

## **Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure (2022)**

The current trend in improving student/learning supports involves tinkering in ways that make changes that don't make a dent in reducing the opportunity and achievement gaps. Schools need a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that embeds a focus on a full range of mental health and psychosocial and educational concerns. To enable such a major system change, school improvement policy must expand from a two- to a three-component framework and ensure that all three are fully integrated and pursued as primary components at schools.

Ultimately, significantly improving student and learning supports requires not only a vision for good schooling, but a way to get there from here. The mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. And the reality is that the current operational infrastructure at all levels require major reworking.

Since planned improvements mean little if they don't play out at the school level, this reports begins at that level. Then, based on analyses of what is needed to facilitate and enhance school level efforts, mechanisms are conceived that enable groups or "families" of schools to work together to increase efficiency and effectiveness and garner economies of scale. From this perspective, district level mechanisms are reconceived with a view to supporting each school and family of schools as they change and develop. Also at the district level, establishment of a school-community collaborative is outlined. Finally, we highlight the special operational infrastructure that facilitates adoption, adaptation, and implementation of the major systemic changes involved in improving student/learning supports.

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## Preface

Some time ago, Seymour Sarason cautioned:

*Good ideas and missionary zeal are sometimes enough to change the thinking of individuals; they are rarely, if ever, effective in changing complicated organizations (like the school) with traditions, dynamics, and goals of their own.*

And John Maynard Keynes cogently stressed:

*The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones.*

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, some principals were telling us that as much as 25 percent of their budget goes to addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. At the same time, they recognize that these resources are not producing needed results.

With the aim of fostering major system changes, our Center at UCLA pursues new directions for improving student/learning supports. In previous reports, we have offered transformational policy and intervention frameworks to advance efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

This report focuses on the necessity of *reworking operational infrastructure at schools and districts* in ways that can significantly advance whole school, whole student improvement.

We often find that efforts to discuss operational infrastructure are met with eyes that glaze-over. However, the reality is that significantly improving student and learning supports requires not only a vision for good schooling, but a way to get there from here. The mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change.

And, since planned improvements mean little if they don't play out at the school level, we conceive the process beginning at that level. Then, based on analyses of what is needed to facilitate and enhance school level efforts, mechanisms are conceived that enable groups or "families" of schools to work together to increase efficiency and effectiveness and garner economies of scale. From this perspective, district level mechanisms are reconceived with a view to supporting each school and family of schools as they change and develop. Also at the district level, establishment of a school-community collaborative is outlined. Finally, we highlight the special operational infrastructure that facilitates adoption, adaptation, and implementation of the major systemic changes involved in improving student/learning supports.

Our emphasis on new directions in no way is meant to demean current efforts. We know that the demands placed on those working in schools and districts often go well beyond what is reasonable. Given the current working conditions in many schools, our intent is to help make the hardwork generate better results.

Some of what we propose is difficult to accomplish. Hopefully, the fact that there are schools, districts, and state agencies that have trailblazed the way and provided lessons learned will engender a sense of encouragement to those committed to innovation.

It will be obvious that our work owes much to many. We are especially grateful to those who are pioneering major systemic changes across the country. These leaders and so many in the field have generously offered their insights and wisdom. And, of course, we are indebted to hundreds of scholars whose research and writing is a shared treasure. As always, we take this opportunity to thank Perry Nelson and the host of graduate and undergraduate students at UCLA who contribute so much to our work each day, and to the many young people and their families who continue to teach us all.

Respectfully submitted for your consideration,

Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor

# Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure

We understand that the title of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) is aspirational. One major problem with the legislation is that it does too little to guide and support schools so that they play a more effective role in addressing barriers to development, learning, and teaching and in reengaging students who have disconnected from schooling.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic,

- >too many youngsters were experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- >too many schools were ill-prepared to cope with the many students in need.

And the situation is worse today.

As schools struggle to reduce the achievement and opportunity gaps, fundamental changes are essential not only in the instructional component of schooling, but in how schools address factors getting in the way of students engaging in instruction.

In previous reports, we have presented analyses of what is wrong with how districts and schools address barriers to learning and teaching.<sup>1</sup> We also have detailed a transformational policy and intervention framework for improving student/learning supports.<sup>2</sup> This report focuses on the necessity of *reworking operational infrastructure at schools and districts* in ways that significantly advance school improvement related to student/learning supports.

The changes discussed are essential to ensure effective and empowered leadership and staffing for the systemwide improvements we envision. Our research and development efforts indicate that the work entails designing, developing, building capacity, implementing, evaluating, and sustaining a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families.

Outlined in this report are mechanisms for

- leadership
- carrying out specific tasks related to system building and providing student/learning supports
- partnerships among school and community stakeholders

Part I begins by discussing reworking operational infrastructure at the school level.

Part II covers connecting a “family” of schools (e.g., a feeder cluster) with a view to enhancing cohesive efforts, improving efficiencies, and garnering economies of scale.

Part III focuses on reworking the operational infrastructure at the district level to ensure critical support for schools that empower changes, provide capacity building and oversight, and ensure replication to scale and sustainability.

Part IV discusses and illustrates why a well-designed operational infrastructure is essential to effective school-community collaboration.

Part V highlights an operational infrastructure for facilitating system change in schools.

## What are Learning Supports?

Learning support resources include a wide range of student and learning support personnel (e.g., counselors, school psychologists, social workers, nurses; compensatory and special education staff, and more). They encompass specialized services, special initiatives, and grants. Involved are programs for afterschool, wellness, dropout prevention, attendance, drug abuse prevention, violence prevention, pregnancy prevention. Add in parent/family/health centers, volunteer assistance, and community resources linked to schools. And of course there is more. Allocated funds come from the general budget, compensatory and special education, and special projects (including those supported by extra-mural sources).

A system of student and learning supports requires more than conceiving a continuum of intervention, such as the MTSS framework. MTSS and its pyramid depiction does provide a good starting point for broadly framing student and learning supports. As widely conceived, however, the multi-tier model needs to be expanded into intertwined sets of subsystems at each level that braid together a wide range of school and community (including home) resources. The subsystems focus on promoting whole-child development and prevention, identifying and addressing problems as soon as they arise, and providing for students with severe and chronic problems

It also is necessary to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that reflect a school's daily efforts to provide student/learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide. Our analysis of typical "laundry lists" of district programs and services used to address barriers to learning and teaching led us to group student/learning supports into six domains. In organizing the activity in this way, it becomes clearer what supports are needed in and out of the classroom to enable student learning. The six domains are:

- *Embedding student and learning supports into regular classroom strategies to enable learning and teaching* (e.g., working collaboratively with other teachers and student support staff to ensure instruction is personalized with an emphasis on enhancing intrinsic motivation and social-emotional development for all students, especially those experiencing mild to moderate learning and behavior problems; reengaging those who have become disengaged from instruction; 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 intervention);
- *Supporting transitions*, including assisting students and families as they negotiate the many hurdles related to reentry or initial entry into school, school and grade changes, daily transitions, program transitions, accessing special assistance, and so forth;
- *Increasing home and school connections and engagement*, such as addressing barriers to home involvement, helping those in the home enhance supports for their children, strengthening home and school communication, and increasing home support for the school;
- *Responding to – and, where feasible, preventing – school and personal crises* (e.g., by preparing for emergencies, implementing plans when an event occurs, countering the impact of traumatic events, providing followup assistance, implementing prevention strategies, and creating a caring and safe learning environment);
- *Increasing community involvement and collaborative engagement* (e.g., outreach to develop greater community connection and support from a wide range of resources – including enhanced use of volunteers and developing a school – community collaborative infrastructure); and
- *Facilitating student and family access to special assistance*, first in the regular program and then, as needed, through referral for specialized services on and off campus.

