with no improvement. Clear understanding of what has worked and what gaps need to be filled should be compulsory (Center for Mental Health, 2010a, b; Center for Education Policy 2009; Council of Great City Schools, 2010). In addition, the Commission on No Child Left Behind (2007) has asserted that it is critical to fully understand and to comprehensively address students' behavioral, social, and emotional needs as well as their academic needs. In their report, the NCLB Commission cites the comprehensive research indicating that students struggling with mental health concerns achieve at higher rates when schools identify and intervene with these problems early. The Commission links access to mental health services to improved student outcomes and

recommends that, when creating their school improvement plan, schools should be required to determine the availability of school and community social and mental health services to support struggling students.

Flexibility is key to achieving success. The current models cap innovation and lock schools into a pathway where they cannot adapt to new needs and situations, which will likely lead to continued failure. Schools are able to produce creative, engaging and successful solutions when given the ability (Silver, 2010). Additionally, according to the Center on Education Policy, schools that raise achievement use a flexible menu of tools and strategies to improve their school's performance. When schools are allowed flexibility and choice, they can adapt their plan as needs arise. (Commission on NCLB, 2007; Council on Great City Schools, 2010).

Priority schools should be given sufficient time (3-5 years) to show progress. Quick and dramatic improvement options based on business turnaround models are a hasty and risky approach to systemic school reform. Effectiveness should not be sacrificed for time. The turnaround model celebrates immediate changes in business culture to achieve a "quick win," (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; Hassel & Hassel, 2009).

If there is one thing research supports, it is that school turnaround is difficult and very complex (Commission on NCLB, 2007). The lessons of the corporate sector are not always applicable to education (Kowal & Hassel, 2005). This does not mean schools should not be measured and evaluated to make adjustments in the reform. It means shortchanging effective, long-term solutions in favor of a litany of immediate wins could hamper sustained achievement. Three to five years is the consensus for sufficient evaluation of progress towards building school-wide achievement (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2010a, b; US Department of Education, 2010).

School closure should be a last resort. School closure, the final option in SIG, is the most destructive. Closing a school can disrupt a community and cannot guarantee that the educational alternative is much better. School closure effectively abandons a community and the student, who will have to complete what is often a difficult transition process to a new school. Dramatic and significant change can be achieved without closing a school. By encouraging school closure we undermine student's communities, impact their self-esteem and sweep under the rug systemic problems in the district or community (Myslinksi, 2010).

Often, the educational alternatives available to the students of closed schools are little or no better than the schools they just left. In rural areas, the closing of a school can cause significant disruption to students because travel time can be greatly extended (NSBA, 2010).

Former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch has pointed out that 'schools are often the heart of their community, representing traditions, values and history that help bind the community together.' She says they should have the opportunity to receive all the resources they need to succeed before they are forced to shut the doors (Myslinksi, 2010).

Failure to rethink the current school improvement models would be an injustice to the students in this country with the least opportunities. The heavy-handed imposition of punitive measures in the current models run the risk of impeding long-term success. Congress cannot fear rethinking the current policy and starting from scratch. We cannot afford to lose another generation of children. Our country's success depends on a 21st century education. By revising the School Improvement Grants models to include a menu

of research driven options within this framework we can enable our schools to comprehensively rebuild for learning and put ‘priority schools’ on a pathway to achievement.”

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We just missed the school bus.

Don't worry. I heard the principal say no child will be left behind!



About Moving from a Two- to a Three-Component Approach for School Improvement

As Congress considers reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), it is essential to move from the prevailing two-component to a three-component blueprint policy. As Exhibit 1 highlights, currently the primary thrust is on improving instruction and management/governance. While these two components obviously are essential, lasting school improvement requires something more. Research has clarified that the need is for a third component that directly and comprehensively focuses on (1) *addressing barriers* to learning and teaching and (2) *re-engaging students* who have become disconnected from classroom instruction (see Exhibit 2).*

The third component, an enabling or learning supports component, directly addresses barriers to learning and teaching. It is conceived as primary and essential and fully integrated with the other two components.

