

Addressing Barriers to Learning

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... the Center's quarterly e-journal*

Now's the time to recognize the limitations of ESSA planning and take action!

Accelerating school improvement in 2019 in ways that substantively enhances equity of opportunity requires evolving current ESSA plans. In this issue, we reproduce edited excerpts from our Center's analyses that highlight the necessity of escaping prevailing thinking and the type of new directions that are needed.

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School Improvement, School Transformation – Some Straight Talk

As has been the case for some time, David Berliner clearly stresses the daunting realities for efforts to improve schooling outcomes of students growing up in poverty:

It's neither this nation's teachers nor its curriculum that impede the achievement of our children. ... So many of [the] problems of American education have their start in the tracking of America's children — but not necessarily by their schools! Our children are tracked into different neighborhoods on the basis of their family's income, ethnicity, and race. This is where our school problems begin. We seem blind to the fact that housing policies that promote that kind of segregation are educational policies, as well. ... The neighborhood school in a society with an apartheid-lite housing policy is killing us! ... These realities of contemporary American life have powerful effects on schooling in America. For example, I can predict quite accurately the percentage of kids that score at certain levels on standardized tests by knowing characteristics of the families who send their kids to their neighborhood school. I don't need to know anything at all about the teachers or curriculum at that school. If I want to, I can probably skip the expense of the test! ... Although demographics may not be destiny for an individual, it is the best predictor of a school's outcomes — independent of that school's teachers, administrators and curriculum! ... The higher the poverty rate, the lower the scores.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2018/10/22/education-professor-my-students-asked-who-i-would-vote-heres-what-i-told-them/?utm_term=.993987fac8ee.

Since schools cannot solve society's fundamental economic imbalances, where does this leave schools? Just where a Carnegie task force on education noted some time ago:

*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.*

Meeting the Challenge Involves More than Focusing on Improving Teaching

Most school improvement and transformation talk gives short shrift to addressing barriers that are directly affecting learning. This trend is reinforced when such changes are made in schools that have a majority of students who are in a position to profit from the changes. This limited focus is a recipe for continued failure in all other schools.

Transforming Schools and Comprehensively Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Naturally, every school must do as much as feasible to improve instruction and how it is managed/governed. At the same time, it must develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing as many factors as feasible that interfere with students having an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond.

Every school has some resources devoted to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Some devote as much as 25% of their budget to such concerns. But in most schools, the efforts are fragmented and marginalized and focused on a relatively few students with major behavior, learning, and emotional problems. Now is the time to improve the situation by moving forward in efforts to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. Such a system involves more than just doing better coordination of existing activity. It involves more than linking with a few community services and declaring the school is now a community school. It involves more than adopting a multi-tiered support system (MTSS) framework. All these efforts are relevant, but fall short of what is needed.

Framing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports: Broadening MTSS

A well-developed system of learning supports encompasses resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and cognitive supports in the classroom and schoolwide. A comprehensive, cohesive, and coherent system is essential to reducing dropout rates, narrowing the achievement gap, and strengthening whole school improvement and is essential for enabling whole child improvement and enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond for all students.

Thinking about a continuum of interventions is a good starting point for framing the nature and scope of a comprehensive system. The levels of such a continuum involve an interrelated and overlapping intervention subsystems focused on

- (1) promoting development and preventing problems
- (2) responding to problems as early-after-onset as feasible
- (3) treating severe, pervasive, and chronic problems.

As discussed in the next article, while MTSS stresses a continuum of interventions, it does little to guide development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. MTSS must be reconceived. That is:

- each of the three levels of MTSS must be developed as an integrated set of subsystems,
- the subsystems must link school and community interventions in ways that weave resources together, and
- across the subsystems, the laundry list of fragmented programs and services must be coalesced into a circumscribed set of arenas reflecting the content purpose of the various interventions.

