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counting



Addressing Barriers to Learning

New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link



Vol. 19, # 1

2014: It's Time to Unify Learning Supports!

Ending Counterproductive Competition for Sparse Student & Learning Supports

Over the years, various legal mandates and growing appreciation of the many barriers to learning and teaching have given rise to a variety of initiatives, programs, and services. As a result, a great amount of activity is in play across the country.

At the same time, analyses of school improvement policy and plans underscore how far away most schools are from playing an effective role in enabling equity of opportunity. This is especially the situation in schools where a large number of students are not doing well. Most of these schools offer only bare essentials. Too many cannot even meet basic needs.

For obvious reasons, concerns have been raised about categorical funding, the proliferation of piecemeal and overspecialized interventions, and turf battles among school personnel and between such personnel and community providers offering school-linked services. Ongoing and constant advocacy and lobbying for specific and competing agenda exacerbates these problems. Too often such advocacy amounts to little more than counterproductive competition for sparse resources. And too often such advocacy contributes to maintaining the *marginalized* policy status of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

Given how many powerful economic and political forces are in pursuit of conflicting agenda for public schools, addressing these matters in policy and practice is an enormous challenge. Schools and communities clearly need to focus on how to reduce barriers that confront young people, families, and staff. At the same time, the emphasis cannot continue to be on competing for sparse resources. Counterproductive competition will not transform the unsatisfactory status quo.

Our position for schools is that advocates of limited initiatives need to embed them into a broadened vision for public education. We stress it is time to join together to fundamentally transform student and learning supports into a unified system and to develop that system into a full continuum of interventions that covers a concisely formulated set of classroom and school-wide supports. (See following article and references cited at the end.)

What is your position on this? Send your comments to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Don't Advocate for Another Initiative: Embed the Work into a Unified Component to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

From the perspective of the mission of schools, the good news is that there are many schools where the majority of students are doing just fine, and in all schools, one can find youngsters who are succeeding. The bad news is that in too many schools, particularly those serving lower income families, large numbers of students are doing poorly.¹ For example, over 1,500 high schools in the U.S. account for more than 50% of all high school dropouts. Located in areas with high poverty and often high minority populations, these schools see the typical freshman class shrink by 40% or more by the time students reach their senior year.

Besides needing to reduce dropout rates and excessive absences of students (and staff), almost every school is caught up in addressing bullying, harassment, and a variety of other neighborhood, family, school, peer, and individual factors that interfere with learning and teaching. Any combination of barriers can put a student at risk, but the higher the concentration of risk factors, the greater the number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems. And the reality is that schools cannot achieve their mission and make major improvements in the climate at a school as long as such matters are ineffectively addressed.

Emphasizing barriers to learning and teaching in no way is meant as an excuse for poor school performance. Indeed, doing so simply underscores common sense. As schools and districts move to high-quality, rigorous, grade-level standards and teaching, school and student success often will depend on addressing interfering factors and doing so in ways that result in the emergence of a safe, welcoming, supportive, and nurturing school climate.

Which barriers should schools address and which can they leave to other agencies? An answer comes from a Carnegie Task Force on Education. The task force wisely stresses that school systems cannot be responsible for meeting every need of their students, but "when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge."

In meeting the challenge, too often the tendency is to think mainly about specific problems experienced by individual students. Certainly, schools need to continue to broaden what they do about addressing individual differences and physical and mental health problems. But the complex array of factors interfering with schools achieving their mission calls for more than enhancing services for an array of separate problems. We suggest that meeting the challenge requires embedding all agenda for specific problems into the mission of schools by embracing an expanded vision for school improvement policy and practice that establishes new directions for student and learning supports.

¹ 2013 Conditions of Education -- <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/>

Expanding the Vision for School Improvement

Blueprint plans for education reform have become a trendy way to encapsulate the vision of policy leaders. For example, over the last few years, President Obama, governors, chief state school officers, local superintendents' associations, policy institutes, foundations, and business leaders have offered blueprints. Analyses indicate that the most widely discussed plans fundamentally marginalize efforts to directly address the problems experienced by students and schools.

