

A Center Report . . .

New Directions for School Improvement Policy

This report discusses the necessity of expanding school improvement policy and practice in order to meet the growing challenges related to reducing the achievement and opportunity gaps. Specifically, it highlights that student/learning supports are marginalized in current policy and that addressing the matter requires moving from a two to a three component school improvement framework. Relatedly, an expanded school accountability framework is outlined, and the importance of adopting a set of standards for student/learning supports is emphasized.

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New Directions for School Improvement Policy

*We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking
we used when we created them.*

Albert Einstein

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the temporary pandemic relief funds continue to marginalize efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. So, it is not surprising that federal, state, and local plans do so as well.¹

As long as student/learning supports are marginalized in school improvement policy and practice, the development of this component of schools will likely continue to be ad hoc, piecemeal, and, at times, redundant. Implementation will continue to be fragmented, budgets sparse, and competition for resources counterproductive.²

This unfortunate situation is exacerbated as a result of COVID-19. There is considerable concern about capability of schools to deal with the increasing number of students who need student/learning supports. Significant system improvements are essential for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Yet, most of the widely circulated reports about improving schools give scant attention to rethinking the role of school student and learning support staff.

A major shift in policy and practice is long overdue. This report discusses ways to expand school improvement policy and practice to meet the challenge of addressing persistent barriers to reducing the achievement and opportunity gaps.

Ending the Marginalization of Student/Learning Supports

Students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems are always a topic of concern. The topic gains elevated status whenever a highly visible negative event occurs – such as a shooting on campus, a student suicide, an increase in bullying, concern about trauma. In response to widespread public outcries, special initiatives are introduced. However, as the outcries diminish, so do the initiatives.

Now we have COVID-19 and the enhanced efforts to address societal injustices. These events have underscored the degree to which student/learning supports are marginalized.

Rather than just addressing immediate problems in unsatisfactory ways, steps also can be taken to make transformative system changes. These involve

- elevating the policy priority for addressing barriers to learning and teaching in a unified, comprehensive, and equitable way
- fully integrating the policy into school improvement strategic planning and daily practice
- institutionalizing and supporting mechanisms that facilitate effective development, implementation, scale-up, and sustainability of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach.

The Current Two
Component
Framework for
School Improvement

Our analysis of prevailing policies for improving schools indicates that the primary focus is on two components: (1) enhancing instruction/curriculum and (2) restructuring school management.³ Implementation of such efforts is shaped by demands for every school to adopt high standards and expectations and be more accountable for results, as measured primarily by standardized achievement tests. Toward these ends, the calls have been to enhance direct academic support and move away from a “deficit” model by adopting a strengths or resilience-oriented paradigm. All this is reflected in federal guidelines.

At the same time, barriers that cannot be ignored continue to raise concern, especially when manifested as school violence, drugs on campus, dropouts, teen pregnancy, delinquency, and so forth. Specific types of problems are funded and pursued as "categorical" initiatives, some supported by school district general funds and some underwritten by the federal and private sector.⁴ However, the interventions are neither conceived nor pursued as a primary facet of school improvement and often are described as supplementary programs and adjunctive services (see Exhibit 1).

Overlapping what schools offer are initiatives from the *community* to link resources to schools (e.g., school-linked services, full-service schools, community and school partnerships, community schools). Some of these efforts braid resources together; however, others contribute to further fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and marginalization of student support.