With respect to this latter concern, pioneering work across the country emphasizes six arenas encompassing interventions to:

- >***Enhance regular classroom strategies to enable learning*** (e.g., improving instruction for students with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems and those who have become disengaged from learning at school; includes a focus on prevention, early intervening, and use of strategies such as response to intervention)
- >***Support transitions*** (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)

- >*Increase home and school connections and engagement*
- >*Respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises*
- >*Increase community involvement and support* (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- >*Facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.*

All this is spelled out in two recent books that are free and readily accessible online:

- >*Improving School Improvement*
 - >*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
- Both available at this time as free resources at:
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

Not ready for a book length presentation?

Then, here are some brief introductory resources

- >*Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf>
- >*What are Learning Supports?* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/whatlearnsupports.pdf>
- >*What Is a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports?*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/whatis.pdf>
- >*What Every Leader for School Improvement Needs to Know About Student/Learning Supports*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/whateveryleader.pdf>
- >*Steps and Tools to Guide Planning and Implementation of a Comprehensive System to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/stepsandtoolstoguideplanning.pdf>
- >*Leadership Training: Moving in New Directions for Student Support*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/movinginnewdirections.pdf>

Also see the Center's Toolkit for Rebuilding the System
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

"It is not enough to say that all children can learn or that no child will be left behind; the work involves . . . achieving the vision of an American education system that enables all children to succeed in school, work, and life."

(From the 2002 mission statement of the Council for Chief State School Officers – CCSSO)

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.

MTSS: Strengths and Weaknesses

ESSA (the Every Student Succeeds Act) stresses a devolution of power to states and districts. *How is that power being used to enhance how schools address barriers to learning and teaching?*

One trend has been a widespread adoption by states/districts/schools of some form of multitiered system of support (usually referred to as MTSS, although some places are using other acronyms). This is not surprising given this framework's emphasis in federal legislation.

In ESSA, for example, a schoolwide tiered model (also referred to as a multitier system of supports) is referenced for preventing and addressing behavior problems. The tiered model is defined as "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data based instructional decision making."

The tiered model (including use of early intervening services) and specific approaches such as positive behavioral intervention and supports are presented as strategies for enabling children with disabilities and English learners to meet challenging state academic standards and are to be coordinated with similar activities and services carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Our Center has sent out inquiries 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 that context, we also have been seeking and receiving responses about the strengths and weaknesses of MTSS (Multi Tiered System of Support) as a framework for improving student/learning supports.

Below we summarize our concerns and provide a sample of comments from the field. (For more of the comments, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mtss.pdf> .)

Center concerns: As emphasized in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a schoolwide tiered model, also referred to as a multitier system of supports, is referenced for preventing and addressing behavior problems. The term appears only five times in the law; the acronym "MTSS" is never used and no framework or model of multi-tier services is specified.

The tiered model (including use of early intervening services) and specific approaches such as positive behavioral intervention and supports are presented as strategies for enabling children with disabilities and English learners to meet challenging state academic standards and are to be coordinated with similar activities and services carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

It is important to understand that current discussions of MTSS do not account for its serious limitations as a framework for student and learning supports. Among our concerns are:

- >MTSS is an inadequate depiction of a continuum of student/learning supports (e.g., it simply delineates levels of school interventions, rather than subsystems of school/community student/learning supports)
- >it does not clarify the contribution each level can make to reducing the number of students in need of special assistance (and relatedly how the continuum applies the principle of using the least intervention necessary and the practice of using response to intervention)
- >it does not systematically organize into the continuum of supports the content of what schools do each day to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Our analyses indicate that the term MTSS is widely being adopted as a planning convenience without detailing how it will be translated into practice at schools. As the term becomes yet one more set of initials, the risk is that it simply will become another school improvement buzzword.

It will do little to enhance a school's effectiveness in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond requires going beyond how MTSS generally is conceived and implemented.

Those who value a multi-tiered continuum need to evolve it into a much more innovative and transformative framework for increasing the effectiveness of student/learning supports.