This policy shift is necessary to guide school improvement efforts in ways that fully integrate the development of a component that provides a truly comprehensive system of learning supports. It does this by providing a unifying umbrella policy under which all resources expended for student and learning supports can be woven together.

By adopting a three-component blueprint for school improvement, the plan formulated by Congresswoman Chu underscores the need to comprehensively and systemically address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students and elevates the discourse about how to enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. This emphasis makes it the first plan at the Congressional level designed to move school improvement policy from a two- to a three-component blueprint.

The move from a two- to a three-component policy significantly enhances the blueprint and roadmap for transforming school improvement policy and practice in ways that effectively deal with learning and behavior problems and provide intensive support for struggling students. It should be noted that two pioneering states, Iowa and Louisiana, have used a three-component framework in designing a comprehensive system of learning supports for their schools.

Defining a System of Learning Support for Policy Purposes

Learning supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports to enable all pupils to have an equal opportunity for success at school by directly addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

A comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive learning support system provides supportive interventions in classrooms and schoolwide and is fully integrated with efforts to improve instruction and management at a school.

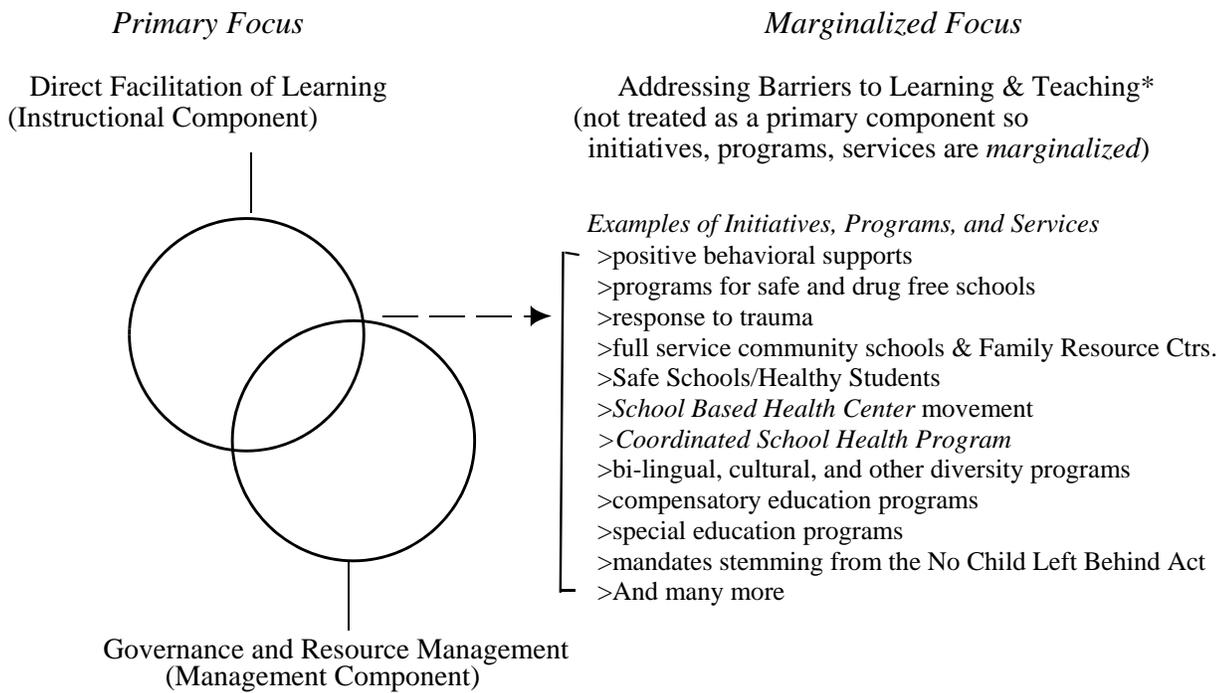
*See the following policy and practice analysis reports from UCLA:

>*Synthesis and Analysis of Recommendations to Congress for ESEA reauthorization from the Perspective of Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/esearchs.pdf>