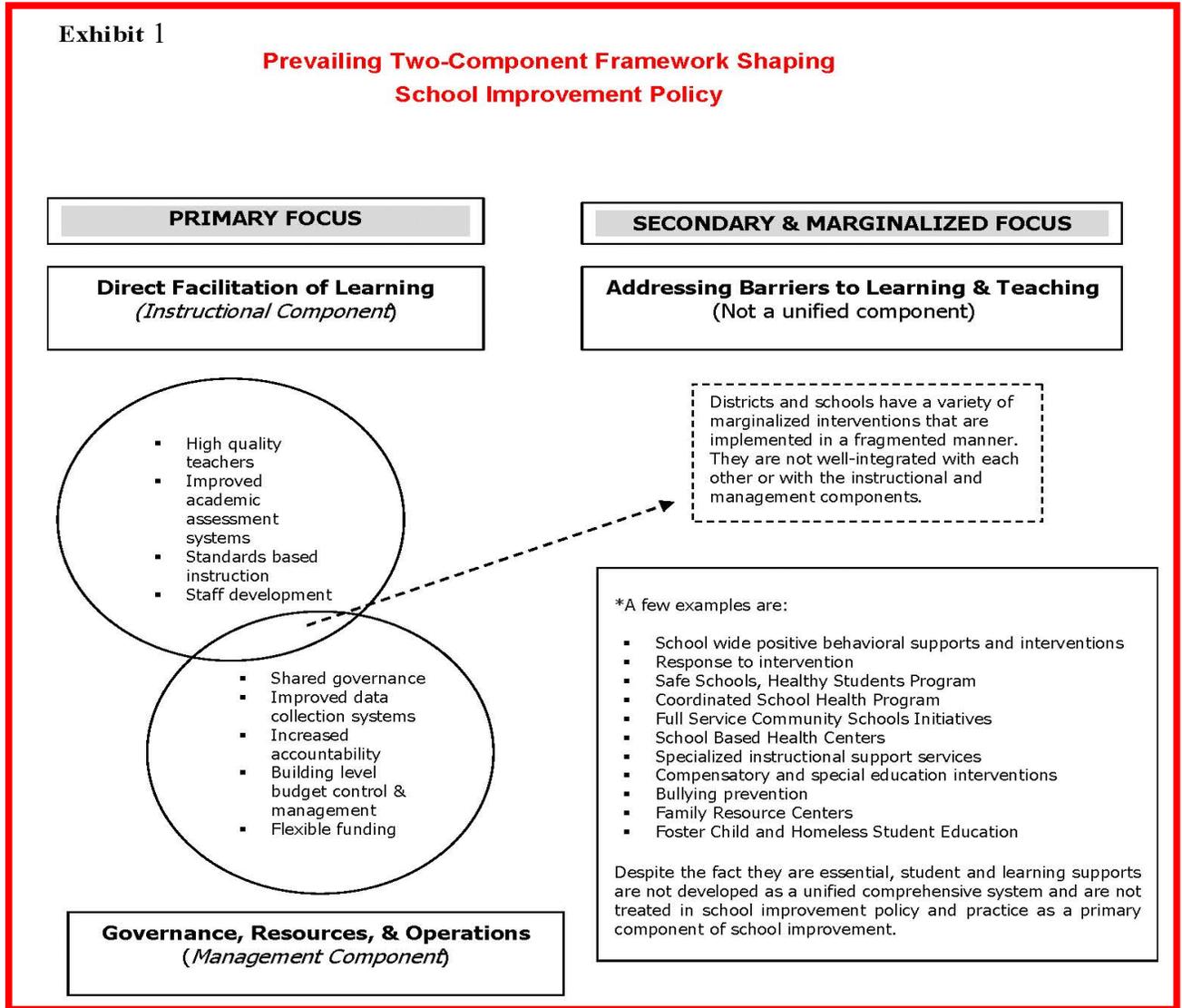
Local, state, and federal agencies also have generated initiatives that play out at schools. One major focus is on promoting coordination and collaboration among the various programs and services (e.g., fostering “integrated services”); another focus is on special funding streams (e.g., ESSA funds, billing Medicaid for school health services).⁵

The various initiatives do help *some* students who are not succeeding at school. However, they come nowhere near addressing the scope of need. Indeed, their limited potency further underscores the degree to which efforts to address barriers to learning are marginalized in policy and practice.

The degree to which marginalization is the case is seen in the lack of attention given to addressing barriers to learning and teaching in school improvement plans. It is also seen in the lack of attention to mapping, analyzing, and rethinking how the resources used to address barriers are allocated. For example, educational reformers virtually have ignored the need to reframe the work of student/learning support staff. All this seriously hampers efforts to provide the help teachers and their students so desperately need.