Comments about MTSS from the field: A November report from the Brookings Institution reviews a sample of state ESSA plans. It states:

A number of plans mention "multi-tier systems of support." The logic of these systems is that students, schools, or districts can be arrayed into tiers. The lowest tier applies to just about everybody. Those in higher tiers need more support. Arraying individuals into tiers can be cost-effective to the extent that lower-cost forms of assistance can be broadly applied and higher-cost forms of assistance can be narrowly applied to those showing they really need the assistance. It is like triage in hospital emergency rooms. However, what happens in the highest tier still needs to be identified. The notion of using tiers is simply structural - the tiers need to be filled with something.

(From: "State Plans Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Where is the Research?" by M. Dynarski <https://www.brookings.edu/research/state-plans-under-the-every-student-succeeds-act-where-is-the-research/>)

Here are a few of the many responses we received as part of an exchange on the Center's Community of School Practitioners.

>"I agree that MTSS has become a buzz word and is typically used in a top down manner that is less rather than more helpful. In theory, MTSS is sensible: it is supporting school leaders thinking about an ecologically informed manner about systemic and instructional efforts on the one hand and supporting school leaders working to coordinate these efforts. In practice, I rarely see coordination being practiced. And, it is very rare that fostering engagement (and what I more and more describe as inter generational school improvement efforts) is a focus...."

>"I find MTSS to be a structure that provides schools with the framework to develop 'toolboxes' of available resources, whether they be grounded in curriculum resources or as part of community support networks. Ideally, MTSS would be broad enough to encompass 'wrap around' services available in the community. We have worked to develop tiered intervention that isn't restricted to school programming and includes community services. We're not there yet, but I do believe MTSS provides a structure where it is possible to include broader interventions. And in my experience, educators crave structure. So if MTSS provides that base need, let's make it encompass community resources!"

>"Concepts in education seem to become rigid and mechanical when they are translated into policies, practices and action plans. MTSS is one example. I believe the MTSS was developed as a framework that enabled schools to integrate prevention and intervention science into practice, a continuum that has its basis in school/community wide promotion and prevention practices as well as support for those needing support. It has some roots in public health. This is the foundation. In practice it should be seamless and based upon the sound conditions for learning (CFL) that enable educators to better ensure a focus on universal promotion and prevention. PBIS is not a great example of a universal skill developing practice and the goal of meeting state standards has not been primary to MTSS in my mind. A 'system of support' is dependent upon the effective use of measurement and of individualized connection and caring as well as effective academic instruction. MTSS can be compatible with addressing barriers to learning. Sadly MTSS, like many constructs has gotten distorted in its application and some schools, systems and states see it as a sorting tool. It is like the application of RTI. RTI was a term for schools to look at the effectiveness of their intervention's, their design and implementation. RTI for too many focuses on the child's response rather than the effective design and implementation of the interventions. Student Support Teams were staffed and designed to provide systemic information to enhance school-wide conditions for learning as well as to design and monitor student interventions but few seem to implement this systemic function. Barriers to learning and teaching should be part of the foundational design and implementation of community schools."

>"MTSS framework, while a great vehicle for Learning Supports efforts, doesn't go far enough to stress prevention and resiliency. There are some translational problems with the application of MTSS concepts. Generally speaking, school folks tend to be problem focused. If there are behavior problems or reading problems, interventions are designed to help. That's great. But I have to wonder, what are schools doing to PREVENT behavior or reading problems. Behavior problems and learning issues are well-documented. An intervention is put into place and it either works or doesn't and school folks move on to another intervention — or another student in need of an intervention. The data are there to show that there was a problem and something was done.

But are data being collected and used to identify the larger issues (barriers) that are at the root of student problems? To use your example, are schools trying to save individuals drowning in the stream, or are they using what they know to repair the bridge that's causing people to fall into the water? Prevention and building student resiliency is much more complex than addressing problems.

Staff need to understand the research, effective practices, indicators of success and have the support to put things into place that will help to prevent problems in the first place. That includes working with community subsystems, being focused on reducing numbers of students with learning issues, and changing day-to-day practice to build resiliency in students. And these things can't be accomplished within the confines of the school building. Teaching a child to read can be done inside a school building and is the job of a teacher. Teaching a child to learn should happen everywhere and is the job of the community. My question for schools using the framework would be, 'Is the time spent on problem-focused efforts to help students equal to the time spent on prevention of problems?'"

