

## School Improvement? . . . fully addressing barriers to learning and teaching is the next step!

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

**L**ike many of you, we are flooded each week with new reports analyzing public education and what needs to be done.

Most of these contain good ideas that are worth pursuing.

But, too often, the list of recommendations pays too little attention to the many well-known external and internal barriers to learning and teaching that stem from various societal, neighborhood, familial, school, and personal conditions. These factors clearly interfere with school success – contributing to active disengagement from classroom learning and leading to major achievement gaps and high dropout rates.

Given the data on how many students are not doing well, it is imperative and urgent for schools to place a high priority on *directly* addressing as many barriers to learning and teaching as feasible.

### ***Why aren't current approaches sufficient?***

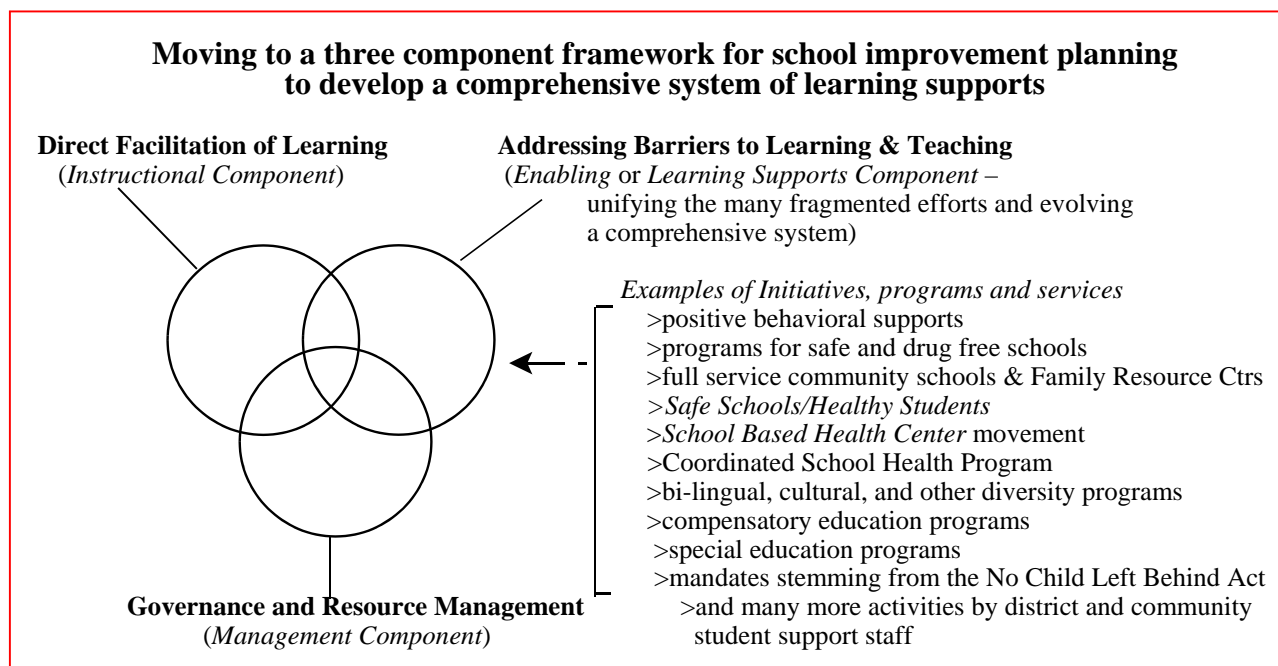
Most school improvement efforts *primarily* focus on enhancing instruction and school management/governance. Because of concerns for school safety and greater family and community involvement, schools also embed a few scattered programs and services to address these matters.

No one argues against the necessity of good instruction or good school management. The problem with the current state of affairs is that improved instruction alone does not address many barriers to learning and teaching. And, analyses indicate that the student “support” programs and services that schools do add to address such barriers are too limited, fragmented, and marginalized.

It is commonplace for those staffing such interventions to be organized and function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders. Furthermore, a great proportion of existing student support is oriented to discrete problems and over-relies on specialized services for individuals and small groups.

All this not only is expensive in terms of direct costs, it produces inappropriate redundancy and counter-productive competition and works against developing cohesive approaches to maximize results. Continued limited efficacy and cost effectiveness seem inevitable in the absence of significant systemic change.

The time is long overdue for escaping old ways of thinking about student supports. Leaders at all levels need to move school improvement efforts in substantively new directions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The foundation for doing so involves adopting a three component conceptual framework to guide development of a comprehensive enabling or learning supports component at every school. Such a framework is illustrated on the next page.