An irony in all this is that the agenda for reducing the opportunity and achievement gaps is unlikely to succeed in the absence of concerted attention to ending the marginalized status of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

So while the primary policy concern with improving instruction and school management obviously is essential, analyses emphasize that a third component – one that directly deals with factors interfering with student learning and teachers teaching – also is a primary and essential facet of school improvement.⁶



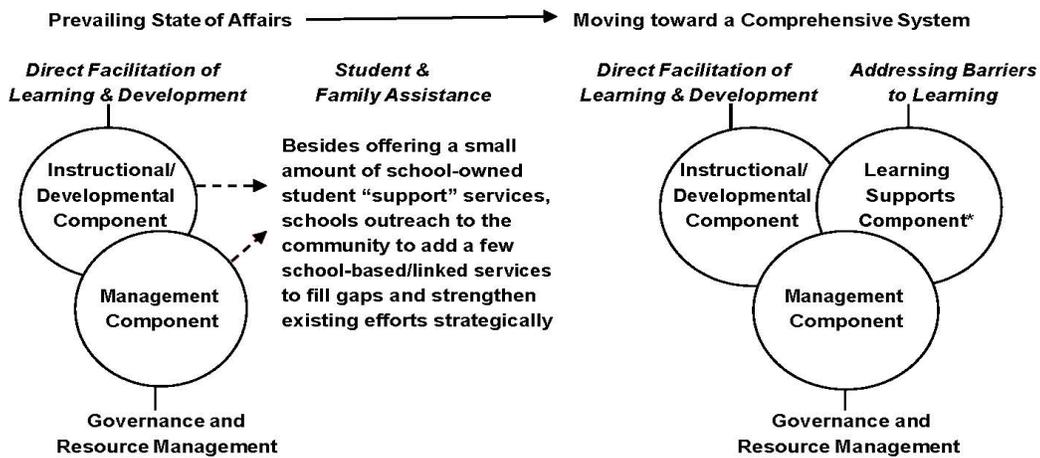
Adopting a Three Component Policy Framework for School Improvement

The rush in recent years to raise test scores resulted in a primary emphasis on direct efforts to improve instruction. The best instruction that can be provided obviously is essential. However, for too many youngsters, it is not sufficient, especially in schools enrolling large proportions of students who are not doing well. Despite this, the main focus in many school planning guides is on curriculum, instruction, and classroom discipline.⁷ This neglects the need for fundamental restructuring of school and community resources that are designed to provided supports to enable learning.

Students who approach instruction lacking readiness with respect to motivation and/or specific capabilities need schools to provide a range of well-organized student/learning supports. This is illustrated in Exhibit 2 as a major component to address barriers to learning and teaching. Adoption of a three component framework elevates addressing barriers to the level of a fundamental and primary facet of schooling. Movement to a three component model is intended to enable schools to more effectively enhance equity of opportunity for success at school.

Exhibit 2

Moving to a Three-Component Policy Framework for School Improvement.



*A *Learning Supports Component* is designed to enable learning by (1) addressing factors that interfere with learning, development, and teaching and (2) re-engaging students in classroom instruction. The component is established in policy and practice as primary and essential and is developed into a unified, comprehensive system by weaving together school and community resources.

A Note About Learning Supports

States and districts are trending toward using the umbrella term Learning Supports. Learning supports are defined as the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school by directly addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Such supports are designed not only to directly address interfering factors, but to do so in a way that (re)engages students in instruction. Attention to both these matters is essential because, in general, interventions that do not ensure a student's meaningful engagement in instruction are insufficient in sustaining student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning.

In the classroom and school-wide, such supports encompass efforts to

- reduce the overemphasis on using social control practices and over-relying on extrinsic reinforcers
- enhance an emphasis on intrinsic motivation to promote engagement and reengagement.

To ensure effective development and sustainability of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable student/learning support system, a Learning Supports Component is established in policy and practice as primary and essential and is underwritten by weaving together school and community resources.

For lessons learned from trailblazing and pioneering work related to a three component approach to school improvement, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>.

Rethinking School Accountability

Accountability drives much of what schools do and don't do.

School accountability is a policy tool with extraordinary power to reshape schools – for good and for bad. As everyone involved in school improvement knows, currently the only accountability indicators that really count are achievement test scores. Achievement tests drive school accountability, and what such tests measure has become the be-all and end-all of what is attended to by many decision makers. This produces a growing disconnect between the realities of what it takes to improve academic performance and the direction in which many policy makers and school reformers are leading the public. The disconnect is especially evident in schools serving what often are referred to as "low wealth" families.