>"In our district, we have been discussing this issue and agree with your assessment. Below I will share my opinion on this issue based on my experience over the years. Over the past twenty-five plus years this has become a common theme in how school sites and districts explain their work in support services. I was able to see how other districts viewed support services because of my twenty-two years at the university as part-time faculty. MTSS is now the 'buzz word', and I saw the same thing with 'RTI'. We could list a number of 'programs' that serve the same purpose for education: to 'simplify' working on 'Barriers to Learning'. It becomes a 'checkbox' in order to meet mandates and/or funding requirements.

In a short list, I'll try to explain some issues that I have found difficult to overcome:

- I think your preliminary analyses is very insightful and is correct. In the development of our district's MTSS framework, it was clear that there was general direction as we looked at other state-wide plans, but not a comprehensive approach of how to address the structure. The district took the MTSS as a framework, but used Learning Support Teams as a way to design the work to address the five key components of the MTSS Framework. If you look at those components Learning Support Teams embraced the structure of the work. What has been interesting is how that continuum is perceived by the school sites and also some of the leadership. It has been a challenge to have sites and individuals see that connection. I believe our district could have only used the Learning Support Teams work with their schools, but because of funding and accountable issues, MTSS language needed to be used. Truth be told, MTSS forced the district into this work. It wasn't until after the trainings started that it was realized how important Learning Support Teams work was for the organization of the MTSS Framework.
- It seems to be able to understand and organize round addressing learning, behavior, and emotional supports you need to have leadership that think systematically. Because I have worked with 'system thinking' individuals, I assumed that most people think that way. I was incorrect. The challenge in developing a intervention continuum is to have leadership that guides that work in a systematic way. Unfortunately, I have run into many educational leaders who believe they are system thinkers, and they are not.
- Individuals that support classrooms, teachers, students and families also play an important part in development of this systematic approach to support. Unfortunately, my experience has been that support staff wants to work with individuals and can be very resistant to systematic organization to supports, as well as, partnering with other disciplines and outside agencies.

In the end, there needs to be a cultural change in education in how it views student supports. I don't believe we truly train educators in how to manage those supports. Because of this, developing a comprehensive systematic approach to developing prevention and intervention supports for students and families become difficult because you have to change thinking. My guess is that district and sites that have developed a comprehensive approach have changed their culture, but the true test is if the supports are sustainable over time. This work has been driven by individuals, it needs to be driven by the system itself. I have struggled with getting people to understand the importance of this work. The joy comes when someone 'gets it' and you see the change in how supports are organized for student, families and staffs. You see the change."

>"Here in our state we are doing a lot of work with MTSS (which is also the way we are moving under our ESSA plan). However we are taking a comprehensive look at how the MTSS structure can address ALL needs of students not 'just learning'. We are looking at services and supports for all 3 tiers for learners. We also know that those tiers can be fluid and variable for youth. We have just officially approved our states Social and Emotional Learning Competencies (SEL) for Birth through Grade 12 which are part of our Tier 1 approach. We've connected the SEL Competencies to the School Improvement planning process for schools to encourage their inclusion in all academic subjects and schoolwide to help address culture and climate. We are in the process of helping schools see the connection between SEL & school mental health and trauma efforts. (as well as PBIS and Rti etc). We have a district in our state who is a SHINING star in this arena. I guess our philosophy is if the movement is towards MTSS how can we take our student support efforts and align them so they don't get lost in the sauce. (essentially if you can't beat em join em...??)"