>*Turning Around, Transforming, and Continuously Improving Schools: Federal Proposals are Still Based on a Two- Rather than a Three- Component Blueprint*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/turning.pdf>

Exhibit 1. Moving from a Two-Three- Component Framework for Improving Schools

A. Current School Improvement Framework



*While not treated as a primary and essential component, schools generally offer some amount of school-owned student “support services” – some of which links with community-owned resources. Many types of student support personnel staff the interventions (e.g., school counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, etc.). Schools have been reaching out to community agencies to add a few more services. All of this, however, remains marginalized and fragmented in policy and practice.

B. Needed: Revised Policy to Establish an Umbrella for School Improvement Planning Related to Addressing Barriers to Learning and Promoting Healthy Development

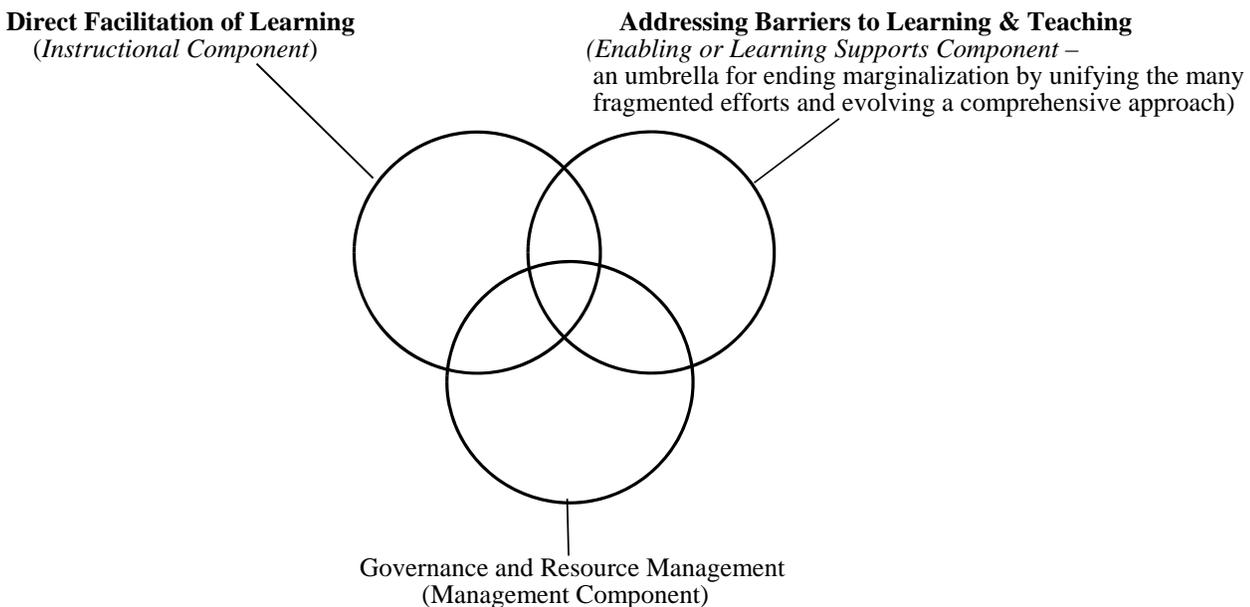
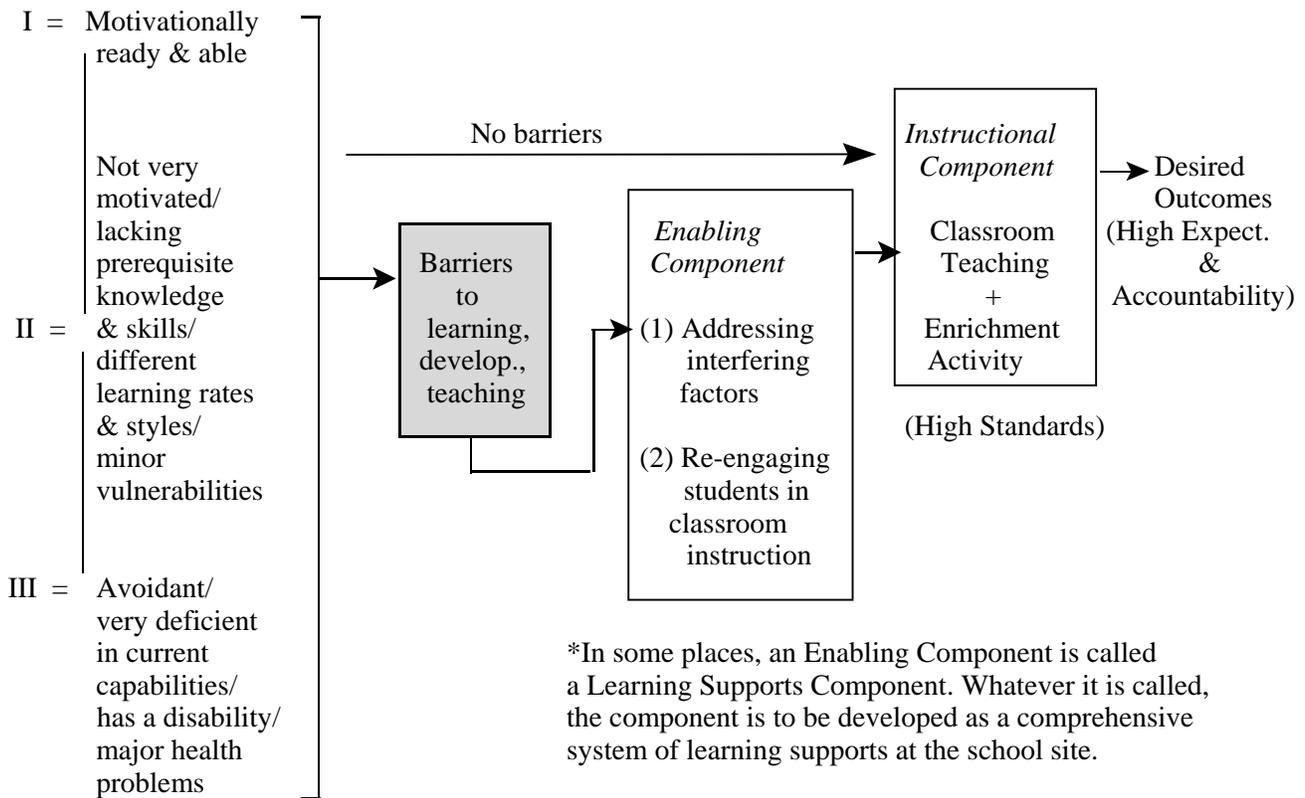