Expanding the accountability framework

The move to a three component policy framework is intended to expand the framework for school accountability in ways that encompass indicators related to all three components. Exhibit 3 highlights a prototype for an expanded school accountability framework. As illustrated, there is no intent to deflect from the laser-like focus on meeting high academic standards. Debate will continue about how best to measure academic outcomes, but clearly schools must demonstrate they effectively teach academics.

At the same time, policy must acknowledge that schools also are expected to pursue high standards in promoting positive social and personal functioning, including enhancing civility, teaching safe and healthy behavior, and some form of "character education." Every school we visit has specific goals related to this facet of student development and learning. Yet, it is evident that there is no systematic evaluation or reporting of the work. As would be expected, then, schools direct few resources and too little attention to these unmeasured concerns. Yet, society wants schools to attend to these matters, and most professionals understand that personal and social functioning are integrally tied to academic performance. From this perspective, it seem self-defeating not to hold schools accountable for improving students' social and personal functioning.

For schools where a large proportion of students are not doing well, it is also self-defeating not to attend to benchmark indicators of progress in addressing barriers to learning. Schools cannot teach children who are not in class. Therefore, increasing attendance always is an expectation (and an important budget consideration). Other basic indicators of school improvement and precursors of enhanced academic performance are reducing tardiness and problem behaviors, lessening suspension and dropout rates, and abating the large number of inappropriate referrals for special education. Given this, the progress of school staff related to such matters should be measured and treated as a significant aspect of school accountability.

Exhibit 3

Expanding the Framework for School Accountability

Indicators of Positive Learning and Development

High Standards for *Academics**
(measures of cognitive achievements, e.g., standardized tests of achievement, portfolio and other forms of authentic assessment)

High Standards for Learning Development Related to *Social & Personal Functioning**
(measures of social learning and behavior, character/values, civility, healthy and safe behavior)

"Community Report Cards"

>increases in positive indicators

>decreases in negative indicators

Benchmark Indicators of Progress in Addressing Barriers & (Re-)engaging Students in Classroom Learning

High Standards for *Enabling Learning and Development***
(measures of effectiveness in addressing barriers , e.g.,
>increased attendance
>reduced tardies
>reduced misbehavior
>less bullying and sexual harassment
>increased family involvement with child and schooling
>fewer referrals for specialized assistance
>fewer referrals for special education
>fewer pregnancies
>fewer suspensions and dropouts)

*Results of interventions for directly facilitating development and learning.

**Results of interventions for addressing barriers to learning and development.

ESSA Requires an Additional Indicator of School Quality or Student Success

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires not less than one indicator of school quality or student success that a) allows for meaningful differentiation in school performance, b) is valid, reliable, comparable and statewide with the same indicators used for each grade span, and may include student growth. ESSA does not prescribe specific indicators, the law does require that additional indicators meet technical standards and provide meaningful data for analyzing school differences.

The law gives examples – chronic absenteeism, discipline rates, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, measures of postsecondary readiness, student engagement, educator engagement, school climate and safety, and any other indicator that meets the criteria.

State plans indicate many choose to add chronic absenteeism and measures of college/career readiness; some choose school climate, on-track rate at the middle and/or high school levels, social emotional learning, and arts education.

The law also requires that reporting of how all students and each group of students (such as student with disabilities) perform on indicators. For schools where subgroups of students are chronically struggling, for schools where less than two-thirds of students graduate, and for the bottom 5 percent of schools, the emphasis on school turnaround will remain intensive.

Some cautions

School outcomes, of course, are influenced by the well-being of the families and the neighborhoods in which they operate. Therefore, performance of any school should be judged within the context of the current status of indicators of community well-being, such as economic, social, and health measures. If those indicators are not improving or are

declining, it is patently unfair to ignore these contextual conditions in judging school performance.

From the perspective of a three component school improvement policy framework, adding a couple of “nonacademic” accountability indicators clearly is not a solution. Doing so will likely contribute to the trend to drive student and learning supports in ways that deemphasize any essential work that is not an accountability indicator. For example, efforts to improve attendance often only round up and bring truants back to school, but do little to help teachers re-engage these students in classroom instruction. This is a recipe for a revolving door.