Why? Because the blueprints and the guidelines and strategic plans they engender are based on a narrow vision that is related to a two-component framework for school improvement policy and practice. Such a narrow vision leads to ad hoc, piecemeal, and limited student and learning supports focused mostly on specific personal and interpersonal behaviors manifested as learning and behavior problems at schools.²

In marked contrast, trailblazing state departments and districts across the country are beginning to focus on new directions for student and learning supports. Given the realities of sparse resources, they are moving forward strategically by setting priorities and phasing in the systemic changes in policy and practice. This involves first unifying all student and learning supports and then, over a period of several years, developing a comprehensive and equitable system of interventions.

Starting Strategically

Our research indicates that efforts to establish and institutionalize new directions start with ensuring the work is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice. The emphasis is on:

- (1) expanding school improvement policy from a two- to a three-component framework by adding a third component to the prevailing focus on instruction and management (i.e. a component dedicated to addressing barriers to learning and teaching – see Exhibit on the next page),
- (2) operationalizing the third component as a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports,
- (3) reworking school leadership and infrastructure and the infrastructure for school-community collaboration to ensure development of the third component – with an emphasis on redeploying and weaving together existing school and community resources and taking advantage of natural opportunities at schools for addressing problems and promoting student, staff, and other stakeholder development and well-being,
- (4) ensuring establishment of effective mechanisms for systemic change, scale-up, and sustainability.³

² See, for example, the U. S. Department of Education's strategic plan for 2014-2018 – <http://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/strat/plan2014-18/draft-strategic-plan.pdf> .

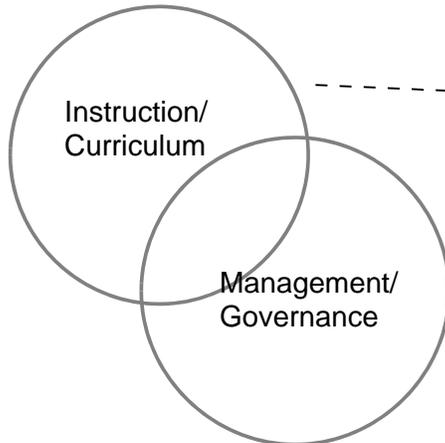
³ For more details, see the following article and the references at the end of that article.

Exhibit

Moving to a Three Component Policy Framework to Unify Student & Learning Supports

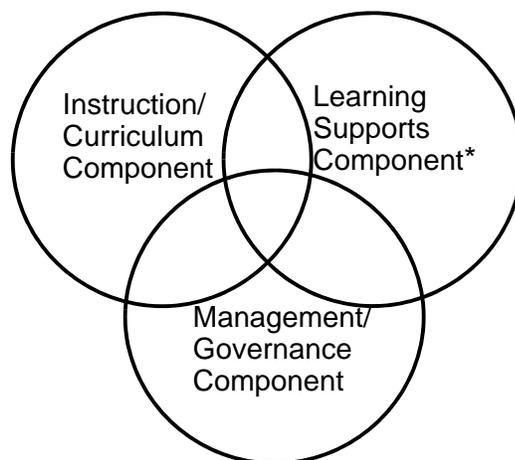
Current School Improvement Framework

Primary Emphasis



Some Student & Learning Supports
Various approaches to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students – all pursued marginally and in a piecemeal and fragmented manner*

Turning Student/Learning Supports into a Unified and Primary Third Component for School Improvement



Ending the marginalization by unifying the many fragmented pieces into this primary and essential component to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students

***Examples of Student & Learning Supports Initiatives, programs and services**

- >Bullying prevention and response
- >School-wide positive behavioral interventions
- >Response to intervention initiatives
- >Safe schools/healthy students programs
- >Full service community schools initiatives
- >Family Resource Centers
- >Coordinated school health programs
- >Specialized instructional support services
- >School based health centers
- >Dropout prevention and re-engaging disconnected students
- >Compensatory and special education interventions
- >Foster care and homeless student programs
- >And many more activities provided by student support staff

