Moving Forward

Addressing Barriers
to Learning Vol. 23, #1

SPECIAL EDITION

Evolving School Improvement Plans to Better Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Question: *What's an innovative way to improve how all schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students?*

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) recognizes that significant numbers of students require supports to successfully meet challenging state academic standards. The legislation clearly underscores that student and learning supports permeate efforts to enable every student to succeed.

Unfortunately, the act muddies the nature and scope of such supports by scattering references to them throughout the various Titles, Parts, Subparts, and Sections. By addressing barriers to learning and teaching in a piecemeal and mostly indirect manner, ESSA conveys a fragmented picture and a lack of coherence with respect to essential supports. This perpetuates long-standing problems related to improving student/learning supports (e.g., fragmented planning and implementation, marginalization, counterproductive competition for sparse resources).

ESSA's devolution of power to states and districts brings challenges and opportunities. One opportunity is to end the existing fragmented and marginalized approach schools use in dealing with factors interfering with student success and equity of opportunity. In this respect, states and districts will need to move beyond the limitations of prevailing school improvement plans and begin the process of innovatively evolving the way schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. We suggest this means transforming student/learning supports and doing so in all schools and not just those designated for targeted support and improvement.

With a view to aiding efforts to evolve school improvement plans, we have developed prototypes and guides detailing ways to transform student/learning supports. Such a transformation involves:

(1) *Adopting a three component framework for school improvement.* This means evolving the current two component emphasis on instruction and management/governance to establish a third component that unifies efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

(2) *Planning the development of the third component (over several years) into a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports.* Such a component focuses on whole child development and enhancing equity of opportunity for all students in-classrooms and schoolwide.

While there is widespread appreciation of the need for a continuum of interventions, just adapting the popular version of MTSS (i.e., multi-tiered student supports) is neither innovative nor sufficient. The protype for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports stresses that the third component involves *two* major facets:

(A) *A continuum of intervention that expands what is referred to in ESSA as a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS).* As contrasted to the limited way MTSS usually is portrayed, the need is to develop a continuum of interventions as an *integrated set of subsystems* for

- promoting healthy social-emotional development and preventing problems
- responding quickly when problems arise
- contributing effectively to helping with severe and chronic problems.

(B) *A cohesive and coherent approach that coalesces programs, services, and initiatives*. Rather than just listing programs and services at each level of the continuum, it is necessary also to group and categorize the various activities into a circumscribed set of arenas reflecting the *content purpose* of the interventions. In doing so, besides expanding schoolwide supports, a core concern is enhancing learning supports in the classroom. Our research has established six arenas of student/learning supports that readily map onto the continuum (see Exhibit 1).

In keeping with public education and public health perspectives, a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports focuses on providing physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports in the classroom and schoolwide to enable learning and engagement. **Note that such a system not only addresses interfering factors, it stresses the (re)engagement of students in classroom instruction. As process and outcome considerations, the system stresses personalizing instruction, an enhanced focus on intrinsic motivation along with a reduced emphasis on extrinsic reinforcers, and special assistance in and outside the classroom.**

> For the most recent detailed presentation of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports and related resource references, see H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor, (2017). *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide.* This resource can be accessed at no cost from the Center's homepage at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/ .

(3) **As a final planning step,** *formulate the processes for systemic change, scale-up, and sustainability in a strategic and effectively resourced manner.* Key here is a significant reworking of the leadership operational infrastructure. For guidance on these matters, see

> >*Education Leaders' Guide to Transforming Student/Learning Supports –*
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transguide.pdf

or

> >*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (just published by Cognella)
> https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html

Feel free to let us know if you want us to help.
Contact us at Ltaylor@ucla.edu or adelman@psych.ucla.edu

Three approaches to school improvement planning

Let's just find a way out of this mess!

Let's target some low hanging fruit to show some quick progress!

Let's move forward with major innovations that really address barriers to learning and teaching and enhance equity of opportunity for all students!

Exhibit 1. Six Content Arenas of a Learning Supports Component

Research over many years stresses that the content of student and learning supports clusters usefully into six arenas. (We think of these arenas as the curriculum of learning supports.)