**Appreciating Operational Mechanisms at All Levels**

Figure 1 highlights the multiple levels involved in improving schools and the types of key mechanisms that shape what happens. Rationally, operational infrastructures should be systemically connected at each level and among the various levels.

Ultimately, everything depends on planned improvements playing out effectively at the school level. Therefore, conceptually, our first emphasis is on what an integrated, three component infrastructure should look like at a school. Then, the focus expands to include the mechanisms needed to connect a family or complex (e.g., feeder pattern) of schools. With respect to districts, mechanisms need to be reworked in ways that best support the work at the school and complex levels.

At all levels, productive school collaborations with surrounding community resources require a well-developed and institutionalized operational infrastructure.

And this is also what is required for effective facilitation of system changes.

Figure 1. Multiple levels and key mechanisms involved in school improvement.

		<b>Mechanisms</b>		
		<b>Leadership</b> (e.g., administrative leader, leadership team)	<b>Workgroups – Standing and ad hoc</b> (e.g., for carrying out specific tasks related to system building and providing student/learning supports)	<b>Collaborations</b> (e.g., school-community stakeholder connections)
<b>Levels</b>	School			
	Family of Schools			
	District			
	Regional			
	State			
	Federal			

Given that our focus here is on the school, family of schools, and district, at this time we will leave it to others to extrapolate implications for reworking the infrastructures at regional, state, and federal levels.

## Part I. Reworking Operational Infrastructure at the School Level

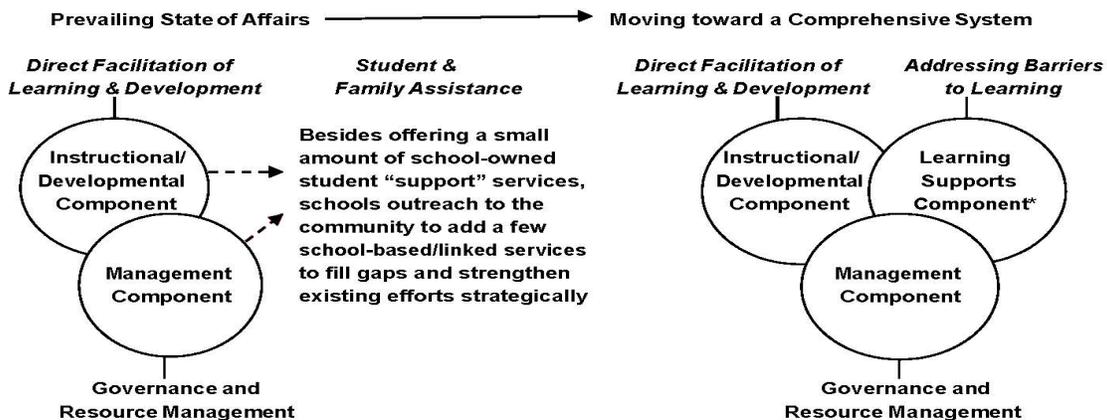
In analyzing the infrastructure at schools, we seldom find a designated administrator for improving student/learning supports. There are workgroups (e.g., teams) focused on crisis response, student reviews, and IEPs. There may be a school-based health center. At community schools, there are mechanisms for enhancing relationships with community services and outreaching to families.

In general, mechanisms associated with student/learning supports are marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. The marginalization is reflected in the ad hoc, piecemeal, and fragmented way such supports are pursued at schools.

Ending the marginalization and fragmentation requires rethinking school improvement policy and practice. As illustrated below, expanding the framework from two- to three-components.

Exhibit

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



\*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.

A three component framework for school improvement includes moving forward with the development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Such a commitment also calls for an operational infrastructure that maintains and regularly renews the system and is fully integrated with the mechanisms for instruction and management/governance.

## New Leadership Mechanisms

Improving how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students and families requires dedicated and empowered leadership mechanisms.<sup>3</sup> The leadership mechanisms embody the vision for the work and are key to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.

Examples of major leadership functions and tasks are:

- Aggregating data about all students to analyze school needs with respect to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students
- Conceptualizing, developing, planning, and overseeing implementation, system improvement, sustainability, and renewal
- Mapping student and learning supports activity and resources (including personnel and budget) at the school and those working with the school from the community
- Analyzing resources and doing a gap and redundancy analysis using a comprehensive intervention framework that covers prevention and amelioration of problems
- Formulating priorities for system development (in keeping with the most pressing needs of the school)
- Recommending how resources should be deployed and redeployed to strengthen existing efforts, including filling gaps (e.g., clarifying which activities warrant continued support and suggesting better uses for nonproductive resources)
- Planning and facilitating systemic improvements
- Facilitating coordination and integration of school resources and connections with community resources and resolving turf and operational problems
- Establishing standing and ad hoc workgroups to carry out tasks involved in system development and providing student and family supports
- Performing formative and summative evaluation of system development, capacity building, maintenance, and outcomes (including expanding the school accountability framework to assess how well schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students)
- "Social marketing" and developing strategies for enhancing resources

*Leadership mechanisms embody the vision for and are key to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports*

Note that the above activity expands the focus of student/learning supports from the current emphasis on a relatively few troubled and troubling individuals to a focus on the needs of all students. Also note that the work includes outreaching to the community to fill critical system gaps by weaving in human and financial resources from public and private sectors.

Key mechanisms for carrying out these functions are a designated administrative leader and a leadership team. Their responsibility and accountability is to (a) transform current marginalized and fragmented interventions into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports and (b) ensure the system is fully integrated as a primary and essential component of school improvement.

*The  
administrative  
leader*

Given that learning supports coalesce into one of three primary and essential components of whole student, whole school improvement, it is imperative that the component has a designated administrative school leader (e.g., an assistant principal, dean, or other leader who regularly sits at administrative and decision making "tables"). The job responsibilities and accountabilities encompass working with staff and community resources to develop, implement, maintain, and renew over time a full array of student/learning supports. Key functions include overseeing and guiding changes to facilitate system development in ways that not only coordinate and integrate, but move toward unifying all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. Moreover, the work involves doing all this in ways that ensure full integration of the three components at the school.<sup>4</sup>

The first major task involves establishing a leadership team capable of developing and ensuring capacity building for and sustainability of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports at the school. After establishing the team, the administrative lead is responsible for building team capacity, facilitating meetings, overseeing progress, and maintaining its long-term integrity.

*The  
leadership  
team*

A first set of tasks for the Learning Supports Leadership Team involves pursuing the following functions:

- Mapping student and learning supports activity and resources (including personnel and budget) at the school and those working with the school from the community
- Analyzing resources and doing a gap and redundancy analysis using a comprehensive intervention framework that covers prevention and amelioration of problems
- Formulating priorities for system development (in keeping with the most pressing needs of the school)
- Recommending how resources should be deployed and redeployed to strengthen existing efforts, including filling gaps (e.g., clarifying which activities warrant continued support and suggesting better uses for nonproductive resources)

(See the aid for *Mapping & Analyzing Learning Supports* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf> ; also see the aid for *Listing Current Resources Used at a School for Addressing Barriers Learning and Teaching* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdffdocs/listingresources.pdf> .)

The resource mapping and analyses provide a basis for reducing fragmentation, eliminating intervention redundancies, and increasing cost-efficacy.<sup>5</sup>

Over time, the team's efforts focus on evolving the vision at the school for student and learning supports. The aims are not only to play a role in preventing and ameliorating learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems, but to contribute to classroom and schoolwide efforts to foster academic, social, emotional, and physical functioning and promote an increasingly positive school climate.

