

## *Policy Notes*

### **Some Points About Influencing Policy**

**A**s we attempt to influence public policy, it is essential to have some perspective on what the term means.

Policy denotes a purposive course of action aimed at dealing with a matter of concern. We treat public policy as courses of action carried out by institutions and people who staff them. We also view the process of developing policy as political, but not limited to the enactment of laws, regulations, and guidelines. That is, while much policy is enacted by legally elected representatives, policy often emerges informally because of the way people in institutions pursue course of action each day. Decisions not to act also constitute policy making.

A great deal of discussion in recent years focuses on whether policy should be made from the top-down or the bottom-up. Our experience in attempting to influence policy related to the matter of addressing barriers to student learning suggests that efforts to generate changes must focus on the top, bottom, and at every level of the system.

The commitment and priority assigned to a policy generally is reflected in the support provided for implementing specified courses of action. Some actions are mandated with ample funds to ensure they are carried out; others are mandated with little or no funding; some are simply encouraged.

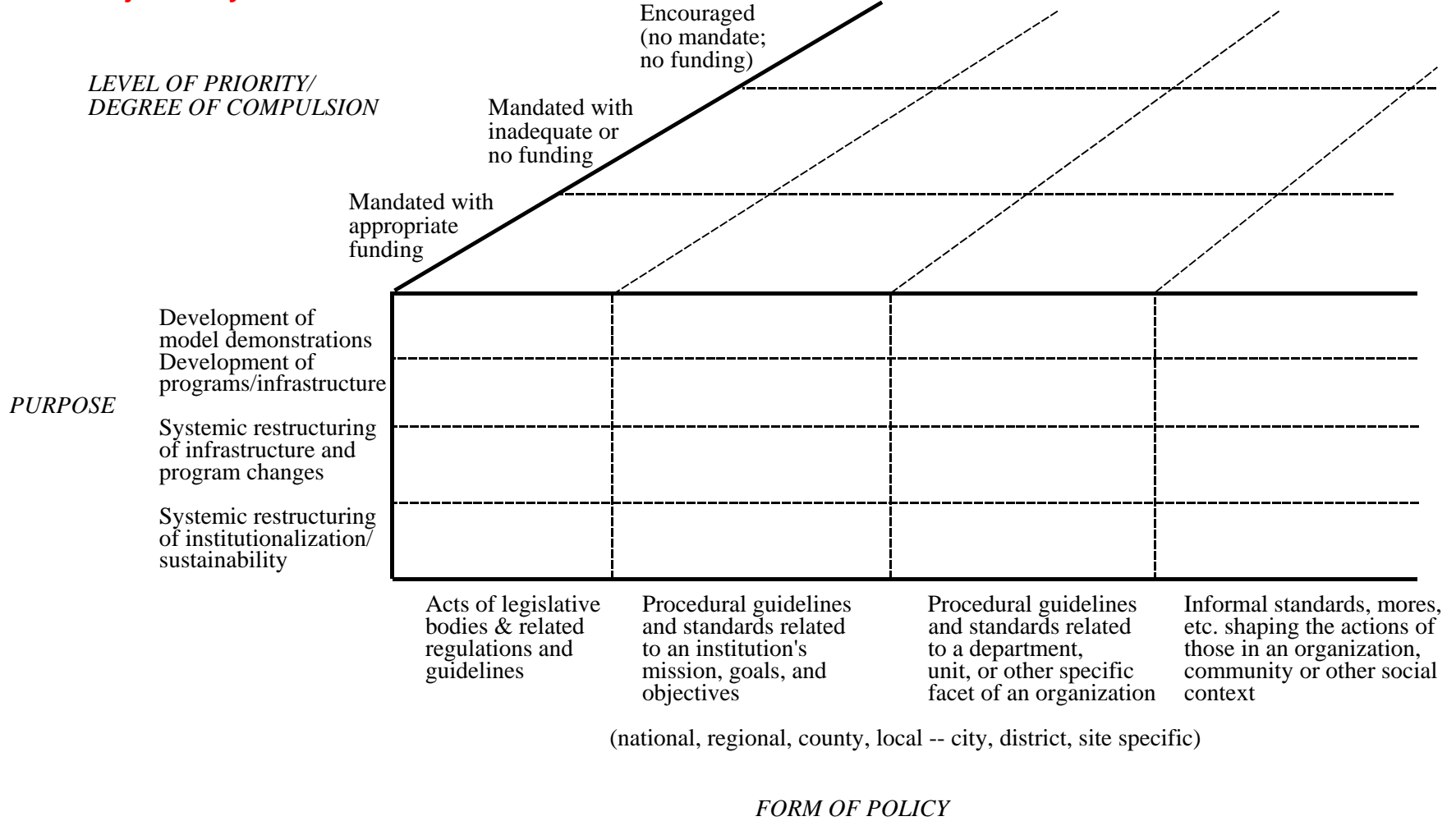
Designated courses of action vary considerably. More often than not policy is enacted in a piecemeal manner, leading to fragmented activity rather than comprehensive, integrated approaches. Relatedly, time frames often are quite restricted -- looking for quick payoffs and ignoring the fact that the more complex the area of concern, the longer it usually takes to deal with it. The focus too often is on funding short-term projects to show what is feasible -- with little or no thought given to sustainability and scale-up.