***Addressing barriers to learning and teaching is an imperative and urgent agenda item***

Student supports as they currently operate can't meet the needs of the many whose problems are affecting their learning at school. The realities are the problems are complex and complex problems require comprehensive solutions. School improvement and capacity building efforts (including pre and in service staff development) have yet to deal effectively with these matters.

Most school improvement plans do not effectively focus on enhancing student outcomes by *comprehensively* addressing barriers to learning and teaching. For many students, such a focus is essential to (re)engaging them in classroom instruction and enabling classroom learning.

And, the straight forward psychometric reality is that in schools where a large proportion of students encounter major barriers to learning, test score averages are unlikely to increase adequately until barriers are effectively addressed.

So, school policy makers and administrators must respond to the imperative for rebuilding supports for learning as an essential component in enabling *all* students to have an equal opportunity to learn at school.

This calls for ensuring schools develop the type of *Comprehensive System of Learning Supports* that enables them to

- reduce student dropout rates
- reduce teacher dropout rates
- re-engage students in classroom learning
- narrow the achievement gap
- eliminate the plateau effect related to efforts to improve achievement test performance
- reduce the growing list of schools designated as low performing
- minimize the degree to which high stakes testing is taking a toll on students

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**School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.**

Carnegie Task Force on Education

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### ***How does this fit with current efforts to improve schools?***

Most policy makers and administrators know that good instruction delivered by highly qualified teachers alone cannot ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. As a result, most schools already are concerned about improving how a variety of barriers to learning and teaching are addressed.

Now is the time for schools to plan and develop more effective and comprehensive systems for directly dealing with factors that keep too many students from doing well at school. Such efforts can draw on pioneering work from across the country that is moving learning supports to a prominent place in improving schools and student outcomes.

### ***What are learning supports?***

Ultimately, all school interventions to address barriers to learning and teaching are about supporting learning. As defined for policy purposes, *learning supports* are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports intended to address barriers to learning and teaching in ways that enable all pupils to have an equal opportunity for success at school. To be most effective, learning supports should be woven into a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of classroom and school-wide interventions and should be fully integrated with instructional efforts.

### ***What's the specific focus in moving in new directions to enhance learning supports?***

Moving in new directions means fully integrating into school improvement a systematic focus on how to:

- reframe current student support programs and services and redeploy the resources to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive component to enable learning
- develop both in-classroom and school-wide approaches – including interventions to support transitions, increase home and community connections, enhance teachers' ability to respond to common learning and behavior problems, and respond to and prevent crises
- revamp district, school, and school-community infrastructures to weave resources together to enhance and evolve the learning supports system
- pursue school improvement and systemic change from the perspective of learning supports and the need to engage and re-engage students in classroom learning

Note: These matters are incorporated into recommendations for consideration by Congress as they discuss reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (e.g., No Child Left Behind)

>see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/nclbra.pdf>

>see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/congress%20letter.pdf>

and into proposed legislation in California

>see [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/sb288\(2-15-07\).pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/sb288(2-15-07).pdf)

**What the best and wisest parent wants for his [or her] own child,  
that must the community want for all of its children.  
Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely;  
acted upon, it destroys our democracy.**

John Dewey, *The School and Society*, 1907

**For specific frameworks and aids to guide school improvement planning for developing a comprehensive system of learning supports, see the “Rebuilding Tool Kit.”**

Online for free and easy access, the tool kit provides frameworks and aids that can be readily adopted or adapted in designing, implementing, and sustaining a comprehensive component for learning supports at every school.

>>see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

Included in the tool kit is an example of a proposal and answers to frequently asked questions about developing a comprehensive component for addressing barriers to learning.

>>*Prototype for a school district proposal to stakeholders about developing a comprehensive system of learning supports.* See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/studentssupport/toolkit/adj.pdf>

>>*Q & A Notes*

>See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/q&a.pdf>

>See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/Q&ASchoolImprove.pdf>

For more on all this and on the *National Initiative: New Directions for Student Support*, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm>

**The next decade must mark a turning point for how schools and communities address the problems of children and youth. Needed in particular are initiatives to reform and restructure how schools work to prevent and ameliorate the many learning, behavior, and emotional problems experienced by students. The end product must be schools where everyone – staff, students, families, and community stakeholders – feels supported. This will require reshaping the functions of all school personnel who have a role to play in addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development. And, it requires fully integrating all this into school improvement planning.**



The Center for Mental Health in Schools is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.