Where creation of "another team" is seen as a burden, existing teams, such as student or teacher assistance teams or a school crisis team, have demonstrated the ability to focus on system development by augmenting their membership and adding system concerns to the agenda. In small schools where there are so few staff that a large team is not feasible, the leadership team may consist of just a few persons.

*Team size is less important than members' breadth of vision & commitment to unifying & developing a comprehensive & equitable system*

The membership of the team depends on who is available to play a leadership role (e.g., guidance counselor, school psychologist, nurse, social worker, attendance and dropout counselor, special education staff, after school program staff, bilingual and Title I program coordinator, health educator, representatives of any community agency that is significantly involved with the school). In addition to the administrative leader for the component and student/learning support staff, such a team is well-advised to add the energies and expertise of others (e.g., regular classroom teachers, a union representative, non-certificated staff, parents, older students). The larger the group, of course, the harder it is to find a meeting time and the longer each meeting tends to run. Nevertheless, the value of broad stakeholder representation far outweighs these matters.

For the team to function well, there must be a core of committed members who have or will acquire the ability to carry out identified functions and make the mechanism work. Because various activities at a school require the expertise of the same personnel, some individuals will necessarily have multiple commitments. The team must have a facilitator who is able to keep the members task-focused and productive. It also needs someone who records decisions and plans and, between meetings, reminds members of tasks they have agreed to do prior to the next meeting. Advanced technology (management systems, electronic bulletin boards and email, clearinghouses) can help facilitate communication, networking, planning, and so forth.

The team meets as needed. Frequency of meetings depends on ambition and time. Initially, this may mean once a week. Later, when meetings are scheduled for every 2-3 weeks, continuity and momentum are maintained through interim tasks performed by workgroups or individuals. Because some participants are at a school on a part-time basis, one of the problems that must be addressed is rescheduling personnel so that there is an overlapping time to meet. Of course, the reality is that not all team members will be able to attend every meeting, but a good approximation can be made, with steps taken to keep an absent member informed.<sup>6</sup>

*Standing and ad hoc workgroups*

Workgroups (often called committees and teams) are mechanisms for performing specific tasks. Standing workgroups can help develop and implement high priority schoolwide and classroom supports related to one or more learning supports' domains.

Student review and IEP teams are a continuing form of standing workgroups.

Ad hoc workgroups are formed as needed to perform a designated short-term task, such as carrying out one of the leadership team's functions.

When we mention a Learning Supports Leadership Team, some school staff quickly respond: *We already have one!*

When we explore this with them, we usually find what they have is a *student case-oriented team* – that is, a team focused on individual students who are having problems. (Such a team may be called a student study team, student success team, student assistance team, teacher assistance team, and so forth.) A related team, of course, is the IEP team. The functions of student case-oriented teams include triage, referral, and care monitoring/ management, progress review and reassessment.

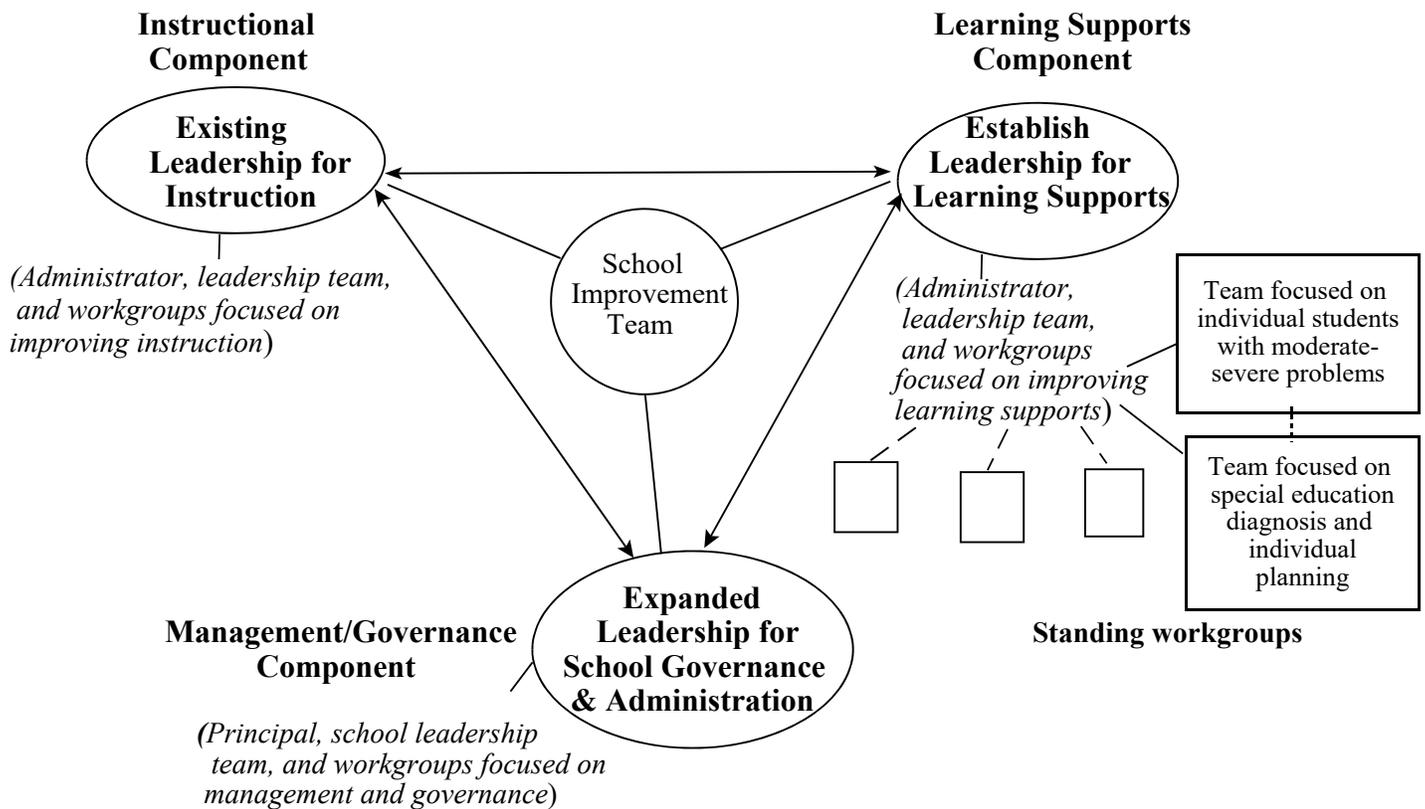
Clearly, an emphasis on specific students is warranted. However, as the primary focus associated with student and learning supports, this approach tends to sidetrack development and implementation of improvements at schools that can prevent many individual problems and help many more students.

So, we designate the student case-oriented teams as one type of standing work group and contrast them with standing and ad hoc workgroups that focus on the functions related to system improvement. This involves pursuing tasks related to developing and implementing schoolwide and classroom student/learning supports and ensuring they are implemented in a unified, comprehensive, and equitable manner.

### **Prototype of an Integrated School Operational Infrastructure**

As illustrated in the figure on the following page, each of the three primary and essential components for school improvement requires (1) administrative leadership, (2) a leadership team to work with the leader on system development, and (3) standing and occasionally ad hoc workgroups to accomplish specific tasks. The leaders for the instructional and learning supports components are part of the management/governance component to ensure all three components are integrated and that the learning supports component is not marginalized. If a special team is assigned to work on school improvement planning, implementation, and evaluation, the leaders for all three components must be on that team.