Exhibit 2

An Enabling or Learning Supports Component to Address Barriers and Re-engage Students in Classroom Instruction*

Range of Learners

(categorized in terms of their response to academic instruction at any given point in time)



***Examples of Risk-Producing Conditions that Can be Barriers to Learning**

E n v i r o n m e n t a l C o n d i t i o n s**

P e r s o n F a c t o r s**

<i>Neighborhood</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>School and Peers</i>	<i>Individual</i>
>extreme economic deprivation	>chronic poverty	>poor quality school	>medical problems
>community disorganization, including high levels of mobility	>conflict/disruptions/violence	>negative encounters with teachers	>low birth weight/ neurodevelopmental delay
>violence, drugs, etc.	>substance abuse	>negative encounters with peers &/or inappropriate peer models	>psychophysiological problems
>minority and/or immigrant status	>models problem behavior		>difficult temperament & adjustment problems
	>abusive caretaking		>inadequate nutrition
	>inadequate provision for quality child care		

**A reciprocal determinist view of behavior recognizes the interplay of environment and person variables.

Center Commentary on Congresswoman Chu's Report

We note that some critics of the Chu plan continue to marginalize the focus on the third component for school improvement. Rather than appreciating that it is a primary and essential component, they characterize it as focused mainly on matters such as family engagement and community health and social services. Much more is involved.