Concluding Comments

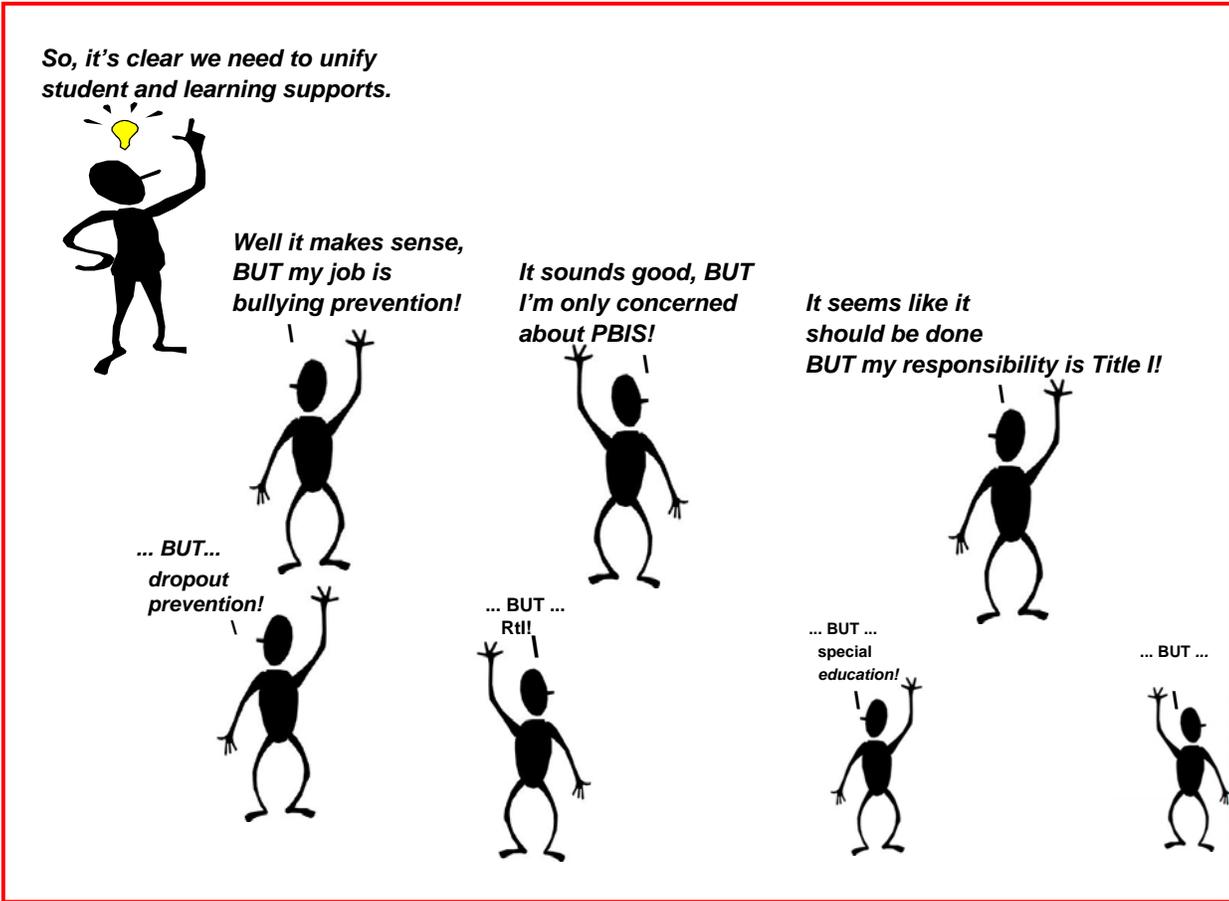
Schools and communities clearly need to focus on how to help young people, families, and staff address child and adolescent problems. At the same time, the emphasis cannot be on pursuing every designated problem as a separate initiative.

Analyses of school improvement policy and plans underscores how far away most schools are from playing an effective role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and enabling equity of opportunity. And given how many powerful economic and political forces are in pursuit of conflicting agenda for public schools, addressing these matters in policy and practice always is an enormous challenge.

With specific respect to schools, it is imperative for advocates of specific problems to embed them into a broadened vision for public education and school accountability. It is time to fundamentally transform student and learning supports into a comprehensive, coherent, and cohesive system for effectively and equitably addressing barriers to learning and re-engaging disconnected students. We suggest that such a vision fits nicely into school improvement policy and avoids the trap produced by advocating for yet another specific initiative or yet another "reform" that mainly tinkers with what schools are doing.