Figure 2. Prototype for an Integrated Operational Infrastructure at the School Level\*



As illustrated, each of the three primary and essential components for school improvement requires

- administrative leadership and other advocates/champions with responsibility and accountability for ensuring the vision for the component is not lost,
- a leadership team to work with the administrative lead on system development,
- standing workgroups with designated ongoing functions and occasional ad hoc workgroups to accomplish specific short-term tasks; the teams that currently focus on processing students referred for out-of-classroom assistance are identified as two standing work groups.

To ensure coordination and cohesion, the leader for the instructional component and the newly established leader for the learning supports component are full members of the management/governance component, and if a special team is assigned to work on school improvement, the leaders for all three components are on that team.

\*Note that most schools already have an operational infrastructure that designates leadership and workgroups for improving instruction and management functions. This generally is not the case for a learning supports component. Without such mechanisms, efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students cannot operate as a primary and essential facet of school improvement. A parallel reworking should be done at the district level (see Figure 4).

## Part II. Connecting a Complex or “Family” of Schools

Schools in the same geographic (catchment) area have shared concerns, and feeder schools often are interacting with students from the same family. All three components of school improvement can benefit when a “family” of schools works together.

For example, some programs and personnel are (or can be) shared by several neighboring schools, thus minimizing redundancy and reducing costs. Think about overall capacity building and personnel development. Think about supports for transitions, shared crises, and working with families who have youngsters attending more than one level of schooling in the same cluster. (When a family has several children in need of special attention, it is neither cost-effective nor sound practice for each school to work with the family separately.)

School leaders from a “family” of schools can establish a multi-site leadership council to help ensure cohesive and equitable deployment of resources and also can enhance the pooling of resources to reduce costs. Such a multi-site mechanism can enhance leadership, facilitate communication and connection, ensure quality improvement across sites, and facilitate ongoing development of the component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The mechanism can be particularly useful for integrating the efforts of high schools and their feeder middle and elementary schools (see Figure 3).

With respect to linking with community resources, a family of connected schools is especially attractive to community agencies who often don't have the time or personnel to link with individual schools.

*Community agencies often don't have the time or personnel to link with individual schools*

Natural starting points for sharing include analyses of each school's needs assessment, resource mapping, and recommendations about priorities for system improvement. Specific attention is paid to how each school can work together on common concerns such as improving instruction, enhancing attendance, safe school plans, and reducing violent behavior.

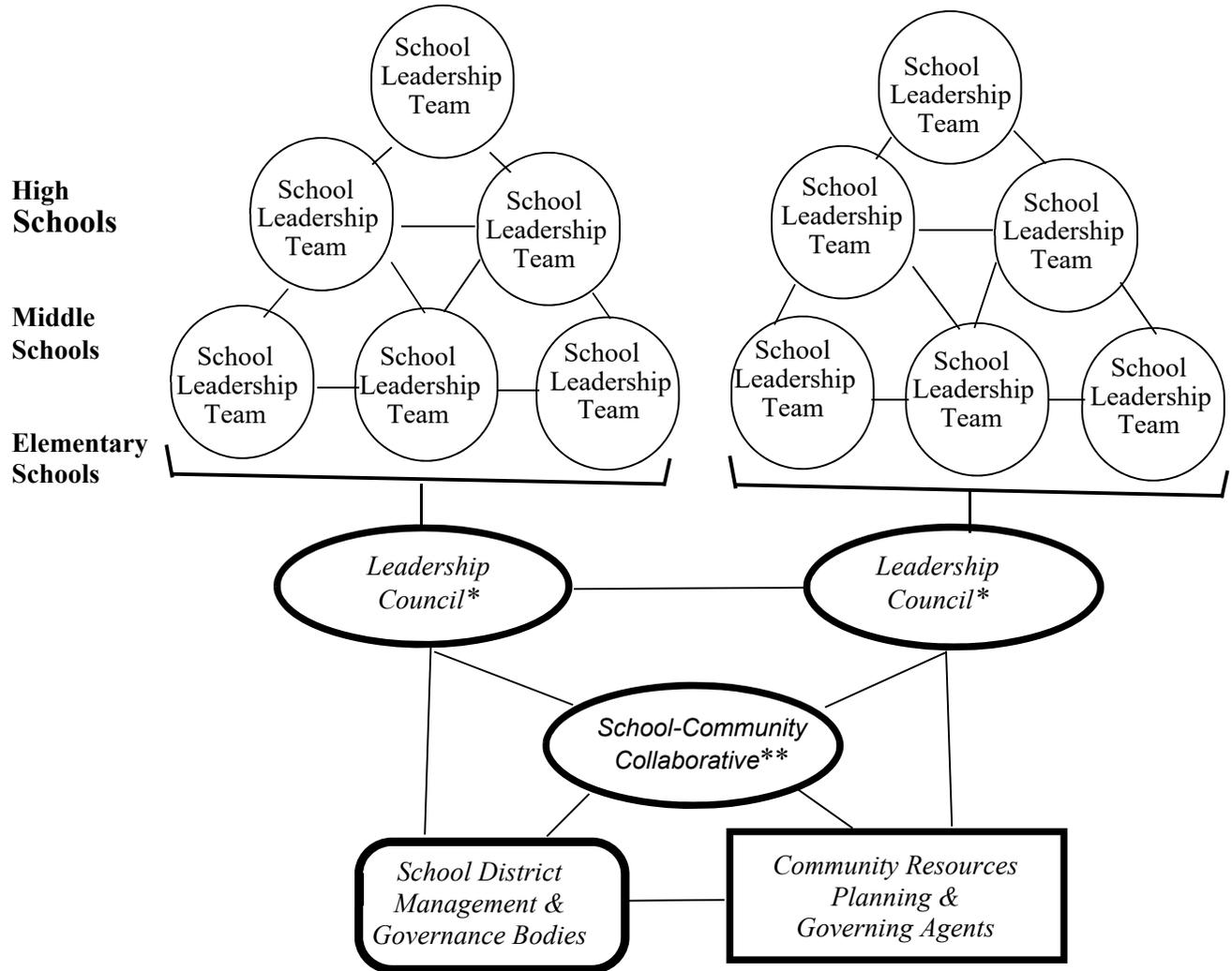
As illustrated in Figure 3, the multi-site team or Leadership *Council* brings together representatives from each participating school's Leadership Teams to meet (e.g., once a month). The objectives are to

- identify and meet common needs with respect to mandates and other functions and personnel development
- create processes for communication, linkages, coordination, and collaboration among schools and with community resources (note: multi-school councils are especially attractive to community agencies lacking the time or personnel to link with each individual school)
- ensure cohesive and equitable deployment of resources
- weave together human and financial resources from public and private sectors and encourage the pooling of resources to minimize redundancy, reduce costs, and achieve economies of scale.

While all three components of school improvement can benefit from a multi-site council, if the schools are not ready to connect with a whole school focus, we recommend starting with the leadership for the learning supports component.

At the district level, partnering with community stakeholders to establish and institutionalize a school-community *collaborative* provides a mechanism for doing even more to ensure efficiency, effectiveness, and equity (see Part IV).

Figure 3. Connecting Resources Across Feeder Schools, a District, and Community-Wide



\*A Leadership *Council* consists of representatives from each of schools in a complex. It provides a mechanism for analyzing needs and resources at a family of schools and can enhance how resources are used and developed, achieve economies of scale, and improve outcomes. Councils also enable connections with and between district and community decision makers – again with an agenda of enhancing resources, garnering economies of scale, and whole school improvement.