No matter how clear a plan is,
someone is always ready to misread it!

With respect to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, Chu's report emphasizes that learning supports need to be organized into a comprehensive system for a full continuum of interventions to enable every school to better address barriers to learning and re-engage disconnected students. She outlines that key strategies include:

- building teacher capacity to re-engage disconnected students and maintain their engagement
- providing support for the full range of transitions that students and families encounter as they negotiate school and grade changes
- responding to, and where feasible, preventing behavioral and emotional crises
- increasing community and family involvement and support
- facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.

In addition to promoting healthy development, the full continuum of interventions mentioned spans systems to (1) prevent problems, (2) respond as early after onset as feasible, and (3) provide for severe and chronic problems. Each of the strategies she mentions encompasses complex arenas that must be fleshed out at each level of the continuum.

Our research over many years has clarified that school improvement planning and implementation has substantially ignored most of this leaving many good teachers in the untenable position of having too many students for whom well designed and implemented instruction simply is not enough. Chu's report tries to address this concern by moving in new directions. We hope others will take the time to move beyond reframing what she says to make it seem like old thinking about linking community services to schools or claiming that school already have a comprehensive system of student and learning supports. Only two states, Louisiana and Iowa, have completed designs for this third component (i.e., a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students) and are moving to build capacity to implement it. (Hawaii also initiated such a framework, entitled a Comprehensive Student Support System, but has yet to implement it effectively.)

As U.S. Secretary of Education Duncan has recognized, turning around schools that are not doing well is a formidable task. It is also a task about which many ambiguities and controversies swirl (see our recent policy analysis reports noted on p. 6 of this issue).

"The truth is", as Joanne Weiss (U.S. Department of Education) has stated, "we don't know exactly how to turn around schools. The truth is also that excuses and inaction don't help students who are trapped in these schools. It's a real dilemma, not a fake one."

Given all the uncertainties associated with turning around, transforming, and continuously improving schools, it is essential to pay attention to shifting school improvement policy from a two- to a three-component framework.

What are your views about the matters discussed in the Chu report?

Send you comments to Ltaylor@ucla.edu and we will share them widely.

Learning Supports in Action at a School

What it Will Look Like When We Help Teachers with Student Re-engagement, Rather than Overemphasizing Discipline and Referral for Mental Health Services

Almost every teacher has at least a few students who are not doing well at school. They often are in trouble on the school playground before school and during lunch. Teachers are constantly caught up in disciplining and sending such students to the principal's office. The students often are referred to a "Student Study or Success Team" only to end up on a long list waiting. With continuous development of a comprehensive system of learning supports, the focus can shift to enhancing what goes on in the classroom and schoolwide to minimize the need for control-oriented student management and discipline and referral out for expensive special services.

In the classroom: The emphasis on enhancing teacher capacity to re-engage students in daily learning activities helps teachers learn more about matching individual interests and skills and how to design the instructional day to provide additional supports from peers, colleagues, and community volunteers. Rather than seeing the solution in terms of discipline, teachers learn how to understand what is motivating problems and are able to provide a more personalized approach to instruction (including response to intervention strategies) and extra in-classroom support that re-engages students in learning. Over time, the job descriptions of all student support staff not involved in classroom instruction will be rewritten to ensure their functions include going into classrooms to help teachers learn and implement new ways to enable learning for all students who are not well-engaged in classroom learning.

Support for daily transitions. The focus on enhancing support for daily transitions (such as before and after school, breaks and lunch) will increase availability of recreational and enrichment opportunities so all students have positive options for interaction. Staff involved in supervising such activities will learn to identify and help engage students in activities that interest them (e.g., a sport's tournament, an intramural club activity). Involvement will be monitored to ensure students are truly engaged, and along with a student support staffer (e.g., school psychologist, counselor, social worker, nurse), playground staff will use the opportunity to help enhance student social and emotional learning.

