

25 years &
counting



Addressing Barriers

to Learning

New ways to think . . .
Better ways to link



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About School, Home, and Community Connecting and Collaborating to Address Barriers to Learning

Few argue against the notion that schools, homes, and communities should work closely with each other to meet their mutual goals. The reality, however, is that many schools are islands with no bridges to the community. Families may have little connection with each other or their children's schools. And it is commonplace for neighborhood resources such as agencies, youth groups, and businesses to operate in relative isolation of each other and local schools.

Schools can and need to play a fundamental role in developing connections and collaborations with home and community. However, the objective must be to establish and sustain *formal* collaborations.

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Informal linkages are relatively simple to acquire; establishing major long-term connections requires committed and organized *outreach* and a productive *operational infrastructure*. This is particularly so when the aim is to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated set of interventions. A comprehensive approach involves much more than informally linking a few community services and activities to schools. Such

an approach requires weaving a wide range of school and community resources together and doing so in ways that formalize and institutionalize working relationships among stakeholders (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 2002, 2003, 2007; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2005a, 2008a; Forum for Youth Investment, 2011; Honig, Kahne, & McLaughlin, 2001; Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2004; Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001; Taylor & Adelman, 2003).

To enhance understanding of substantive school, home, and community collaboration, our purpose here is to share some lessons learned about building a strong collaborative infrastructure. In the process, we highlight the nature and scope of a unifying and comprehensive intervention framework.

What's Been Happening

Initiatives across the country have demonstrated that schools and communities can connect to improve outcomes for youngsters, families, and neighborhoods (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009). Some connections involve a wide range of stakeholders, including families, professionals, public and private health and human service agencies, schools, organizations, businesses, and more. The intent generally is to enhance well-being at school and in the neighborhood by mobilizing community and social capital and improving policies and structures (Komro, Flay, Biglan, et al., 2011).

The focus may be on addressing

(a) *specific types of youth concerns* such as reducing substance abuse or violence (e.g., gangs, bullying), improving safety, promoting youth development (e.g., expanding after school academic, recreation, enrichment, work and service opportunities) and/or

(b) *general concerns about system functioning* (e.g., coordinating and integrating programs and services, improving access to health and social services, enhancing the range of school student and learning supports, enhancing transitions to work/career/post-secondary education, facilitating youth school, and community development).

Systems-oriented initiatives often are designated as school-linked and coordinated services, wrap-around, one-stop shopping, full service schools, community schools, and systems of care.

When the emphasis has been on connecting community agencies with schools, four not mutually exclusive formats have emerged:

- (1) co-location of community agency personnel and services at schools – sometimes in the context of family and parent resource centers or School-Based Health Centers financed in part by community health organizations,
- (2) formal linkages with agencies to enhance access and service coordination for students and families at the agency, at a nearby satellite clinic, or in a school-based or linked center,
- (3) formal partnerships between community agencies and a school district to establish or expand school-based or linked facilities that include provision of services,
- (4) schools contracting with community providers to offer mandated and designated student services.

A problem with school-linked services is that they often result only in co-locating agency staff at schools

The problem with the emphasis on agency and service-oriented collaboration is that, in too many instances, school-linked services result only in co-locating agency staff on school campuses (McMahon, Ward, Pruett, Davidson, & Griffith (2000)). As these activities proceed, a small number of youngsters receive services, but little connection is made with school staff and programs. The tendency is to link them to sites without integrating them with a school's education support programs and the direct efforts of classroom teachers. Failure to integrate with other services and with key programs at the school probably undermines the efficacy of a service and limits its impact on academic performance.

Other problems have arisen when "outside" professionals are brought in to schools. For example, school district pupil services personnel often view the entrance of "outsiders" as a discount of their skills and as a threat to their jobs. Also policy makers often arrive at the mistaken impression that linking community resources to schools can effectively meet the needs of schools in addressing barriers to learning. In turn, this has led some legislators to view the linking of community services to schools as a way to free-up the dollars underwriting school-owned efforts.