Those calling for “multimetric” accountability capture the essence of the problem of emphasizing only one or a few nonacademic indicators. However, they have yet to face up to developing an accountability framework that effectively accounts for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. If the goal of a school accountability system is to improve schools so that they increasingly enhance equity of opportunity, these factors must be included in a comprehensive manner.

The question also has been raised about whether there can be too much emphasis on gathering more data. This is a critical issue for school

improvement. Over and over, one hears the line: *In God we trust, from all others demand data!*

Good data are always of value. Most policy makers and practitioners would like to make data-driven decisions. But, good data often are not available. Moreover, more data often are not needed.

The reality is that there are plenty of data on the factors that interfere with so many students not benefitting from good instruction. Indeed, spending more on data gathering (e.g., more needs assessment, screening) often uses up sparse resources that are needed to develop essential special assistance.

We view the following type of expanded framework as a move toward what has been called *intelligent accountability*.

Adopting Standards for Learning Supports

Besides accountability, school improvement discussions across the country have adopted sets of standards. For the most part, however, the standards movement has not dealt with the reality that curriculum and teaching standards fall far short of providing a focus on how schools can enhance equity of opportunity for all. Such standards give short shrift to factors that interfere with successful teaching and pay too little attention to the many students manifesting moderate-to-severe learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Establishing standards for student/learning supports is essential to rectifying these short-comings. Such standards in no way diminish the importance of curriculum and teaching standards or of the need to improve such standards. Every teacher must have the ability and resources to bring a sound curriculum to life and apply strategies that make learning meaningful and effective; to these ends, appropriate curriculum and teaching standards are foundational. But, such standards are insufficient for enhancing equity of opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. Standards generated for learning supports can help drive and guide development of such supports and related personnel preparation. For a prototype of standards and quality indicators for a learning supports component, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/qualityindicators.pdf>.

Concluding Comments

By continuing to marginalize student/learning supports, policy makers continue to marginalize all students who are not doing well at school. It is unlikely that the majority of students in economically depressed areas will perform well if schools and communities do not pursue a holistic, systemic, and collaborative approach.

Ending the marginalization of how schools address barriers to learning and teaching involves expanding the prevailing framework for school improvement. Adopting a three component framework not only can enhance student learning and well-being, it can help strengthen their families, schools, and surrounding neighborhood.

Note: Elsewhere we offer a prototype for operationalizing a Learning Supports Component into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable intervention system and emphasize that doing so can fully embed mental health in schools.

References

- ¹ See list references to our Center reports analyzing ESSA's focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essaanalyses.pdf>
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>
How Well Do State Legislatures Focus on Improving School Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching & Re engage Disconnected Students? <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Legisanal.pdf>
- ² Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (1997). Addressing barriers to learning: Beyond school-linked services and full service schools. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 67, 408-421.
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http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/24_moving_prevention_from_the_fringes_into_the_fabric.pdf
- ⁴ Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006). Mapping a school's resources to improve their use in preventing and ameliorating problems (pp. 977-990). In C. Franklin, M. B. Harris, & P. Allen-Mears (Eds.), *The school services sourcebook: A guide for school-based professionals*. New York: Oxford University Press. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/53_mapping_a_schools_resources_to_improve1.pdf
Also see our Center's resource on funding and funding integration.
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fundinginteg.pdf>
- ⁵ *Integrated Student Supports and Equity: What's Not Being Discussed?*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/integpolicy.pdf>
Also see our Center's resource on funding and funding integration.
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fundinginteg.pdf>
- ⁶ Adelman, H. S. & Taylor, L. (2011). Turning around, transforming, and continuously improving schools: Policy proposals are still based on a two rather than a three component blueprint. *International Journal of School Disaffection*, 8, (Spring).
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http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html
- ⁷ See the previously cited references.

What Should We Focus on?

Some tend to measure whatever can be easily measured.
That's okay but quite limited.

Some disregard that which can't be measured or
give it an arbitrary quantitative value.
That's artificial and misleading.

Some presume that what can't be measured easily isn't very important.
That's blindness.

Some say what can't be measured really doesn't exist.
That's suicide.

adapted from Yankelovich