\*\*See Part IV.

### Part III. Reworking Operational Infrastructure at the District Level

As with schools, most districts do not have a unified approach to student/learning supports and so a major step involves unifying such supports into a third primary and essential component. Figure 4 lays out a framework that parallels the revamped one at the school level to avoid a disconnect between the operational infrastructure at schools and at the district level.

#### Administrative Leaders

Job description for the leaders of each component must be revised to reflect the new responsibilities and accountabilities.<sup>4</sup> Their positions should be established at a high enough level to ensure that each is always an active and influential participant at key planning and decision-making tables. Relatedly, all three components must be a regular part of the agenda at school board meetings.

Given the past marginalization of student/learning supports, it is crucial to establish the district's administrative leader for this work at a high enough level to ensure s/he is always an active participant at key planning and decision-making tables.

#### Leadership Teams

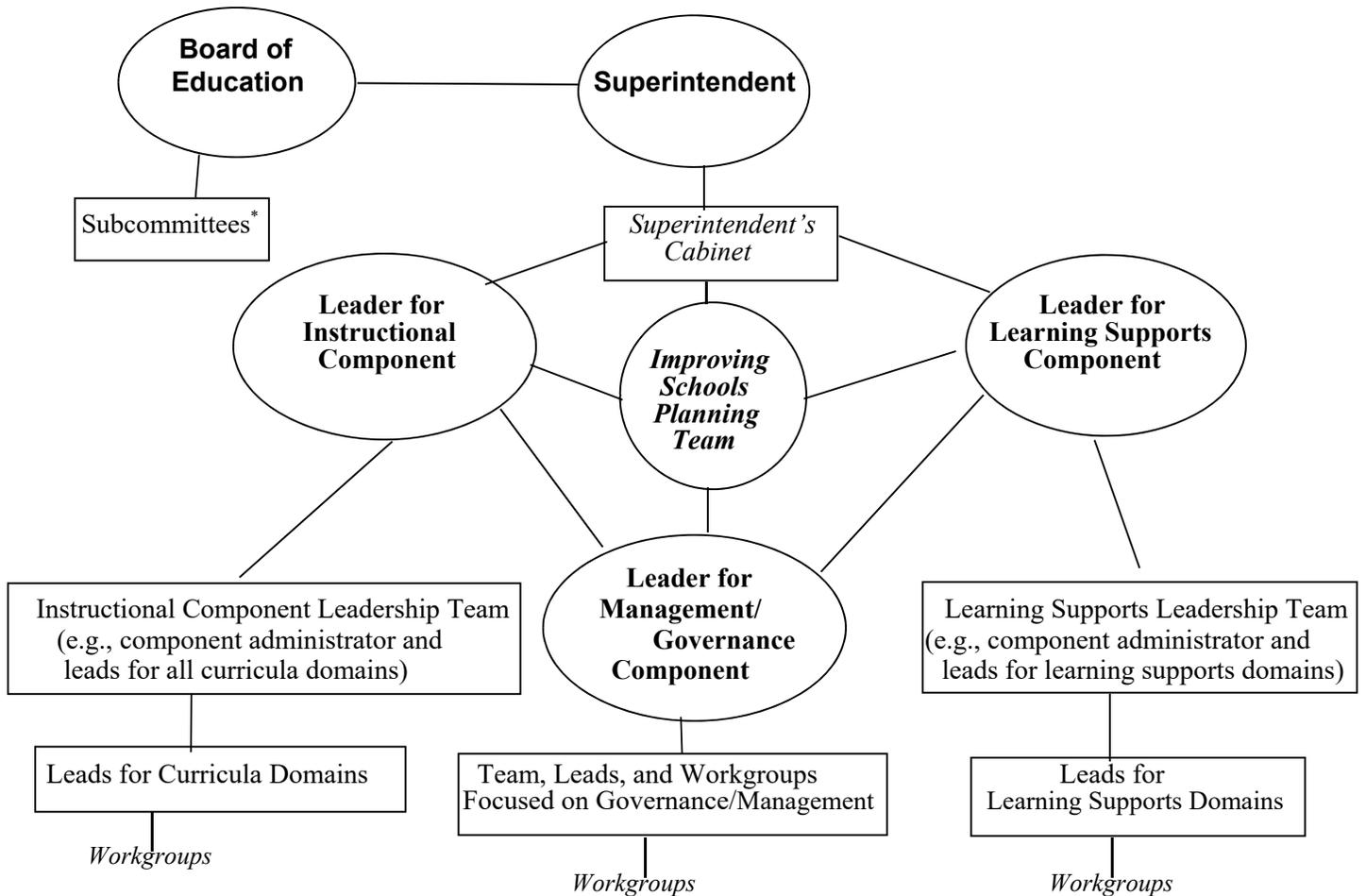
Leadership teams for each component focus on system design and strategic planning for development and implementation across the district.

With specific respect to the learning supports component:

- (1) Their initial focus is on coalescing student and learning support resources at the district level. The resources of concern come from the general fund, compensatory education, special education, special projects, and community resource linkages to schools (e.g., student support personnel such as school psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses; compensatory and special education staff; special initiatives, grants, and parent/family/health centers; programs for afterschool, wellness, dropout prevention, attendance, drug abuse prevention, violence prevention, pregnancy prevention, volunteer assistance).
- (2) On a daily basis, the team provides guidance, support, and capacity building to
  - support the ongoing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports at schools
  - connect families of schools
  - facilitate connections between schools and community resources and stakeholders

The emphasis on a three component framework for school improvement calls for capacity building attention that yields cross-component and cross-disciplinary understandings to broaden the perspective of personnel and enable them to work collaboratively on the improvement agenda for schools.

Figure 4: Prototype for Operational Infrastructure at the District Level



\*If there isn't one, a board subcommittee for learning supports should be created to ensure policy and supports for developing a comprehensive system of learning supports at every school (see Center document *Restructuring Boards of Education to Enhance Schools' Effectiveness in Addressing Barriers to Student Learning* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/boardrep.pdf>)

## Part IV. Operational Infrastructure for a School-Community Collaborative

Efforts at all levels have been made to increase collaboration between education and other societal stakeholders. Once again our focus here is on schools and districts – leaving others to extrapolate from there.

Interest in connecting school and community resources is growing at an exponential rate. The goal is to maximize mutual benefits, including school improvement, 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 young people, schools, families, and neighborhoods.

For most schools, connecting school-home-community is seen as an essential facet of good schools and especially efforts to ameliorate student problems, promote their well-being, and generally enhance equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond. (And when there is a school-related ballot measure, schools seek voter support.) For community agencies, connection with schools is seen as providing better access to families and their children, promoting greater engagement, and enhancing opportunities for having an impact on hard-to-reach clients. Moreover, the hope is that integrated school-community interventions will increase the pool of resources for providing supports and addressing disparities.

At the school level, school-home-community *connections* are called for and made. Every school outreaches to students' homes with the hope of involving parents in various ways. In addition, some schools recruit volunteers from the community and solicit other forms of resource contributions from a variety of community stakeholders. Some pursue ways to link community social services and physical and mental health services to their school and seek community providers for afterschool programs.

One downside of current outreach at the school level is that it pursues a narrow vision about the role and functions of school-community collaboration for school improvement in general and for transforming how schools provide student and learning supports in particular. There are a great many community resources that can significantly help improve schools and that will strengthen the community.

Another negative outcome of individual schools connecting with community resources is that it increases inequitable use of sparse resources.