In general, development of a unified, comprehensive, systemic approach is intended to increase impact, reduce the number of individuals who require specialized supports, and enhance cost-effectiveness. This encompasses a focus on promoting and protecting the well-being of teachers and other school staff so that they can do more to promote and protect the well-being of students. For individual students, this means preventing and minimizing the impact of as many problems as feasible and doing so in ways that equitably maximize school engagement, productive learning, and positive development. For the school and community as a whole, the intent is to contribute to a safe, healthy, nurturing environment characterized by respect for differences, trust, caring, support, social justice, protection of personal rights, and expectations that yield good outcomes. All this is essential in facilitating the emergence of a humane school climate and establishing a comprehensive community school.

It is not enough for leaders to *reiterate* the need to address child and adolescent problems, focus on the total child, ensure equity of opportunity, have safe and drug free schools, reduce the achievement gap, increase graduation rates, ensure personal rights, create humane and community schools, and all the other ideals set forth for public education and public health. Ideals that are proposed must be understood as qualities that emerge from strategic actions. That is, healthy children, increasingly positive school climates, community schools, world-class outcomes, etc. emerge from a well-conceived, big-picture vision and effective capacity building – strategically pursued every day with common sense, wisdom, commitment, and perseverance.



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It's Starting to Happen!

Across the country efforts have begun to unify all student and learning supports into a third primary and essential component for school improvement with the intent of evolving a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. The process encompasses both weaving together school resources and outreaching to invite community resources to help fill critical gaps.

Examples include:

- >Alabama statewide initiative – see news release at <https://docs.alsde.edu/documents/55/Newsreleases2013/Comprehensive%20System%20of%20Learning%20Supports%20Press%20Release%207%2031%2013.pdf>
- >Gainesville (GA) City School District – see case study at <http://www1.gcssk12.net/images/shared/other/RFL-S.png>
- >La Crosse (WI) School District – see video at http://youtu.be/-QmhekE7__k

For more, see *Where's It Happening? Trailblazing and Pioneering Initiatives* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>

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Five Essential Elements of a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

It is clear that developing a *Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports* is a complex, multi-year process. Our Center has delineated the specific nature and scope of the system and processes for getting from a fragmented and marginalized set of student and learning supports to a unified and comprehensive system (see the references at the end of this article and the aids in the Center's *System Change Toolkit* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>).

In doing so, we have stressed that such a system needs to be *adapted* to localities.

While reasonable adaptation is wise, care must be taken not to eliminate elements that are essential to a fundamental transformation of how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. Unfortunately, a constant problem for school improvement efforts is the tendency for some to adopt the terminology and not the substance of system transformation.

To counter this tendency, here are five essential elements that should be the focus of any place that indicates it is developing a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.

(1) A three component policy for schools

To enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school, schools need to be able to *directly* address barriers to learning and teaching. This requires elevating such efforts so that they are a third primary and essential component for school improvement (see the Exhibit on page 4). The third component might be called a learning supports component or a component to address barriers to learning and teaching or something comparable. (For more discussion of this element, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/blueprint.pdf> .)

The policy must be translated into a *design document* and *strategic plan* that ensures learning supports are unified and then developed into a comprehensive system that provides supportive interventions in classrooms and school-wide. The design and strategic plans for the third component must be fully integrated with the strategic plans for improving instruction and management at schools.*

Obviously, it is desirable that the three component policy be adopted at all levels (SEA, LEA, and schools). However, most schools can move forward once their district has enacted such a policy.

(2) A transformative intervention framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching

A unified and comprehensive intervention framework combines both an integrated and systemic continuum of school and community intervention (delineated as levels)** *and* organized content consisting of a multifaceted and cohesive set of five to seven arenas. (See the prototype presented in the practice guide at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essentials.pdf>).

*Re. examples of policy statements and design and strategic planning, see Sections A and B of the Center's *System Change Toolkit* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm> .