The reality is that even when one adds together community and school assets, the total set of resources in impoverished locales is woefully inadequate. In situation after situation, it has become evident that as soon as the first few sites demonstrating school and community agency linkages are in place, community agencies find they have stretched their resources to the limit. (One response to the resource problem has been to focus on providing services that can be reimbursed through third party payments, such as medicaid funds. However, this often results in further limiting the range of interventions and who receives them.)

By themselves, health and human services clearly are an insufficient strategy for dealing with the biggest problems confronting schools. Services are only one facet of any effort to develop the kind of comprehensive approach that can effectively address barriers to learning and enhance healthy development. Youth development initiatives, for example, expand intervention efforts beyond services and programs.

As noted, the range of entities at schools, in the home, and in a community is wide-ranging. It includes such sources of human and social capital as individuals and organized groups, professionals, businesses, community based organizations, postsecondary institutions, faith-based and civic groups, programs at parks and libraries, and any facility that can be used for recreation, learning, enrichment, and support (Kretzmann, 1998; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). By connecting formally with these entities, schools can help weave together a critical mass of resources and strategies. This is especially needed in impoverished communities.

Promising, but . . .

A reasonable inference from available data is that school-community collaborations hold considerable promise for strengthening students, families, neighborhoods, and schools (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2004). Such collaborations not only can improve service access, they can open school doors in ways that enhance opportunities for recreation, enrichment, remediation, and family involvement. They encourage a view of schools not only as community centers where families can easily access services, but also as hubs for community-wide learning and activity. And they establish formal operational mechanisms for developing productive working relationships braiding a wide range of school and community resources to address overlapping concerns.

At the same time, it has become clear that when the focus is mainly on linking some agency services, concerns arise about the limited scope of the work and about the additional fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and marginalization that it generates. And, even more fundamentally, there are indications that many attempts to develop and sustain effective school, home, and community collaboratives have collapsed. A poignant indicator of this state of affairs are the exasperated compliants from participants about going to yet another meeting.

Moving Forward

About an Operational Infrastructure for Collaboration

As noted above, the focus in connecting schools and communities has emphasized specific types of youth concerns and/or general system concerns. We suggest that most schools and communities need to adopt a broad focus and develop mechanisms that enable productive collaboration in addressing the complex and multifaceted concerns confronting them.

Many efforts to collaborate have floundered because too little attention was paid to establishing a sound operational infrastructure for working together. An effective collaborative is the product of well-conceived mechanisms that are appropriately sanctioned and endorsed by governing bodies (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011). Key elements are mechanisms for oversight and leadership, ongoing capacity building and support, and accomplishing specific tasks. The process of initially establishing such a collaborative infrastructure may begin at any level; however, it is good to think first about what is needed locally and then what is necessary to support the local work.

Exhibit 1 graphically illustrates the basic facets of a sound collaborative operational infrastructure. It is important to ensure that all key stakeholders are represented. And, there must be

- (1) authority to act and adequate resources (time, space, materials, equipment) to support the infrastructure
- (2) capacity building (e.g., training and support) to ensure participants have the competence to perform their roles and functions
- (3) ways to address personnel turnover quickly so new staff are brought up to speed.

Because work groups usually are the mechanism of choice, particular attention must be paid to increasing levels of competence and enhancing motivation of all stakeholders for working together. (Stakeholder development spans four stages: orientation, foundation-building, capacity-building, and continuing education.)