>“First of all MTSS is only mentioned in the ESSA in lower case letter about 7 times, with no definitions or explanations. However, mental health and trauma-informed are mentioned over 30 times. When I asked a representative from ESSA who came to our state, what MTSS is, he did not have any clarity at all. A MULTI tiered model THAT supports IDEA students??? I am hoping that the ESSA did not intend for this to be a component of Special Ed or ELL, but something for all children in the public schools. There are more severe limitations with the ESSA, and MTSS is a start. It is the only framework that is noted and what we need to do is to flesh it out, define it and rebrand it. There is no clarity and so many people across the country are running to define this and some are doing a good job especially when they focus on building a multi-tiered response to students that includes academics and behavior and minimizes all the bulk of non-essentials that are loading our schools down. It is critical that every adult on campus become aware of their responsibility to student behavior and emotional well-being. At the end of the day, a custodian may be a better mentor for a young boy than a school counselor or a MH therapist. Our shift in our system is that building relationships and monitoring student behavior is everyone's responsibility and to view behavior through a trauma informed lens that has compassion for students and their families at its core. The problem is the lack of substance and guidance that has been offered for this from the USDOE. I hope we will not see this relegated to IDEA and ELL, but that MTSS is the way we do business at schools. Re-branding our ideas is critical as our culture is always looking for the next initiative. This could be a "refresh"! If people are gravitating to MTSS, better we are first to the gate to define it before it defines us. Here are my guidelines for MTSS

- Must be school and zip code centric (not one size fits all, but 1 system that is customizable based on culture and resources both in a school and the community)
- Must focus on both academics and behavior (this addresses the idea of the whole child) and translates to if you teach the whole class reading writing and math... then also teach behavior. if you need to create a small group to reteach reading writing and math, then also use a small group to teach behavior to those who need targeted support. and lastly, if you meet with students individually for a few minutes to ensure they are getting it in reading writing and math... also do that for behavior. The problem is that there is a belief that those with behaviors don't belong in our classrooms. When behavior management founded in relationships with students is grounded in the teacher's classroom, then there is room for all manner of social, emotional learning as well as depth of knowledge because, the students feel safe and heard and are part of the learning day. (please look at the deeper meaning here... academics would include electives, career opportunities, science, arts, etc and behavior would be the social, emotional, behavioral and well-being part and both are inextricably intertwined).
- MTSS is for all students
- MTSS must have admin leadership and buy in with a team that can support a multi-tiered approach including those who can build relationships with family and community.
- MTSS can be the framework that ties all initiatives together with definition and support for customization and allow for a way to build processes that meet student needs.
- MTSS must use data to identify needs and those needs must be integrated into the professional development of all staff.”

>“Thank you for taking on this very important question. Like so many terms in education and psychology, MTSS began with a very specific meaning and then has been generalized to many different uses. It is used to describe the levels of interventions that ought to be used to promote reading competence in schools — a comprehensive and well developed reading curriculum for all students, a small group intervention for students who continue to struggle in reading, and an intensive and individualized intervention for those students who do not benefit sufficiently from the comprehensive and small group instruction. It's also been used to describe behavioral interventions — much in the vein of Positive Behavior Supports. And it's been used more broadly to describe mental health interventions. I think that the framework is fine conceptually, but I'm suspicious because almost every author uses three levels, and every reference seems to attribute the same percentages to each level (5% need intensive supports, 15% need additional supports, and 80% of students are said to need only the population wide services.) My suspicion is that those proportions are assigned because of the funding that is going to be made available for the services and not necessarily the size of the need. I think that critical information, that needs to be more evidence-based and practice-verified, includes: how do we know which students need more intensive services and supports? what schoolwide practices are comprehensive and well-developed supports for the general enrollment of the school? what additional practices or supports are needed for the smaller (maybe smaller) groups of students who need more intensive services? and, of course, we have no good evidence that all students needing more intensive supports need the same KIND of intensive supports? So I do think that this has become a shorthand that short circuits much of the most interesting questions about how we promote the success of young people in schools.”