### Why Form a School-Community Collaborative?

Schools and the communities in which they reside deal with multiple, interrelated concerns, such as poverty, child development, literacy, violence, safety, substance abuse, housing, employment, and more. Given this, school districts need to and can play a significant role in addressing such concerns by pursuing a broad and equitable vision of school-community connections. School and neighborhood improvements are mutually enhanced through effective collaboration among a wide range of resources.

With respect to enhancing student and learning supports, a school-community *collaborative* is a formal and institutionalized partnership that effectively weaves together and *equitably* allocates school and community resources across all schools in a district. As a partnership, it is not run by the district. It is a collective body consisting of a broad range of empowered stakeholders (e.g., staff, community stakeholders and resources, families, students, representatives for the homeless). As such, it needs its own operational infrastructure.

Researchers have mapped the range of community entities whose missions overlap that of the local schools. These include county and municipal agencies,

mutual support/self-help groups, service clubs and philanthropic organizations, youth organizations, community based organizations, faith institutions, legal assistance groups, ethnic associations, artists and cultural institutions, businesses/corporations, unions, media, family members, local residents, senior citizens groups, and more. Districts/schools need to consider outreach to the full range of resources that exist, especially in neighborhoods where poverty dominates life. Particular attention should be paid to linking and connecting with community entities that can fill critical gaps in school offerings and supports.

### **About Bringing Community Services to Schools<sup>7</sup>**

With roots in the 1960's human service integration movement, the last few decades have seen many initiatives for connecting community services to schools to better meet the needs of children and their families. 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, community schools, systems of care, and more.

This trend produced several problems. For one, because community resources in many neighborhoods are sparse, the first school to contact a given agency often tied up all the resources the agency could bring to local schools. To counter this, the school district's management/governance component needs to address this matter by working with schools to connect community resources equitably (not equally) across the district.

Another problem is that linking with a few service agencies ignores the potential of broad-based school-community collaboration for enhancing equity of opportunity for young people and for strengthening families, schools, and neighborhoods.

In general, the prevailing emphasis of much of the activity referred to as integrated student supports is on connecting *community* services to schools (e.g., health and social services, after-school programs). However, given that such services are scarce, this usually means enhancing linkages and co-locating a few services to a couple of school campuses. This benefits the chosen schools but reduces resources available to other schools in the community, thereby increasing inequity.

While bringing agency supports to schools is a well-intentioned endeavor, the examples most frequently highlighted are built and are operating on an exceptional resource base. As a result, they can't be taken to scale. From the perspective of school improvement, scalability is an essential facet of increasing equity across school districts.

An additional problem related to thinking mainly about connecting with community agency services is that it encourages some policy makers to develop the false impression that community resources are ready and able to meet all the support needs of students and their families. This impression already has contributed to serious cuts related to student supports (e.g., districts laying off student support personnel) in the struggle to balance tight school budgets. Such cuts further reduce the pool of resources available for improving equity of opportunity.

## **Enhancing Community Involvement and Collaborative Engagement for School Improvement**

Temporary school-community connections often are established in the wake of a crisis or to address a particular problem. It is relatively simple to make informal linkages. However, major long-term formal working relationships are driven by a comprehensive vision about the shared role schools, communities, and families can play in strengthening youngsters, families, schools, and neighborhoods. This encompasses a focus on safe schools and neighborhoods, positive development and learning, personal, family, and economic well-being, and more.

School/district efforts to enhance community connections begin with outreach to a broad range of community entities. Initially, the objective often is to develop immediate links and connections with community resources that can help fill critical intervention gaps at schools. If the aim is to form ongoing partnerships, steps must be taken to establish a school-community collaborative.

Outreach can involve a social marketing campaign to inform and invite participation with respect to district and school planning for working with the home and community to improve schools.

## **Toward Developing a School- Community Collaborative**

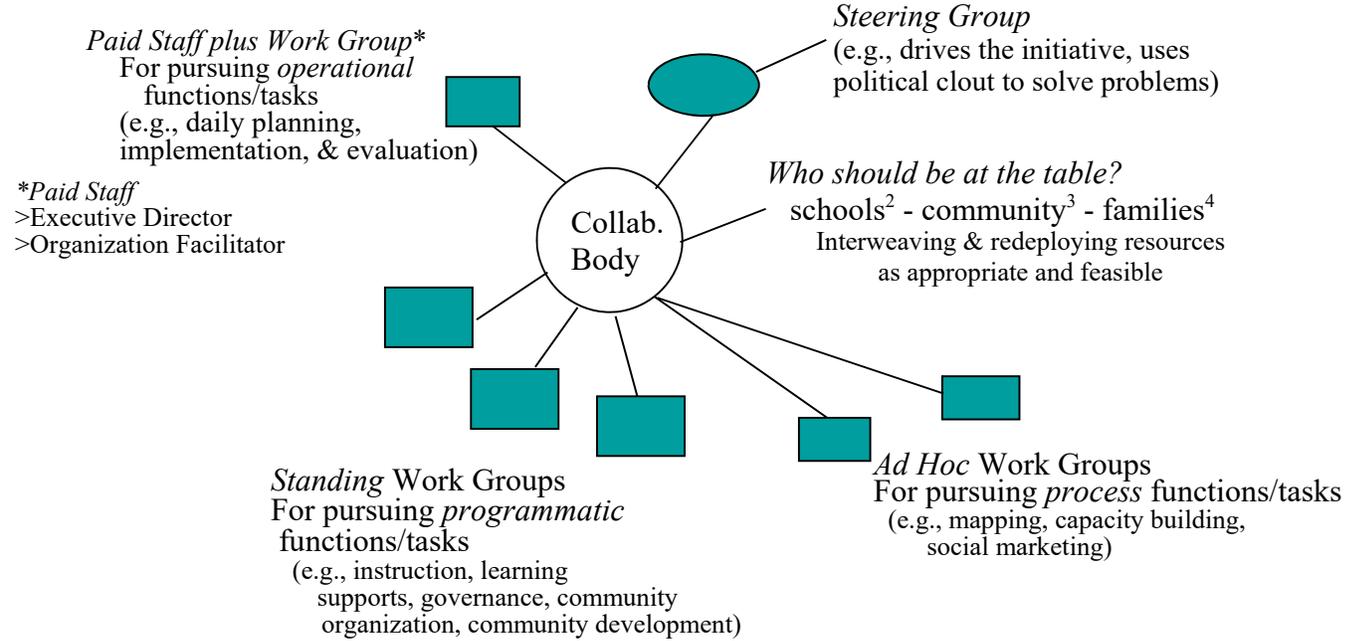
Effective pursuit of joint aims and functions requires establishing an effective school-community *collaborative* at the district level. To these ends, it is essential to develop a well-conceived operational infrastructure for collaboration. See Figure 5 for a prototype of the type of mechanisms needed to provide oversight, leadership, capacity building, and ongoing support as a collaborative plans and implements strategic actions.

Establishing such an infrastructure requires translating policy into authentic agreements about shared mission, vision, decision making, priorities, goals, roles, functions, resource allocation, redeployment, and enhancement, strategic implementation, evaluation, and accountability.