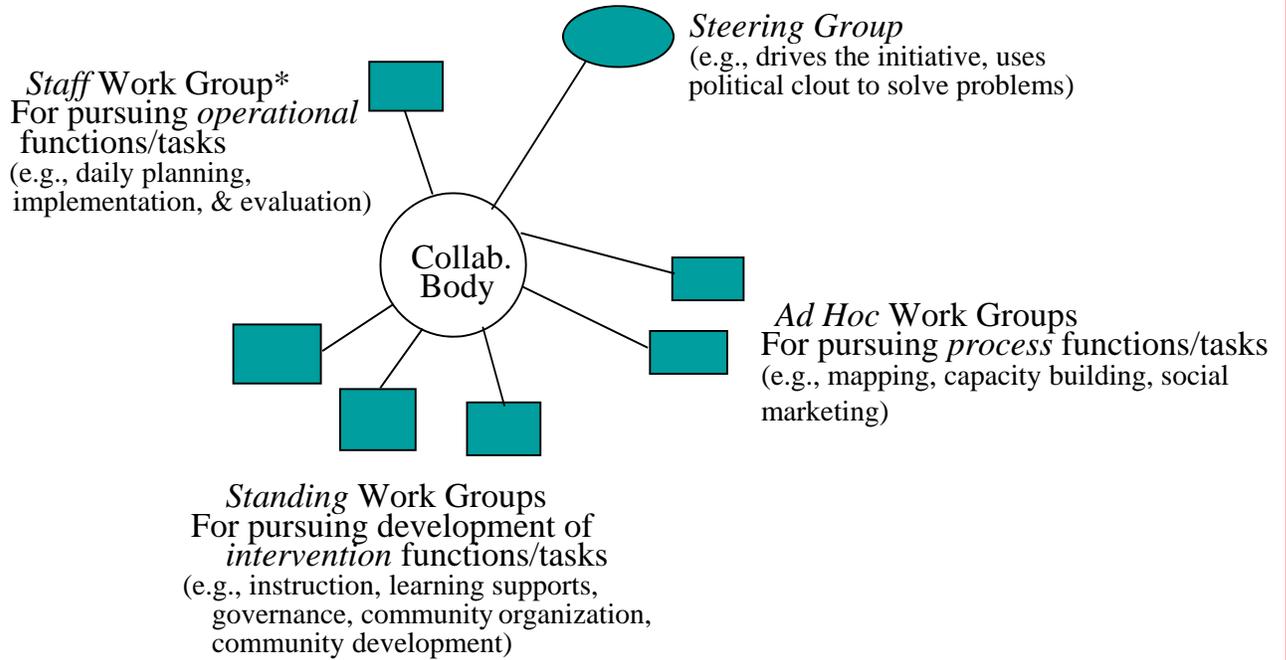
Note the need for a *Steering Group*. This team champions, guides, supports, and nurtures the process. It must consist of high level individuals who are highly motivated – not just initially but over time. The complexity of collaboration requires ongoing personalized guidance and support to operationalize the collaborative’s vision, enhance capacity, and address barriers to progress, including stakeholder anxiety, frustration, and other work-related stressors. This entails close monitoring and *immediate* follow-up to address problems. The other key mechanisms are designated *operational leaders and staff, and ad hoc and standing work groups* (e.g., resource-oriented and intervention development teams).

Locally, the focus is on connecting families and community resources usually with one school. Then, collaborative connections may encompass a cluster of schools. For example, many natural connections exist in catchment areas serving a high school and its feeder schools. The same family often has children attending all levels of schooling at the same time. Some school districts and agencies already pull together several geographically-related clusters to combine and integrate personnel and programs. In a small community, a cluster often is the school district.

*It’s relatively easy
to convene a
“collaborative” . . .
it’s developing and
maintaining
an effective
infrastructure
that’s hard to do.*

Exhibit 1

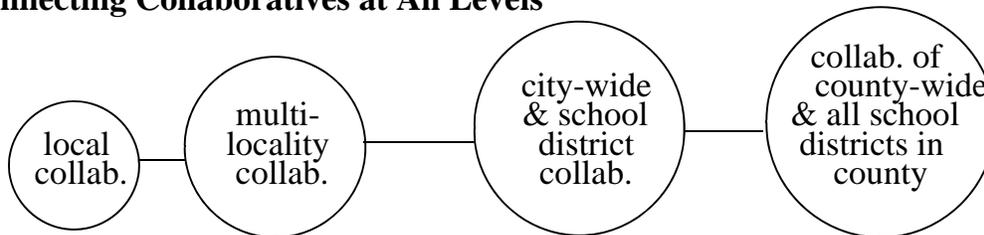
Basic Elements of a Comprehensive Collaborative Operational Infrastructure



**Staffing*
>Executive Director
>Organization Facilitator (change agent)

Who should be at the table?
>families
>schools
>communities

Connecting Collaboratives at All Levels



Several collaboratives may coalesce to increase efficiency and effectiveness and achieve economies of scale. Because adjoining localities have common concerns, they may have interventions that can use the same resources. Through coordination and sharing, redundancy can be minimized and resources can be deployed equitably and pooled to reduce costs. Toward these ends, a multilocality collaborative can help

- (1) coordinate and integrate programs serving multiple schools and neighborhoods
- (2) identify and meet common needs for stakeholder development
- (3) create linkages and enhance collaboration among schools and agencies.