(1) *Classroom-based learning supports*. The aim is to enhance strategies in regular classroom to enable learning (e.g., working collaboratively with other teachers and student support staff to ensure instruction is personalized with an emphasis on enhancing intrinsic motivation for all students and especially those manifesting mild-moderate learning and behavior problems; re-engaging those who have become disengaged from learning at school; providing learning accommodations and supports as necessary; using response to intervention in applying special assistance; addressing external barriers with a focus on prevention and early intervening).

(2) *Support for transitions*. The aim is to support students and families as they negotiate the many transition challenges related to schooling (e.g., hurdles encountered during school and grade changes, daily transitions, program transitions, accessing supports, and so forth).

(3) *Home connections and engagement with school*. The aim is to address barriers to home involvement (e..g., help those in the home enhance supports for their children, strengthen home and school communication, increase home support of the school).

(4) *Community involvement and collaborative engagement*. (e.g., outreach to develop greater community connection and support from a wide range of entities, including enhanced use of volunteers and other community resources, establishing a school-community collaborative)

(5) *Crisis response and prevention.* The aim is to effectively handle and, as feasible, prevent school and personal crises (e.g., preparing for emergencies, implementing plans when an event occurs, countering the impact of traumatic events, implementing prevention strategies; creating a caring and safe learning environment)

(6) *Student and family special assistance.* The aim is to facilitate student and family access to special assistance (including specialized services on- and off-campus) as needed.

The six arenas:

- unify student and learning supports by grouping the many fragmented approaches experienced at school in ways that reduce responding to overlapping problems with separate and sometimes redundant interventions

- address barriers to learning and teaching through improving personalized instruction, increasing accommodations, and providing in-classroom supports and special assistance as soon as problems arise

- enhance the focus on motivational considerations with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation as it relates to individual readiness and ongoing involvement and with the intent of fostering intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome

- add specialized remediation, treatment, and rehabilitation as necessary, but only as necessary.

A fuller sense of each of these arenas is provided in the set of self-study surveys online at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/surveys/set1.pdf .

Updates on Advancing Efforts to Transform Student & Learning Supports

As we learn about places that are making significant systemic changes to evolve how they address barriers to learning and teaching, we add the information and lessons learned to our website section on *Where's it Happening?* – see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm . Recent additions include the following:

• Presentations at the National Dropout Prevention Conference in October 2017 –
  https://www.dropbox.com/s/b63djlq6e2tbrc7/NDPNC_CA_Program-2017.pdf?dl=0

  >*Read, Learn, Succeed: A School-community Initiative for Early Learning Foundations* – Describes the United Way, Gainesville-Hall County Schools' initiative, applying UCLA's Unified System of Learning Supports.

  >*A Systemic Approach: Structuring School Improvement to Meet The Needs of a Diverse Group of Learners* – Describes processes for implementing a systemic approach.

• A special webinar sponsored by the National Dropout Prevention Center

  >*Ensuring All Students Succeed: The Imperative for a Learning Supports Framework*
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYDg4alT1Dk

• Resources cited as part of the webinar:

  >*Learning Supports Pathway: An Integrated Model of School Improvement*
    http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Learning_Supports_Pathway_Overview_11-17-Solutions-Resource.pdf

  >*The Alabama State Department of Education's Learning Supports Initiative :*
   A Compendium of Practice & Findings
    http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Alabama_DOE_LS_Compendium_11-17-Solutions-Resource.pdf

  >*Using a Unified System of Learning Supports to Boost High School Completion*
    (a National Dropout Prevention Specialist Certification Project)
    http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Merrianne.Dyer_.NDPS_.pdf

• Article about Sumter School District in South Carolina's School Administrators *Resource*

  >*Leading* by way of alignment: Building a comprehensive and unified system of supports
   (pages 28-32) – http://www.scasa.org//Files/Magazine%20-%20Final%20copy.pdf

• From a report on the progress by Louisiana's Grant Parish School Board:

  The Grant Parish school district continues our quest to build a system of Comprehensive Learning Supports that supports the diverse needs of our rural student population. ... Because Grant Parish realizes the Comprehensive Learning Supports framework is an effective vehicle for driving learning development that builds a culture of continuous improvement, we continue to strive to improve in all aspects of learning supports.