**The continuum is designed to (a) promote positive development and prevent problems, (b) intervene as early after the onset of problems as is feasible, and (c) provide special assistance for severe and chronic problems. This continuum *must not* be presented as identical to the tiers or pyramid currently emphasized in relation to Response to Intervention (RTI) and behavioral initiatives.

(3) An operational infrastructure dedicated to the third component

To ensure effective daily functioning and continuous development and improvement in keeping with the design and strategic plan, there must be

- an administrative leader for the learning supports component (e.g., associate superintendent, assistant principal)
- a learning supports leadership team (e.g., a resource-oriented, system development team)
- work groups to carry out specific tasks.

(See prototype for reworking operational infrastructure presented in the practice guide at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essentials.pdf>).

The leader's job description must be revised to reflect the new responsibilities and accountabilities and to ensure this leader is at administrative planning and decision making tables so that component development is a regular part of the agenda.

Along with the administrative leader, a learning supports leadership team clarifies, analyzes, identifies priorities, recommends resource redeployment, and establishes and guides workgroups for developing each facet of the component over a period of several years.

(For job and team descriptions, see Section B of the Center's *System Change Toolkit* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm> .)

(4) Continuous capacity building (especially professional development)

Capacity building plans and their implementation must include a specific focus on development of the unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. Professional development must provide on-the-job opportunities and special times focused specifically on enhancing the capability of those directly involved in the learning supports component. Professional development of teachers, administrators, other staff and volunteers, and community stakeholders must also include an emphasis on learning about how best to address barriers to learning and teaching. After general professional development to introduce new directions, the emphasis is on personalizing learning.

(For capacity building resources, see Sections B and C of the Center's *System Change Toolkit* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm> .)

(5) Monitoring for improvement and accountability

Finally, ongoing development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports requires (a) continuous monitoring all factors that facilitate and hinder progress and (b) ensuring actions are taken to deal with interfering factors and continuing to enhance facilitation.

As significant progress is made in developing the system, the monitoring expands to evaluate the impact on student outcomes that are *direct indicators* of the effectiveness of learning supports (e.g., increased attendance, reduced misbehavior, improved learning).

(See *Common Core Standards for a Learning Supports Component* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/commcore.pdf> .
This resource includes indicators for monitoring, evaluation, and accountability).

Suggested for Further Reading

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006). *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Alabama State Department of Education (2013). *A unified and comprehensive system of learning supports for Alabama students*. Montgomery, AL: Author.

<https://docs.alsde.edu/documents/901/ALDOEDesignDocument.pdf>

Center for Mental Health in Schools (2005). *Another initiative? Where does it fit? A unifying framework and an integrated infrastructure for schools to address barriers to learning and promote healthy development*. Los Angeles: Author.

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infrastructure/anotherinitiative-exec.pdf>

Center for Mental Health in Schools (2012). *Establishing a comprehensive system of learning supports at a school: Seven steps for principals and their staff*. Los Angeles: Author.

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf> .

Center for Mental Health in Schools (2012). *Blueprints for education reform: Have you analyzed the architects' vision?*. Los Angeles: Author. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/blueprint.pdf>

Gainesville City Schools (2012). *Rebuilding for learning: Addressing barriers for learning and teaching and re-engaging students*. New York: Scholastic and EDC.

<http://www1.gcssk12.net/images/shared/other/rebuildingforlearning.pdf>

Taylor, L., & Adelman, H.S. (2000). Toward ending the marginalization of mental health in schools. *Journal of School Health*, 70, 210-215.

Also see the system building system change toolkit for *Transforming Student Supports into a Unified & Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* on the website of the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA -

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>



2014 – CALL TO ACTION CAMPAIGN IT'S TIME TO UNIFY STUDENT & LEARNING SUPPORTS!

All signs point to now being the time for actions that can produce fundamental changes related to developing unified and comprehensive systems for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

We are recommending that everyone concerned pursue the following courses of action to move things forward in the coming months:

- Participate at school improvement decision making and planning tables to ensure there is a sophisticated focus on new directions for developing a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.
- Work for collaboration among groups recommending changes in education policy
- Communicate with Congress about including a focus on unifying and developing a comprehensive system of learning supports as a major facet in reauthorizing the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*.
- Focus the attention of governors, mayors, superintendents, principals, and other leaders on the need to help schools unify and develop a comprehensive system of learning supports.