Such a group can provide a broader-focused mechanism for leadership, communication, maintenance, continuum of programs and services. Multilocality collaboratives are especially attractive to community agencies that often don't have the time or personnel to link with individual schools. Finally, "systemwide" (e.g., district, city, county) mechanisms can be designed to provide support for what each locality is trying to develop.

Keep in mind that the focus on schools encompasses all institutionalized entities responsible for formal education (e.g., pre-K, elementary, secondary, higher education). The aim is to weave together a critical mass of the resources represented in these institutions with all other community resources (public and private money, facilities, human and social capital) that can be brought to the table (e.g., family members, service agencies, businesses, unions, community and economic development organizations, recreation, cultural, and youth development groups, libraries, juvenile justice, law enforcement, faith-based institutions, service clubs, media, postsecondary and vocational education institutions, among others). The political realities of local control have further expanded collaboratives to include policymakers, representatives of families, nonprofessionals, volunteers, and anyone else willing to contribute their talents and resources. And, as the collaborative develops, outreach to disenfranchised groups is important.

Finally, we need to note several factors that can undermine effective collaboration:

- Policies that mandate collaboration but do not enable the process (e.g., a failure to reconcile differences among participants with respect to the outcomes for which they are accountable; inadequate provision for braiding funds across agencies and categorical programs)
- Policies for collaboration that do not provide adequate resources and time for leadership and stakeholder training and for overcoming barriers to collaboration
- Leadership that does not establish an effective infrastructure, especially mechanisms for steering and accomplishing work/tasks on a regular, ongoing basis

Any effort to connect school, home, and community resources must embrace a wide spectrum of stakeholders

- Differences in the conditions and incentives associated with participation such as the fact that meetings usually are set during the work day which means community agency and school personnel are paid participants, while family members are expected to volunteer their time.

At the personal level, barriers mostly stem from practical deterrents, negative attitudes, and deficiencies of knowledge and skill. These vary for different stakeholders but often include problems related to work schedules, transportation, child care, communication skills, differences in organizational culture, accommodations for language and cultural differences, and so forth.

Clearly, extensive effort is involved in establishing and sustaining an effective school, home, and community collaboration. This is especially so when the aim is to address the most pressing overlapping concerns in schools, homes, and communities because such an agenda requires a comprehensive intervention approach.

About a Comprehensive Intervention Framework

A comprehensive approach encompasses a full continuum of programs and services, including efforts to promote positive development, prevent problems, respond as early-after-onset as is feasible, and offer treatment regimens/systems of care. Educational, physical and mental health, and psychosocial concerns are a major focus of such a continuum of interventions.

Pioneering efforts across the country are pursuing such a continuum and also are synthesizing and operationalizing a comprehensive component for schools clustering six arenas of intervention (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011). The six clusters focus on

- enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning (e.g., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems)
- supporting transitions (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
- increasing home and school connections
- responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises
- increasing community involvement and support (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.

The result of combining the continuum and the six arenas of intervention is a framework that captures the multifaceted concerns schools must address each day (e.g., see Adelman & Taylor, 2006a b; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008b).

Operationalizing the framework into *a comprehensive system of learning supports* requires braiding together many public and private resources. To these ends, a high priority policy commitment is required that promotes the weaving together of school, community, and home resources to support strategic development of the system. In this respect, note that one of the six intervention arenas involves increasing community involvement and support. This requires a mechanism at the school for outreaching to communities in a strategic and systematic way.