Support for newcomers. Learning supports stress welcoming and social support strategies for new students and families. Student support staff work with office staff to develop welcoming programs and establish social support networks (e.g., peer buddy systems for students; parent-parent connections). As a result, newcomers (and all others) are greeted promptly and with an inviting attitude when they come into the school. Those without correct enrollment records are helped to access what they need. Parents are connected with another parent who helps them learn about school and neighborhood resources. Upon entering the new classroom, teachers connect the newcomer with a trained peer buddy who sticks with the newcomer for a few weeks to help in learning the ropes and connecting with peers. And during the first weeks, support staff can work with each teacher to identify any student who hasn't made a good transition. Together they can determine why and work with the family to turn things around.

Crisis prevention: To reduce the number of crises, student support staff analyze what is preventable (usually related to human relations problems) and then design a range of schoolwide prevention approaches. Among these are strategies for involving all school personnel (credentialed and classified) in activities that promote positive interactions and natural opportunities for learning prosocial behavior and mutual respect.

Fewer referrals, better response: As the in-classroom and schoolwide approaches emerge, the need for out-of-classroom referrals declines. This allows for rapid and early response for those student who continue to manifest problems, and it enables student support staff to work more effectively in connecting students with community services when necessary.

School climate: The implications of all this for enhancing a positive school climate are evident.

What's New?



NEW POLICY REPORTS

Turning Around, Transforming, and Continuously Improving Schools: Federal Proposals are Still Based on a Two- Rather than a Three- Component Blueprint
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/turning.pdf>

This report begins with a discussion of school turnaround models to illustrate the dilemma confronting efforts to enable equity of opportunity. Then, the analysis focuses on current priorities as reflected in the Race to the Top and School Improvement grant proposals and the U.S. Dept. of Education's Blueprint for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Findings underscore the ongoing marginalization of practices (e.g., student and learning supports) that directly address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. The problem is seen as stemming from the two-component framework that dominates school improvement thinking. The analyses highlight the need for federal school improvement policy to shift from a two- to a three-component framework. The third component is defined as focused on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and designated as an enabling or learning supports component. It is stressed that a three component blueprint does nothing to detract from the fact that a strong academic program is the foundation from which all other school interventions must flow.

The report concludes that only by unifying student and learning supports will it be feasible to develop a comprehensive system to directly address many of the complex factors interfering with schools accomplishing their mission. And only by developing such a system will it be feasible to facilitate the emergence of a school environment that fosters successful, safe, and healthy students and staff. It is emphasized that school climate is an emergent quality that stems from how schools provide and coalesce on a daily basis components dedicated not only to instruction and management/governance, but to learning supports as well.

Also see the related New Quick Find entitled:

School Turnaround and Transformation -
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/turnaround.htm>

This resource includes links to related Center resources, other online reports, and Centers focusing on this concern. If there is something you think should be included, let us know. (Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

Synthesis and Analysis of Recommendations to Congress for ESEA Reauthorization from the Perspective of Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching

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

This report categorizes, synthesizes, and analyzes major recommendations to Congress for the ESEA reauthorization. The research is conducted from the perspective of a three- rather than a two- component blueprint for reform.

The analysis illuminates fundamental gaps in the prevailing recommendations from the U.S. Dept. of Education and other major stakeholders and education leaders. Specific emphasis is given to what's missing with respect to a component to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

For example, the analysis finds that sparse attention is given to the need for (a) rethinking and restructuring the work of student and learning support professionals, (b) redeploying existing resources used for learning supports, and (c) weaving school and community resources together. As a result, there is little recognition of the role such improvements can play both in helping teachers enhance engagement and re-engagement in classroom learning and in establishing the type of caring climate in classrooms and school-wide that promotes progress and well-being.

The report notes pioneering work in states that are moving learning supports from the margins to a prominent place in improving schools and enhancing student outcomes. It concludes by highlighting what schools must do to plan and develop more effective and comprehensive systems to directly deal with factors that keep too many students from doing well at school.

As the School Mental Health Project at UCLA approaches its 25th anniversary and its national Center for Mental Health in Schools celebrates its 15th, we want to draw your attention to the previous issues of this quarterly journal/newsletter. They can be readily accessed at –

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/news.htm> .