In an open Letter to the MTSS exchange on the Center’s Community of School Practitioners, Thomas Adams, Ph.D., Deputy Superintendent, California Department of Education, Al Mijares, Ph.D., County Superintendent, Orange County Department of Education, Tim Taylor, County Superintendent, Butte County Office of Education, and Wayne Sailor, Ph.D. and Amy B. McCart, Ph.D., Co-Directors, SWIFT Education Center stated the following:

“The California Scale-up of MTSS Statewide (CA MTSS, see www.ocde.us/SUMS) team would like to add our voice to the Center for Mental Health in Schools & Student/Learning Supports (Center) School Practitioner Community of Practice exchange about how schools use multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) to address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage disconnected students. We believe our collective work with schools, districts, and state departments of education to transform education systems using a strengths-based approach, qualifies us to comment about this topic. The Center published very insightful comments from individuals in the field. The wisdom displayed by these educators confirms our belief that every school and district has strengths on which to build excellent teaching and learning systems that support all students, even those with the most complex needs.

The Center expressed concern that MTSS has severe limitations as a framework for student learning and support, and needs to evolve into a much more innovative and transformative framework for increasing student learning effectiveness. Further, the Center expressed concern that MTSS is in danger of becoming just another school improvement buzzword, or in our terms, lending itself to mapping new language onto old practices and failing to address prevention and illuminating a pathway to addressing barriers to student learning.

We at CA MTSS agree with all of these concerns and, in fact, aligned our task of scaling up MTSS statewide with the broader organizing framework represented by the SWIFT Education Center’s five evidence based domains and ten supporting features.... These domains and features address the barriers to learning through a framework of transformative educational supports that rest on evidence from rigorous investigations (swiftschools.org). The CA MTSS framework has amassed solid evidence to merit its efficacy in offering California schools a set of transformation practices with specific tools with which to track systems formative and summative outcomes. In reference to the findings in the Center’s November 11, 2017, document we offer the following points.

1. MTSS can be more than a planning convenience when schools, districts, and states are supported to translate it into practice at schools.
 - California SUMS initiative is preparing region, county and district leaders across the state to provide support to schools that are implementing new or improving existing MTSS (see www.ocde.us/SUMS).
2. MTSS can incorporate into its continuum of services and supports the principles and practices of subsystems, such as community mental health wraparound services so that the system can support all students.
 - Our approach to MTSS incorporates a resource inventory and matching process designed to help schools to intentionally include community-based service providers who can address students with complex needs across home, school and community settings.
3. Equity-based MTSS is designed to prevent some students’ need for special assistance through such techniques as universally designed curriculum, differentiated instruction, and schoolwide positive behavioral expectations and support. Data-based decision making is used to guide intervention decisions.
 - We are teaching California schools how to use screening and progress monitoring data with entry and exit decision rules for providing students additional or intensified support.
4. MTSS structures need to contain content on what schools do to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems —that is, effective teams, useful data, evidence-based interventions and supports, etc.
 - We support schools as they use as many as possible of their existing resources and deploy these resources through an organized system using Resource Inventories, Tiered Intervention Matrices, Master Schedules, and Intervention Planning Tools.

We know from experience that MTSS is not an empty phrase; and when state and local leaders support schools in sustainable transformation to an equity-based MTSS, students experience better learning and behavior outcomes. We appreciate that the Center raised this topic for discussion and look forward to further dialogue on this critically important system change agenda.”

Earlier Analyses of MTSS by the Center

>ESSA State Consolidated Plans: Rethinking MTSS to Better Address Barriers to Learning
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essamtss.pdf>

>Moving Beyond the Three Tier Intervention Pyramid Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Student and Learning Supports <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/threetier.pdf>

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

When you hear the term *Mental Health in Schools* or *School Mental Health*, what comes to mind?

Probably you think about students who have psychological problems, about what services they need, and how schools don't provide enough of such services. This is not surprising given the widespread tendency for the term *mental health* to be thought of as referring to mental disorders/illness and for relevant interventions to be seen as services (e.g., counseling/therapy).

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

Our analyses of policy and practice stress understanding the following matters as key to advancing a broad approach to mental health in schools.

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

Those concerned with enhancing the role of mental health in schools must guide policy makers to a clear understanding of

- the many factors that are interfering with learning and teaching
- the large number of students who are experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- the fragmented and marginalized state of affairs related to the limited set of services, programs, and initiatives currently provided as student/learning supports
- the small proportion of students reached
- the counterproductive competition for sparse resources.