Steps in establishing a school-community collaborative include:

- identifying community stakeholders who are interested in establishing a school-community collaborative
- formulating aims, short-term goals, and immediate objectives
- organizing participants into an effective operational infrastructure and establishing formal working agreements (e.g., MOUs) about roles and responsibilities
- forming and training workgroups to accomplish immediate objectives
- mapping school and community resources used to improve teaching and learning and address barriers to student success
- analyzing resource use to determine redundancies and inefficiencies
- identifying ways resources can be redeployed and interwoven to meet current priorities
- monitoring and facilitating progress

Figure 5. Prototype of a School-Community Collaborative Operational Infrastructure<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Connecting the resources of schools, families, and a wide range of community entities through a formal collaborative facilitates all facets of school improvement. Effectiveness, efficiencies, and economies of scale can be achieved by connecting a “family” (or complex) of schools (e.g., a high school and its feeder schools, schools in the same neighborhood). In a small community, the feeder pattern often is the school district.

<sup>2</sup> *Schools*. This encompasses all institutionalized entities that are responsible for formal education (e.g., pre-K, elementary, secondary, higher education). The aim is to draw on the resources of these institutions.

<sup>3</sup> *Community entities*. These encompass the many resources (public and private money, facilities, human and social capital) that can be brought to the table (e.g., health and social service agencies, businesses and unions, recreation, cultural, and youth development groups, libraries, juvenile justice and law enforcement, faith-based community institutions, service clubs, media). As the collaborative develops, additional steps must be taken to outreach to disenfranchised groups.

<sup>4</sup> *Families*. All families in the community should be represented, not just representatives of organized family advocacy groups. The aim is to mobilize all the human and social capital represented by family members and other home caretakers of the young.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the family of schools leadership councils envisioned in Part II can readily be incorporated into a school-neighborhood collaborative. And the district’s existing connections with community stakeholders and resources can be expanded and formalized as a district-wide school-community collaborative.

### **A Note About Collaboration**

Most of us know how hard it is to work effectively with a group. Many staff members at a school site have jobs that allow them to carry out their duties each day in relative isolation of other staff. And despite various frustrations they encounter in doing so, they can see little to be gained through joining up with others. In fact, they often can point to many committees and teams that drained their time and energy to little avail.

Despite all this, the fact remains that no organization can be truly effective if everyone works in isolation. And it is a simple truth that there is no way for schools to play their role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching if a critical mass of stakeholders do not work together towards a shared vision. There are policies to advocate for, decisions to make, problems to solve, and interventions to plan, implement, and evaluate.

Obviously, true collaboration involves more than meeting and talking. The point is to work together in ways that produce the type of actions that result in effective programs.

The danger in creating new mechanisms is that they can become just another task, another meeting – busy work. Infrastructure must be designed in keeping with the major functions to be carried out, and all functions must be carried out in the service of a vital vision. Learning supports leadership is valuable only if it is driven by and helps advance an important vision. Leaders and facilitators must be able to instill that vision in others and help them hold on to it even when the initial excitement of "newness" wanes.

The vision, of course, is to enhance equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school. Achieving the vision requires effectively addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students – not just for the few but for the many in need. The nature and scope of need calls for every school to move quickly to develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.

## **Part V. Transitional Infrastructure for Accomplishing Systemic Change<sup>8</sup>**

Transforming systems requires a facilitative operational infrastructure consisting of mechanisms, such as steering groups, planning and implementation teams, and external and internal coaches. Figure 6 offers a prototype operational infrastructure for facilitating system change. Such an infrastructure is established at district and school levels (sometimes with facilitation from state and regional education agencies).

This is a transitional infrastructure – put in place until the transformation is successfully made. Effectively establishing such an infrastructure requires ensuring enough resources are devoted to developing the mechanisms and building their capacity to carry out a multi-year strategic plan.

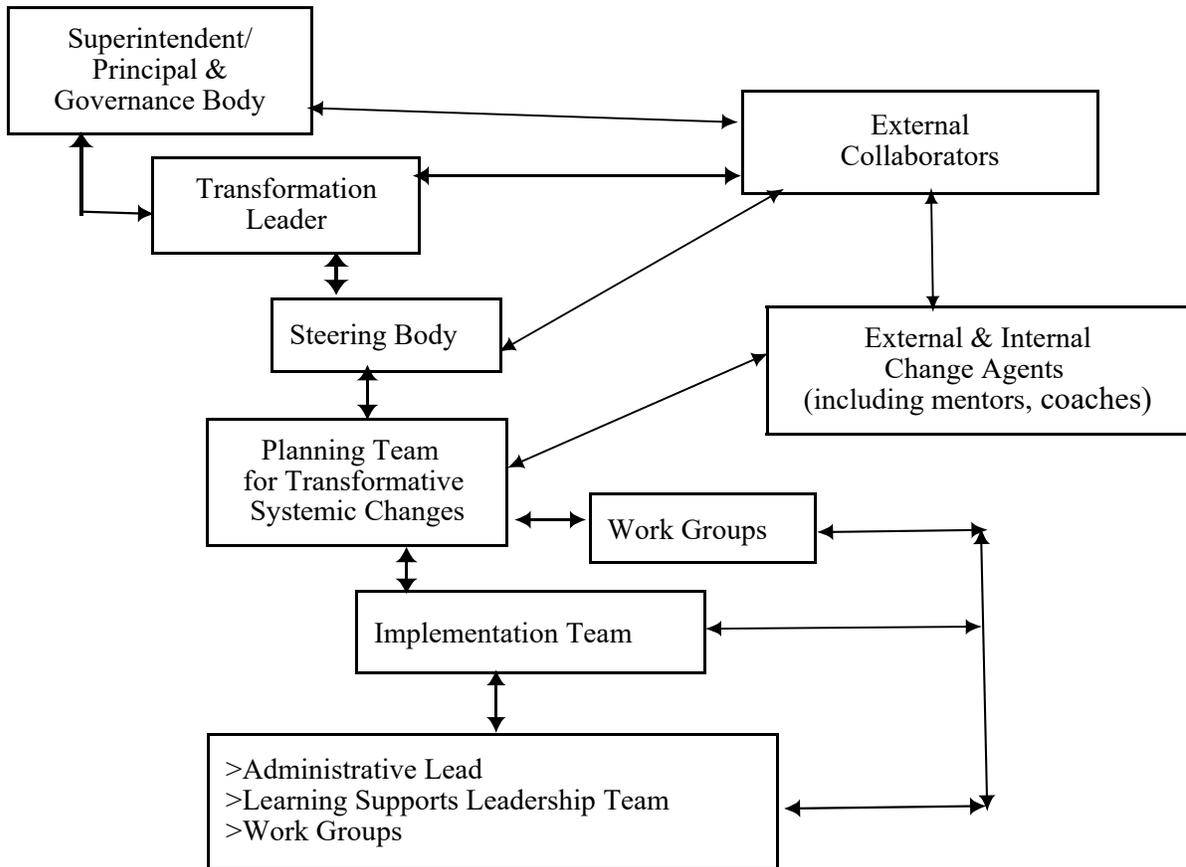
The mechanisms and their functions are customized with respect to differences at state, regional, district, and school levels and differences within regions, districts, and schools. The customization is done to ensure that capability for accomplishing major tasks is not undermined (e.g., special attention is given to ensuring these mechanisms are not created as an added and incidental assignment for staff).

Establishing the transitional infrastructure for systemic change is an essential task for coaches guiding the work. As each mechanism is established, the focus is on

- enlisting a broad enough range of key leaders and staff (e.g., leaders from all three primary and essential components for school improvement; a staff member with data/evaluation expertise; each staff member may be part of several workgroups/teams)
- ensuring group/team members understand each mechanism's functions and interrelationship
- providing the type of capacity building that ensures members understand the essence of what needs to be accomplished and are committed to the importance of the work\*
- assisting in development of clear action plans.