Public policy related to addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development clearly warrants renewed attention. Those concerned with this topic have a role to play in both analyzing the current policy picture and influencing needed changes. The figure on the next page underscores some of the major policy dimensions we find worth keeping in mind as we think about influencing public policy. This is followed by a prototype policy for a *Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports*.

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**Some Major Policy Dimensions**



*OTHER DIMENSIONS*

Comprehensiveness = piecemeal (fragmented) action ↔ comprehensive (integrated) action

Degree of flexibility in administering policy = none ↔ full waivers granted as appropriate

Length of funding = brief ↔ long-term

Requirement of in-kind contribution (buy-in) = none ↔ designated percentage (kept constant or with proportion shifting over time)

## **Board Policy - (Prototype adapted from board policy in several districts)**

### **Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports\***

#### **Rationale:**

The Governing Board recognizes that for some of our students, improvements in instruction and curricula are necessary but not sufficient. We recognize that the economic, neighborhood, family, school, peer, and personal circumstances can create barriers to teaching and learning. The Board believes that the role of schools and the district is to promote development of the whole child and ensure equity of opportunity. This includes addressing barriers to learning by creating a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports, referred to as a *learning supports component*, that is *fully interwoven* with other District wide and site level school improvement efforts.

The Governing Board recognizes that school, home, and community resources combined together and developed into a comprehensive system can support development of the whole child, can address barriers to learning and teaching, and re-engage disconnected students. All children, youth, and families members should have equal access to interventions and resources in proportion to their needs. The successful development of such a system is essential to efforts to improve school climate.

With this policy statement, we commit to developing a unified, comprehensive, equitable, and systemic *learning supports component* for every school. Such a component joins the instructional and management/governance components as the third primary and essential facet of school improvement.

#### **Details:**

It is the intent of the Board of Education that a *Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports* be fully interwoven with other school and district program efforts to improve instruction and maximize the use of resources at individual schools. All interventions are to be tailored to the diversity of students and families in our schools.

Learning supports are defined as the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual assistance intended to enable all pupils to have an equal opportunity for success at school. To enable effective use of learning supports, school and community resources are unified in a learning supports component and fully integrated with instructional efforts and interventions and professional development. A learning supports component is deployed in classrooms and schoolwide to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

The Superintendent or designee shall establish a leadership group to prepare a District design and strategic plan for developing a *Unified and Comprehensive Learning Supports Component* that facilitates the establishment of such a support system at each school. The design and plan shall clarify administrative leadership and mechanisms at District and school levels and ways for clusters (e.g., feeder patterns) of schools and central office operations to support school site efforts (e.g. helping schools achieve economics of scale and implement practices that effectively improve classroom operations and student learning). The design and plan shall also focus on ways to further promote collaboration with communities at the classroom, school, cluster, and central office levels.

The component design should encompass a continuum of interventions that mesh with community efforts to prevent problems, respond as early as feasible after a problem surfaces, and provide for students with severe and chronic problems. The following content arenas should be considered when establishing the continuum:

(1) *Classroom-based learning supports.* Teacher professional development and collaboration with other teachers and support staff should enhance the capacity of teachers to personalize instruction, promote healthy development, address problems, engage and re-engage students in classroom learning, and foster social, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development. Teacher professional development and collaboration includes strategies for better enhancing resilience and addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems within the context of the classroom. To enhance classroom resources and strategies and professional development, this includes in-classroom collaboration with student support staff and targeted use of volunteers.

(2) *Support for Transitions.* The focus here is on enhancing the capacity of schools to handle transitions for students and families (e.g., transitions throughout the school day, over the school year, newcomers entering school, grade level to grade level, school to school and school to college or work). Interventions might include: welcoming and social support programs for newcomers; school and classroom adjustment programs; before and after school and lunch time programs that enrich learning and provide safe recreation; attendance monitoring and support; programs for vulnerable populations, including, but not limited to, those in homeless education, migrant education, and special education programs and counseling for vocational and college transition.

(3) *Crisis Response and Prevention.* The focus here is on establishing systemic approaches for responding to, and preventing, emergency crises. Interventions might include: the establishment of a crisis team to ensure immediate response, school wide and school-linked prevention programs to enhance safety, reduce violence, bullying, harassment, abuse, and other threats to ensure a supportive and productive learning environment.

(4) *Home Involvement and Engagement with School.* The focus here is on enhancing home involvement through interventions that support family needs and enhance communication and connection between home and school. These may include ways for those in need of health and social services to connect effectively with such supports; family literacy programs; parent education; shared decision making and problem solving affecting the pupil and the school; interventions for reengaging homes that have disengaged from school involvement.

(5) *Community involvement and support.* The focus here is on enhancing limited school resources and filling critical intervention gaps through linkages with a wide range of community resources and agencies such as: health clinics, probation offices, mental health services, libraries, recreational facilities, community artists; volunteers and mentors, and postsecondary education institutions.

(6) *Student and Family Assistance.* After all appropriate efforts have been made to address factors interfering with a student learning and performing at school (including application of Response to Intervention), special assistance for pupils and their families is provided or pursued through referrals that effectively connect those in need with direct services to address barriers to the learning of pupils at school. Interventions might include effective case and resource management, connecting with community service providers, special assistance for teachers in addressing the problems of specific individuals, counseling or special education.

\*Research, standards, and quality indicators related to a Unified Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports is available from the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/> .