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

Given all this, it is time to focus on transforming student/learning supports. Doing so is fundamental to improving intervention effectiveness in ways that enhance equity of opportunity, promote whole child development, and engender a positive school climate. Doing so requires ending the marginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and then framing and operationalizing them as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that weaves together school and community resources.

In the process, a broad definition of mental health in schools can be embedded into a transformed system of student/learning supports. Doing so will help

- reduce the unrealistic and often inappropriate call for more and more one-on-one direct services
- counter the mistaken view that collocating community services on school campuses can ever be a sufficient approach to filling critical intervention gaps at schools and for enhancing community and home engagement

- increase classroom, school-wide, and community interventions that can reduce the need for one-on-one services
- facilitate the weaving together of school, home, and community resources to gain economic benefits and enhance outcomes
- enhance coordination and cohesion of all resources (school, community, family) intended to support young people.

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

*For further elaboration of these points, see

>Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2010). *Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

>Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2012). *Mental Health in Schools: Moving in New Directions*. *Contemporary School Psychology*. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contschpsych.pdf>

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

**I heard you only
passed one class.**

**Yea, but it's O.K.
I'm planning to be a specialist.**



School-Community Collaboration: What's Going Wrong?

If all youngsters are to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and in life, schools must move significantly beyond prevailing approaches to school improvement. Needed is fundamental institutional *transformation* that promotes effective collaboration among schools, families, and communities. Such a transformation is essential to enhancing achievement for all, closing the achievement gap, reducing dropouts, and increasing the opportunity for schools to be valued as treasures in their neighborhood.

Schools and the community in which they reside deal with multiple, interrelated concerns - poverty, child development, literacy, violence, safety, substance abuse, housing, employment. School and neighborhood improvements are mutually enhanced through effective school-community collaboration.

Interest in connecting school and community resources is growing at an exponential rate. The goal is to maximize mutual benefits, including better student progress, positive socialization of the young, higher staff morale, improved use of resources, an enhanced sense of community, community development, and more. In the long run, the aims are to strengthen students, schools, families, and neighborhoods.

But too many efforts to substantively connect school and community have ended in frustration and disappointment because of the tendency to approach this complex matter simplistically.

See a recent discussion of what is involved in developing an effective school-community collaboration in Chapter 14 of *Improving School Improvement* – freely accessed at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

Over the years, *Community Schools* have sprouted in a rather dramatic and ad hoc manner and now the term has become popular enough that it is being used by more and more sites. As a form of school-community collaboration, it is essential to clarify the concept and place it into the context of school improvement and institutional transformation. To these ends, see

>*Community Schools: Working Toward Institutional Transformation*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/csinstitutionaltrans.pdf>

They've asked me to be part of a school-community collaborative.



Great! Tell them we want more pupil-free days on the school calendar.

Our hope is that the articles in this issue and the related resources cited will lead not only to further discussion, but an evolution in thinking about school improvement and in policy for transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students and families.

We are always look for opportunities to share the perspectives with a view to stimulating exchanges.

We invite your comments. Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu .



About Center Resources for Transforming How Schools Address Barriers to Learning

(For regular updates about new Center resources, go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> and click on *What's New*.)



Based on our research, the National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports recognizes that effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability of a design for transforming learning and student supports calls for addressing a set of four interconnected concerns. These involve:

- Expanding the policy framework for school improvement to fully integrate, as primary and essential, a student and learning supports component.
- Reframing student and learning support interventions to create a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports in classrooms and school-wide and across all schools in a district.
- Reworking the operational infrastructure to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.
- Enhancing approaches for systemic change in ways that ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability.