• Presentation at the November 2017 joint conference of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees and Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents
  http://www.masc.org/events-and-conferences/annual-joint-conference/2017

  Learning Supports Pathway: An Integrated Model for School Improvement. Every school leader wants to help students reach their full potential. Because instruction alone is not a powerful enough intervention to help all students succeed, schools must provide a wide range of learning supports that are coupled with effective instruction. Scholastic Education discussed the Learning Supports Framework – an integrated model of school improvement. School leaders learned about strategies and examples of success, that address the barriers to learning. Positive results in graduation rates, decrease in disciplinary actions, and improved attendance were highlighted.

- From the San Juan Unified School District (CA):
  https://www.sanjuan.edu/Page/44367

Developing Learning Supports Teams (LST). In alignment with San Juan Unified School District's Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), Learning Supports Teams training and coaching is available to all interested schools in the district. As of 2017-18, 23 SJUSD school sites have participated in LST training. *What is a Learning Supports Team?* Most schools have teams that focus on individual student issues (e.g., a Student Study Team - SST, a Student Intervention Team). These teams tend to focus on such activities as case management, triage and referral. In contrast to this case-by-case focus, a Learning Supports Team (LST) can take responsibility for enhancing the use of all resources available to the school for addressing barriers to student learning. Barriers to learning interfere with students' ability to participate effectively and benefit from classroom instruction. The work of an LST includes analyzing school site data, mapping how existing resources are deployed and clarifying how they can be used to build a comprehensive and cohesive approach to eliminating barriers to student learning. A Learning Supports Team is comprised of invested individuals who work collaboratively to address barriers to student learning (e.g., Principal or Vice Principal, School Psychologist, Counselor, School Nurse, School Social Worker, Behaviorist, Special education teacher, Parents, Students and Community Members)

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Scholastic, Inc. on the Move to Transform Student/learning Supports

As can be seen from the presentations highlighted above, Scholastic Inc. has adopted the Center's work on transforming student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Initially, we worked with Scholastic on their *Rebuilding for Learning* initiative. Scholastic conceived that initiative as a way to provide support for Gulf Coast schools after the 2005 hurricanes. However, during Scholastic's initial research for the initiative, it became obvious that Gulf Coast districts were not the only ones facing serious "learning infrastructure" problems impeding teaching and learning. Thus, Scholastic reached out to our Center at UCLA to expand the scope of the work to focus on enabling all children to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.
See http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/learningsupports/index.htm
See http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/rebuild/rebuilding2.htm .

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Note: The indication of an integrated model for school improvement refers to the full integration of a component to address barriers to learning and teaching into school improvement policy and practice (i.e., ending the marginalization of student/learning supports). Also note that the work underway goes well beyond the limited multitier framework (widely referred to as a multitier system of supports or MTSS).

Who Else is Working to Transform Student/learning Supports?

We have been following with great interest your work on Transforming Student and Learning Supports. I happened upon it first. I shared a few articles with my Superintendent and she made them mandated reading and points of discussion for our Principals' meetings. (from a principal)

As you may know, our Center has been facilitating the National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports.* The initiative's recent Call to Action has stimulated inquiries to us about how school districts, state departments of education, and leadership organizations are pursuing the opportunity to transform the way schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

In response, we are in the process of preparing a report for wide circulation about this matter. Our intent is to analyze what leaders across the country indicate about how to transform student and learning supports as a key facet in enhancing students' equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond. We will connect the analysis to our previous reports on ESSA and addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

> **We very much want to account for a wide-range of perspectives on this critical facet of school improvement. To this end, we are asking you to direct us to any online material or send us copies of what is available from school districts, state departments of education, and leadership organizations you know about that are relevant to this set of concerns.**
> **Please send the information to us at Ltaylor@ucla.edu .**

And if you know of anyone who is thinking about increasing the capacity of a district or school with respect to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student supports, let them know we can help.

*For more on the **National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports**, go to http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html

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Perry County, Alabama faces the challenge of rural isolation, unemployment, and poverty. Of the 1,089 students in Perry County, 100% qualify for free-reduced lunch, 99% are African American, and 70% of children live in a home with a single, female parent. After analyzing their data, the district identified their main barriers to learning as chronic absences for approximately 20% of their students, the resulting impact that absenteeism had on their graduation rate, and the decline in both fiscal and human resources. Perry County used the learning supports framework professional learning opportunity to focus on improving attendance and for analyzing and evaluating existing programs and expenditures. Under the leadership of the School Improvement and Learning Supports Specialist, the district and school learning supports teams developed strategies to focus on students who were chronically absent. Before the learning supports framework use, absenteeism was addressed by a letter to parents and the potential for legal action. After the learning supports framework was applied, the district focused on prevention by developing positive relationships with the families, regular communication to encourage and support, and finding the root causes of absenteeism and mitigating the circumstances.