Outreach Campaign

As part of the *National Initiative for New Directions for Student and Learning Supports*, the Center has developed a nationwide outreach campaign. The outreach is designed to build awareness regarding:

- Why it is imperative to pursue New Directions for Student Support
- Ways to Rethink Use of Resources (Programs, Personnel, etc.)

Special mailings are being sent to superintendents, Title I coordinators, student support directors, special education directors, etc. at state and district levels across the country.

If you want anyone sent the info, send email addresses to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Some Strategic Steps You Can Take Now

(1) Speak out, create awareness, and advocate

- share information about the need for new directions for student and learning supports with others who are in a position to effect systemic changes (e.g., share *What is a Comprehensive Approach to Student Supports?* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/whatiscomp.pdf>)
- let us know who to send information.

(2) Sign-up for the *District and State Collaborative Network for Developing Comprehensive Systems for Learning Support* (send to adelman@psych.ucla.edu)

- This collaborative network is intended to become a linking mechanism for those who want to take a leadership role in moving the field in new directions.

- (3) Share information with others (directly and/or through us)
- about effective practices
 - lessons learned and data on progress
 - about the costs of continuing to do business as usual
- (4) Send in your ideas
- about enlisting other centers, associations, journals, and various media to showcase efforts to move in new directions
 - about roles you and others can play in advancing this initiative
 - about how to kick-start some activity in your locale.
- (5) Use every window of opportunity to be a catalyst for fundamental systemic changes that can enhance the effectiveness of supports for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.
- Work with school improvement leaders to ensure a nonmarginalized focus on developing a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.
 - Work with local, state, and national professional organizations to ensure they take a leadership role in unifying learning supports.
 - Guide leaders to the aids in the *Center System Change Toolkit for Transforming Student Supports into a Unified & Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm> (e.g., in Section B, see the guides on steps for (a) principals and their staff <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf>, (b) for superintendents <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/superstart.pdf>, and (c) state education agencies <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/firststeps.pdf>).
- (6) Send us all information about what you see happening to move learning supports forward as a unified and nonmarginalized system so we can let others know.

If you are interested in learning more, please contact: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Remember: Truly ensuring equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond requires enlightened leadership at all levels to transform the status quo. And, it will take committed people, working together, to establish and fully unify and develop comprehensive learning support systems as part of every school improvement initiative.



AND THIS IS THE YEAR!!!!

Center Update



Latest Center Resources

Guidance Notes:

- > *Five Essential Elements of a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essentials.pdf>

Information Resource:

- > *Child and Adolescent MH Therapy and Schools: Annotated outline focused on key concerns* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolsmhservices.pdf>
- > Excerpts from Sarah Stachowiak *Pathways for Change: 10 Theories to Inform Advocacy and Policy Change Efforts* (added to Diffusion of Innovations series) <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/10changetheories.pdf>

Power Point Presentation:

- > *15 minute Introduction to New Directions for Student and Learning Supports* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/powerpoint/briefintroslices.ppt>

Also – go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> and click on *What's New*

Initiative for New Directions for Student & Learning Supports

A major facet of the Center's work is the *National Initiative for New Directions for Learning Supports* – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ninhome.htm>.

The aim is to advance the field by increasing the attention of school improvement policy makers to rethinking student and learning supports.

As part of the initiative, each month we compile information about what states, districts, and schools are doing related to moving in new directions for student and learning supports. This information is sent to participants in the *District and State Collaborative Network for Developing Comprehensive Systems for Learning Supports*. If you are not a member of this network, you can access the update on the network's page on our website –

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/network/network.html>

If you would like to be included as a participant in this collaborative network, send an email to ltaylor@ucla.edu

**LET US KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING TO MOVE LEARNING SUPPORTS FORWARD
AS A UNIFIED AND NONMARGINALIZED SYSTEM**

Want resources? Need technical assistance?

Use our website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>
or contact us – E-mail: smhp@ucla.edu or Ph: (310) 825-3634

Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (*ENEWS*)?
Or our weekly *Practitioners' Interchange*?
Then, send your request to smhp@ucla.edu

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

Center Staff:

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