\*Capacity building involves ensuring sufficient resources for the transformation (e.g., staffing; budget; guidance materials; external mentoring, coaching, development of each systemic change mechanism, professional development, and TA for deepening understanding, commitment, and skills).

Figure 6. Prototype for a Transitional Infrastructure to Facilitate Transformation



Effectively establishing a transitional infrastructure to facilitate systemic changes requires ensuring initially building staff capacity to accomplish the work. At the same time, capacity building must ensure the daily operational infrastructure is reworked in ways that effectively support phasing in, continued development, and sustainability of the changes.

## Some Lessons Learned

*Operational infrastructure for change.* We find that establishment of a transformation leader and implementation team is readily comprehended; however, the importance of establishing the other temporary mechanisms is less appreciated. In observing efforts to transform schools, we rarely find an operational infrastructure for facilitating implementation in place. More characteristically, ad hoc mechanisms (e.g., a coach, an implementation team) have been set in motion with personnel who often have too little training related to systemic change and without adequate processes for formative evaluation. And, it is common to find individuals and teams operating without clear understanding of functions and major tasks. Therefore, at the onset, it is essential to build the capacity of those staffing the infrastructure.

*Effective and integrated administrative leadership.* Dedicated, well prepared and coordinated leadership is key to the success of any systemic change initiative in a complex organization. And everyone needs to be aware of who is leading and is accountable for the development of planned changes. We find it imperative that the leaders are specifically trained to understand systemic change. And, they must be sitting at key decision making tables when budget and other fundamental decisions are discussed. (In our experience, this often is not the case.) We also find that leaders commonly start strong but given the many challenges of their jobs and the complexities of systemic transformation, a good deal of focused ongoing support is needed to keep them from becoming distracted and/or overwhelmed.

*Champions/advocates.* A well-chosen steering group can champion, guide, and remove barriers to moving the work forward. To do all this, the group needs a core of high level decision makers. In addition, we find it invaluable to cultivate an additional cadre of influential advocates who are highly motivated not just to help get things underway, but to ensure sustainability.

*Administrative leader and workgroup staff.* Systemic transformation requires that the work not just be tacked on to someone who is already overly committed. Job descriptions should be modified to reflect new responsibilities and accountabilities and provision must be made for capacity building related to the functions to be accomplished. (Sample job descriptions are provided in our Center's System Change Toolkit – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>).

*Understanding of proposed changes.* The complexity of dissemination means that it is almost always the case that initial introductory presentations are only partially understood and this interferes with creating informed readiness. Planning for creating readiness, commitment, and engagement must account for a variety of strategies to deepen understanding and counter misinterpretations of intended changes. It is essential to do this early to minimize the problems that will arise from uninformed "grape vine" gossip. Of particular importance is ensuring understanding and commitment to the essential elements that must be implemented and sustained if there is to be substantive rather than cosmetic change. Furthermore, given the inevitability of staff changes, it is essential to plan a process for bringing newcomers up to speed.

*Outreach to resistant parties.* It is common to find staff who are resistant to change. Some view the work as a distraction from and/or a competition with their current job descriptions. To the degree feasible, we find it useful to make continuous efforts to reach out and include in work groups those who are resistant to the transformation and who are reluctant to give up protecting their turf.

*Revisiting agreements.* As understanding of what is involved deepens, we have learned to review and revise initial agreements and procedures as necessary.

*Protecting those making change.* Because they are called upon to do many things that may be unpopular with some stakeholders, it is essential to put appropriate protections in place for those on the front line of change.

*Continuous monitoring is required to watch for and strategically address all this.*

## Concluding Comments

As we noted at the outset, discussions of operational infrastructure tend not to be greeted with excitement. That is why they aren't the first order of business in improving how schools address barriers to learning and reengage disconnected students and families.

Moves toward systemic change should begin with activity designed to create motivational readiness by enhancing a climate for change. Enhancing readiness for and sustaining systemic change involves ongoing attention to daily experiences. Stakeholders must perceive the changes in ways that make them feel they are valued members who are contributing to a collective identity, destiny, and vision. From the perspective of intrinsic motivation theory, their work together must be facilitated in ways that enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness with and commitment to each other.

In general, we have extracted the following points from the literature as most relevant to enhancing readiness for change:

- a high level of policy commitment that is translated into appropriate resources, including leadership, space, budget, and time;
- incentives for change, such as intrinsically valued outcomes, expectations for success, recognition, and rewards;
- procedural options from which those expected to implement change can select those they see as workable;
- a willingness to establish mechanisms and processes that facilitate change, such as a governance mechanism that adopts ways to empower stakeholders, enhance their sense of community, and improve organizational health;\*
- use of change agents who are perceived as pragmatic – maintaining ideals while embracing practical solutions;
- accomplishing change in stages and with realistic timelines;
- providing progress feedback;
- institutionalizing mechanisms to maintain and evolve changes and to generate periodic renewal.

As we also emphasized in this report, major systemic changes are difficult to accomplish. But not meeting the challenge maintains an unsatisfactory status quo.

The current trend in improving student/learning supports involves tinkering in ways that make changes that don't make a dent in reducing the opportunity and achievement gaps. Schools need a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that embeds a focus on a full range of mental health, psychosocial, and educational concerns. To enable such a major system change, school improvement policy must expand from a two- to a three-component framework and ensure that all three are fully integrated and pursued as primary components at schools. Ultimately, accomplishing this will require a major reworking of the operational infrastructure at all levels.

For the title of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) to be more than aspirational, equity of opportunity for student and school success must be enhanced. From this perspective we stress that equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights and that transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to promoting whole child development, advancing social justice, and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.

## Endnotes

1 See *Policy & Program Reports & Briefs* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/materials/policyprogram.htm> ; also see *Lessons Learned from Trailblazing and Pioneer Initiatives* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>

2 Recent detailed presentations include:

- > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/barriersbook.pdf>
- > *Improving School Improvement*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improve.pdf>
- > *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>

3 In discussing power, theoreticians distinguish “power over” from “power to” and “power from.” Power over involves explicit or implicit dominance over others and events; power to is seen as increased opportunities to act; power from implies ability to resist the power of others (Riger, 1993).

4 Examples of job descriptions are provided in the Center’s System Change Toolkit, Section B 5 – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb4.htm>

5 See Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006c). Mapping a school’s resources to improve their use in preventing and ameliorating problems. In C. Franklin, M. B. Harris, & P. Allen-Mears (Eds.), *School social work and mental health workers training and resource manual*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/53 mapping a schools resources to improve1.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/53%20mapping%20a%20schools%20resources%20to%20improve1.pdf)

Center for Mental Health in Schools (2006 rev). *Guide to resource mapping and management to address barriers to learning: An intervention for systemic change*. Los Angeles: UCLA.

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/resourcemapping/resourcemappingandmanagement.pdf>

6 See Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2014). Best practices in the Use of Learning Supports Leadership Teams to Enhance Learning Supports (pp. 181-196). In *Best Practices in School Psychology: System-Level Services*, published by the National Association of School Psychologists. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/bestpract.pdf>

For some resource aids for developing a leadership team for a learning supports component, see the following appended material and the Center’s toolkit for *Rebuilding Student Supports into a Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

7 Community schools currently are one of the leading forces for bringing community agencies to schools. For our discussion of how community schools can evolve and play a role in transforming student/learning supports, see our 2021 report --*Evolving Community Schools and Transforming Student/Learning Supports* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/evolvecomm.pdf>

8 For a general discussion about making transformative system changes, see our 2021 report: *Implementation Science and Complex School Changes* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/implemreport.pdf> ; also see the center’s *System Change Toolkit* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>