Through the work of the learning supports framework, Perry County reduced the number of absences from 20,897 in the 2012-2013 school year to 16,803 in the 2013-2014 school year. Since 2014, Perry County has exceeded a 95% attendance rate. The graduation rate has also improved from 89% in 2012 to 95% in 2015.

Reported by Scholastic: http://www.dianaerskine.com/scholastic/20170125_TSO/learningsupports-v2.html

Two Cautionary Notes

What Will It Take To Close The Opportunity Gap? Ultimately, the opportunity gap ... will not be closed by a set of programs and initiatives that benefit some individuals but do not have a larger scale, collective impact. ... The solution is not technical. It's not about data. It is about fundamental change at the social, political and cultural levels.

Warren Simmons, Executive Director (2014)
Annenberg Institute for School Reform

About Piecemeal Approaches

As everyone involved with improving schools knows, the only measures that counted under the No Child Left Behind Act were achievement test scores. Now under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) states are required to incorporate at least one nonacademic indicator into their accountability systems. This is an explicit recognition that more than achievement scores are relevant and implicity that more is needed than instructional improvements.

Not surprisingly, many places are choosing attendance as their "nonacademic" indicator. The good news is that this will lead to a greater appreciation of the reasons for chronic absenteeism and what is required to address this barrier to learning and teaching. The bad news is that narrow efforts primarily focused on improving attendance to meet accountability demands will lead to increasing already overly fragmented interventions to deal with learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Advocacy for doing more about attendance joins advocacy for doing more about matters such as violence at schools, bullying, dropouts, the achievement gap, etc. Schools are constantly confronted with requests and mandates for another initiative (e.g., another pilot project, another program). Most schools are stretched thin by the many programs already underway. (A common reaction of administrators is: Enough - we can't take on another thing! Nevertheless, when accountability is involved and when extramural funds are in the offing, special initiatives burgeon.

While special initiatives to address a specific problem in schools usually are well-intentioned, ad hoc additions can have pernicious effects on school improvement. For example: a new initiative often reduces attention to other important concerns – especially when budgets are tight; many such initiatives are keyed to a relatively few students; projects funded extramurally tend to be short-lived; piecemeal policies and practices further fragment what is already a too scattered approach to ameliorating problems. Of greatest consequence, however, is that this type of tinkering exacerbates the ongoing marginalization of efforts to make fundamental systemic changes in how student and learning supports are provided.

ESSA provides opportunities for schools to enhance equity of opportunity by unifying and then developing a comprehensive and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students and families. Such a system is essential for ending the fragmentation and marginalization of student and learning supports that is found in every school. Such a system is a fundamental component in increasing collaboration among teachers and support staff, closing gaps in achievement and graduation rates, enhancing post-secondary readiness, fostering positive school-community relationships, and promoting a positive school climate.

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When groups of advocates effectively lobby for a program or special initiative, the trend is for policy makers to respond in an ad hoc, piecemeal manner. This approach to improving schools generates program after program and special initiative upon special initiative. And, despite good intentions, such activity works against the type of fundamental system transformation needed to enhance equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond, as well as generating other pernicious effects. This is of particular concern in districts that predominantly serve economically disadvantaged families where most special initiatives end up helping relatively few students.

From: *Piecemeal Policy Advocacy for Improving Schools Amounts to Tinkering and Works Against Fundamental System Transformation*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/tinkering.pdf

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About Settling for an Integrated Services Initiative

Those who want to better coordinate and integrate supports for students have long been concerned about the poor linkages between communities and schools and within schools. (Early concern was seen in the human service integration movement of the 1960s.)

From an intervention perspective, it is evident that dealing with multiple, interrelated concerns, such as poverty, healthy and whole child development, education, violence, crime, safety, housing, and employment requires multiple and interrelated solutions. Interrelated solutions require various forms of collaboration. Thus, schools, homes, and communities must work together in pursuing shared goals related to the general well-being of the young and society.