Elsewhere we have detailed the value of establishing a school based Learning Supports Resource *Team* and workgroups related to each of the six intervention arenas as a way to carry out development, implementation, and sustainability of a comprehensive system of learning supports at a school (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2005b). Similarly, we have described the importance of a Learning Supports Resource *Council* for a family of schools to work together and achieve economies of scale in pursuing a comprehensive approach (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2005c).

Lessons Learned

In developing effective collaborations, keep in mind the following lessons we learned the hard way. First, *strategic capacity building* is essential. This includes ensuring participants have the authority, training, time, resources, and ongoing support to carry out roles and functions. And, when newcomers join, well-designed procedures must be in place to bring them up to speed.

A second lesson relates to *how agreements are made*. In negotiating agreements to connect, the tendency is just to ask decision makers to sign a memorandum of understanding, rather than involving them in processes that lead to a comprehensive, informed commitment. Often, the signing is done on the basis of some personal relationship. The problem is that the signature is often treated as a ploy (e.g., to obtain extramural funding) and is more cosmetic than substantive. Substantive agreements delineate stable and sustainable *institutional working relationships*, including clear roles, responsibilities, and an institutionalized infrastructure with well-designed mechanisms for performing tasks, solving problems, and mediating conflict. Agreements based simply on personal relationships are vulnerable to the mobility that characterizes many professionals.

Third, collaborative efforts rarely live up to the initial hope in the absence of *skillfull planning, implementation, and ongoing capacity building*. For example, all general and workgroup meetings require adroit facilitation. Otherwise initial enthusiasm for the work quickly degenerates into more talk than action and a waste of time. This is particularly likely to happen when the primary emphasis is on the unfocused mandate to “collaborate,” rather than on moving an important vision and mission forward through effective working relationships and well-defined functions and tasks.

Finally, *collaboration is a developing process*. Collaboratives must be continuously nurtured, facilitated, and supported, and special attention must be given to overcoming institutional and personal barriers. A fundamental institutional barrier to school-community collaboration is the degree to which efforts to establish such connections are *marginalized* in policy and practice. The extent to which this is the case is seen when existing policy, accountability, leadership, budget, space, time schedules, and capacity-building agendas do not support efforts to use collaborative arrangements effectively and efficiently to accomplish desired results. This may simply be a matter of benign neglect. More often, it stems from a lack of understanding, commitment, and/or capability related to establishing and maintaining a potent infrastructure for working together and sharing resources.

Concluding Comments

Given dwindling resources, collaboration is essential. Schools, in particular, need to avoid parallel efforts and weave together different funding streams (e.g., general funds, compensatory and special education entitlement, safe and supportive school grants, specially funded projects). In the process, efficiency and effectiveness can be achieved by connecting families of schools, such as high schools and their feeder schools with each other and community resources.

Persistent outreach and development and maintenance of a well-designed operational infrastructure are essential for substantive school, home, and community collaboration. The success of school, home, and community collaborations is first and foremost in the hands of policy makers. A high priority policy commitment is required to develop and sustain collaboration and support the strategic convergence of school and community resources. Such a policy commitment includes revisiting current policies to reduce redundancy and redeploy allocated school and community resources that currently are being used in inefficient and ineffective ways.

There are, of course, a myriad of political and bureaucratic difficulties involved in making major institutional changes, especially with sparse financial resources. That is why a high degree of commitment and relentlessness of effort is called for in developing effective collaboration.

Remember: It's not about having a collaborative meeting . . . it's about collaborating to be effective. This involves more than meeting and talking . . . it's about working together in productive ways to strengthen students, families, neighborhoods, and schools.

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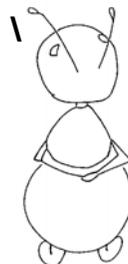
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For more references and resources, see our Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on Collaboration - School, Community, Interagency http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1201_01.htm

What do you think makes for good collaboration?



Good collaboration is when everyone agrees with me!



Center News



New Briefs

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Transitions to and from Elementary, Middle, and High School
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitionstoandfrom.pdf>

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Introducing the Idea of Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports to a New Superintendent or to One Who May Be Ready to Move Forward
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Moving Beyond the Three Tier Intervention Pyramid Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Student and Learning Supports
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The nice thing about teamwork is that you always have others on your side.
 Margaret Carty

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 Linda Taylor, Co-Director
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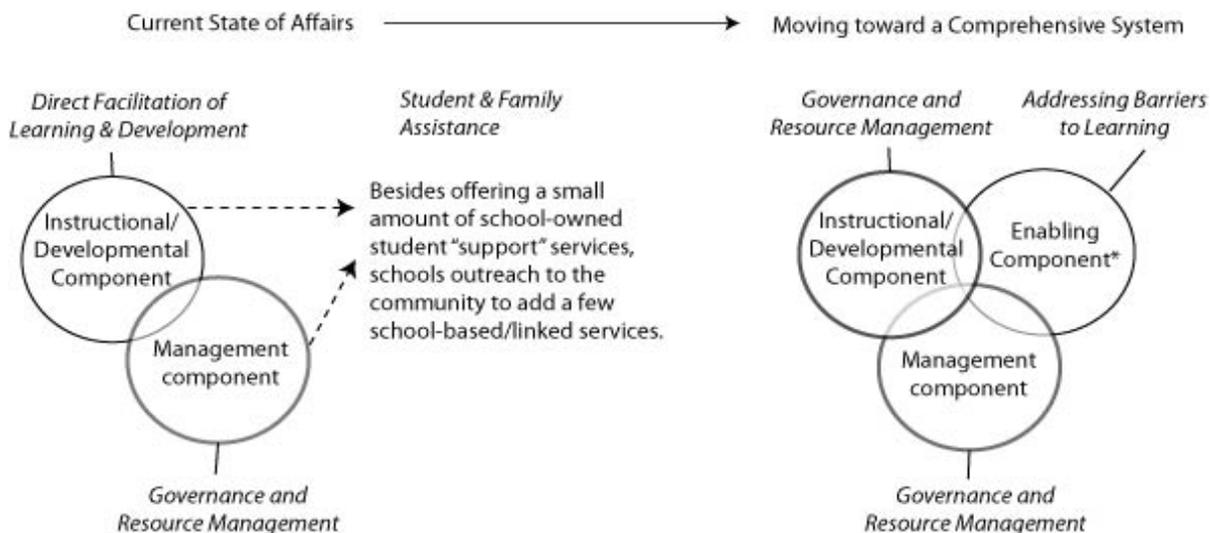
POLICY ALERT

**It's Good that Some Students Did Well this Year;
Now Let's Enable All Students to Succeed at School¹**

Current policy and plans for turning around, transforming, and continuously improving schools are too limited because they are focused mainly on improving instruction and how schools manage resources. While there are a variety of student support programs and services, they are marginalized in policy and practice, and they are pursued in piecemeal and fragmented ways. Throughout many years of school reform, little or no attention has been paid to rethinking these learning supports. This state of affairs works against ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

Policy for improving schools needs to shift from a two- to a three-component framework. The third component becomes the unifying concept and umbrella under which all resources currently expended for student and learning supports are woven together. As with the other two components, such an enabling or learning supports component must be treated in policy and practice as primary and essential in order to combat the marginalization and fragmentation of the work. Furthermore, to be effective it must be fully integrated with the other two components. Properly conceived, the component provides a blueprint and roadmap for transforming the many pieces into a comprehensive and cohesive system at all levels.

Moving to a Three Component Policy Framework for School Improvement



*The Enabling Component is designed to enable learning by addressing factors that interfere with learning, development, and teaching and with re-engaging students in classroom instruction. It is established in policy and practice as primary and essential and is developed into a comprehensive approach by weaving together school and community resources. Some venues where this comprehensive approach is adopted refer to the third component as a Learning Supports Component.

¹Excerpt from Howard S. Adelman & Linda Taylor (2011), Expanding School Improvement Policy to Better Address Barriers to Learning and Integrate Public Health Concerns, *Policy Futures in Education*, 9, 431-436. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/somestudentsdidwell.pdf>