Prototype frameworks for each of these concerns have been developed. You can obtain a quick overview from our policy and practice notes entitled:

> *Evolving School Improvement Planning for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/evolving.pdf>

More in-depth presentations and details are available in our two most recent books:

> *Improving School Improvement*
 > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
 Both available at this time as free resources at:
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

Also see, *ESSA and Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching: Is there Movement toward Transforming Student/Learning Supports?*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/2018%20report.pdf>

Want resources? Need technical assistance? Coaching?
Use our website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>
or contact us – E-mail: Ltaylor@ucla.edu or Ph: (310) 825-3634
Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS)?
Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange*?
Send requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

About Center Resources on Student Perspectives

*If you got your say, then you'd feel like they're letting you in,
and you feel like you're meant to be here.*

Cited by Kids Matter

*Voice comes from a deeper place than our throats.
Voice comes from our hearts, from our minds,
and from the deepest places of knowing.*

Penny Oldfather

Discussions about youth voice are increasing and often are controversial. Beyond the interest in youth voice is a concern for youth participation. This encompasses a focus on civic engagement, youth rights, and intergenerational equity. As defined in a sociological and psychological context, *intergenerational equity* embodies fairness or justice in relationships between children, youth, adults and seniors, particularly in terms of treatment and interactions.

For a brief overview on this topic, see

>*About Student Voice and Participation* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/voice.pdf>

We understand that student perspectives are essential to improving how barriers to learning and teaching are addressed. The following are recent examples of some Center resources sharing student personal voices and perspectives.

- *A Personal Look at Self-reliance and Help Seeking* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/helpseek.pdf>
- *A Personal Look at a Student's Selective Mutism* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/selectmut.pdf>
- *A Personal Perspective on the Teach for America Program* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/tfa.pdf>
- *A University Student Reflects on the Good and Bad of Social Networking use by Children and Adolescents* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/socialnetwork.pdf>
- *A University Student's Perspective on Bullying Prevention in Schools* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/bullyingpers.pdf>
- *A Personal Perspective on Depression among Latino Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/latdep.pdf>
- *A Student-initiated, Student-run, and Student-funded Center for Retaining Underrepresented Minority University Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/retentucla.pdf>
- *A Student's Perspective of Test Anxiety* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/testanx.pdf>
- *Being an International Student in the U.S.A.: In Her Own Words* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/internationalstud.pdf>
- *Eating Disorders: Schools Might Be Adding to the Problem – A Student Personal Perspective* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/harm.pdf>
- *First Year Transition into Higher Education: One Student's Experiences* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/college.pdf>
- *Selective Mutism: A Student Reflects on Her Misdiagnosis, Experiences, and Outcomes* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/selectivemutismpersonal.pdf>
- *Student Perceptions of School Physical Education Programs* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/physed.pdf>

We also understand that there are a wide range of youth voice. To heighten awareness, we have developed a series of information resources on youth subcultures. See

- *What is Youth Culture? A Brief Introduction* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/youthintro.pdf>
- *About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/cheerleading.pdf>
- *About Emo Youth Subculture* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/emo.pdf>
- *About the Goth Youth Subculture* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/goth.pdf>
- *About Hip Hop Youth Subculture* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/youthhiphop.pdf>
- *About Jocks as a Youth Subculture* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/jocks.pdf>
- *About "Loners" and "Losers"* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/loners.pdf>
- *About "Mean Girls" as a Youth Culture Subgroup* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/meangirls.pdf>
- *About "Nerds" and "Geeks" as an Identified Subculture* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/nag.pdf>
- *About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/preppy.pdf>
- *About Raves as a Youth Culture Phenomenon* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/raves.pdf>
- *About Surfing and Skateboarding Youth Subcultures* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/surf.pdf>
- *About Sexual Minority (LGBTQ+) Youth Subculture* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/lgbt.pdf>
- *About Youth Gangs* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/youthgangs.pdf>
- *Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/socint.pdf>
- *Youth Subcultures: Annotated Bibliography and Related References* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/youthref.pdf>
- *Glossary of Terms Related to Youth Culture Subgroups* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/youthgloss.pdf>

Why do you say you're wasting your time by going to school?



Well, I can't read or write, and they won't let me talk!

We are always interested in updating and improving our resources.

Please share; send to Ltaylor@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.

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... and a host of students