Over the last 30 years, the fragmentation of community and school practices for supporting families and their children has been the focus of many initiatives and policy reports. These have generated terms such as school-linked services, integrated services, one-stop shopping, wraparound services, seamless service delivery, coordinated school health, co-location of services, integrated student supports, full-service schools, systems of care, and more.

Referencing the Every Student Succeeds Act, a report currently being circulated stresses the term "Integrated Student Supports" and advocates for the widespread adoption of such initiatives. While most of the discussion of integrated student supports is well-intentioned, the program examples most frequently cited do little to address fundamental concerns that arise in efforts to integrate school, family, and community resources into school improvement policy and practice. As a result, the approach as advocated has little chance of significantly enhancing equity of opportunity for students across the country. Moreover, as practiced, serious unintended negative consequences have been observed with respect to policy, intervention design, and system change.

From the perspective of school improvement, dealing with these concerns is essential to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students and their families. Our work stresses that initiatives to integrate community resources into the daily operation of schools need to be embedded into efforts to transform student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that is a primary component of school improvement policy.

We have addressed these matters in various Center reports and resources over many years. In 2014, we specifically highlighted concerns about the advocacy for "Integrated Student Services" in a set of policy notes entitled: *Integrated Student Supports and Equity: What's Not Being Discussed?* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/integpolicy.pdf).

Also see: *Moving Beyond the Concept of Integrated Student Supports –* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/movingbeyond.pdf).

Since 2015, the types of transformative policy, intervention design, and systemic changes that need to be implemented are being pursued as part of the National Initiative to Transform Student and Learning Supports (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html). And we have highlighted the work in two recent books:

> >*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* (2017). This resource can be accessed at no cost from the Center's homepage at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/

> >*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (just published by Cognella) https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html

Places where efforts are being made to implement such a system are highlighted on our Center's website in a section entitled *Where's it Happening? – Trailblazing and Pioneering Initiatives*

(http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm). Of particular note is the work currently underway in Alabama where the state education agency has developed a design for a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports and has begun implementation in over 100 districts. (see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/aladesign.pdf).

It is also noteworthy that Scholastic Inc. has adopted the Center's work on transforming student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.
(See http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/learningsupports/index.htm)

Don't Stop with an Integrated Student Supports (ISS) Initiative!

Integrated Student Supports initiatives need to be embedded into a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports

All efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching need to be transformed into a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports

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Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights; transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to enabling equity of opportunity, promoting whole child development, and enhancing school climate.
      National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students" But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.
      Carnegie Task Force on Education

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Want resources? Need technical assistance? Coaching?
Use our website: http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu
or contact us – E-mail: Ltaylor@ucla.edu
Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter *(ENEWS)?*
Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange?*
Send requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu
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*The Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports is part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA.

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

Center Assistance for
Transforming Student/Learning Supports

I t is clear from the responses to the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* that many places are ready to move forward.

And, districts and schools have e-mailed us wanting to know more about what direct assistance our Center can provide.

Here's How We Can Directly Help in Making it Happen:

We know that transforming student and learning supports is challenging (especially with everything else that has to be done on most days). Our hope has always been that, given their sparse resources, state departments, districts, and schools will avail themselves of the free and easily accessible resources we have developed to guide efforts to transform student and learning supports.

In addition, with a view to supporting state and local efforts in developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports, the Center offers free mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance by email and phone to teams that are moving this work forward. Those making such systemic changes have found it particularly helpful when we work with them in preparing a design document and strategic plan that integrates the transformation into their existing school improvement plans.

For those seeking our no cost coaching and technical assistance, we find the best way to start is to have an initial conference call with key leadership and then schedule follow-up exchanges with any and all who are working on the transformation. *In preparation for the first call, we suggest the following:*

(1) read Part I in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports ...*
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/bookrev.pdf

(2) as a supplement to the reading, look at the brief introductory webinar at
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/powerpoint/briefintroslidesrec.pptx
        and the accompanying handouts at
            http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/intropphandouts.pdf

(3) browse the resources compiled in our System Change Toolkit
            http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm

(4) see *Relaunching Student and Learning Supports* –
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/relaunch.pdf

and email us with items that need immediate discussion.

If you're ready to move forward, let us know by sending an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu