A Center Policy Report **. . .**

School Improvement Planning:
What's Missing?

Executive Summary

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING: WHAT'S MISSING?

No one can doubt that significant school improvement requires considerable planning. Few would argue against the idea of planning and implementing improvements. But, as too often has been the case with efforts to improve schools, school improvement planning processes have not been conceived in ways likely to produce desired learning outcomes for many students. The analyses presented in this report focus on one fundamental reason for this state of affairs, namely the lack of attention given to how schools do and do not address barriers to learning and teaching.

Institutionalization of School Improvement Planning

Increased formalization of school improvement planning stems from the federal *No Child Left Behind Act's* emphasis on matters such as explication of standards, achievement tests as the main accountability measure, disaggregated data to focus on the achievement gap, and consequences for not meeting annual progress goals.

Disaffection with progress in raising student achievement scores has resulted in institutionalization of school improvement planning

According to the U.S. Department of Education "Every State Educational Agency (SEA) has developed an approved system for implementing the accountability provisions of NCLB." The Department also emphasizes that "The law requires SEAs to conduct an annual review to ensure that they, too, are making adequate progress and fulfilling their responsibilities."

What is the Focus of School Improvement Planning?

As delineated in the 2004 U.S. Department of Education guidance:

> "The purpose of the school improvement plan is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the school, so that greater numbers of students achieve proficiency in the core academic subjects of reading and mathematics. The school improvement plan provides a framework for analyzing problems and addressing instructional issues in a school that has not made sufficient progress in students' achievement.... Specifically, the plan's design must address: core academic subjects and the strategies used to teach them, professional development, technical assistance, parent involvement and must contain measurable goals.... Policies and practices with the greatest likelihood of ensuring that all students achieve proficiency are those that affect the school's teaching and learning program, both directly and indirectly. Policies and practices that have an impact on classrooms include those that build school infrastructures, such as regular data analysis, the involvement of teachers and parents in decision-making, and the allocation of resources to support core goals...."

A perspective on school improvement planning also is found in the 2004 guide produced by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. That analysis stresses the importance of focus areas chosen, standards of practice adopted, performance indicators, and rubrics.

An In-depth Analysis of Two Major School Districts' School Improvement Guides

To formulate a big picture overview of the focus of school improvement planning, an internet search was conducted to review guidance about such planning provided by state and local education agencies around the country and plans formulated by specific schools. Even a cursory analysis of what is online makes it clear that the focus of planning is determined by the interests, agenda, and beliefs of those who develop the frameworks or protocols used to structure planning.

Because major urban centers have been so prominently targeted in critiques of public education, they have devoted significant resources to developing school improvement planning guides and have been using them for a significant period of time. After surveying a range of urban centers, we concluded that the New York City guide was representative of lengthier guides and the Boston Public School guide was representative of more abbreviated guides.

Our Lens for Analysis: Addressing Barriers to Learning

The lens we use in analyzing the breadth and depth of planning guides is a three component model for school improvement. It stresses that any school where a significant number of students are not doing well academically must not only focus on enhancing its instruction and curriculum, but also must focus on enabling learning through a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. And, it must govern and manage its resources in ways that treat both these components as primary and essential in daily school practice. Eventually analyses need to be made with respect to each of the three components and the degree to which they are integrated with each other. The emphasis in the report is only on assessing how well school improvement planning guides focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Findings

Clearly, the call for enhancing continuous school improvement planning has a sound basis. Our analyses, however, suggest that the guidance for schools often does not adequately focus on the need for schools to play a significant role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. This is not surprising given the narrow focus of prevailing accountability mandates stemming from the *No Child Left Behind Act.*

Current guides ignore the need for fundamentally restructuring school and community resources in ways that enable learning

The planning guides reviewed stress meeting the demand for standard-based and result-oriented school improvement mainly by elaborating on prevalent thinking about school practices, rather than considering fundamental systemic change. In doing so, they reflect adherence to the failed assumption that intensifying and narrowing the focus of school improvement to matters directly related to instruction and behavioral discipline are sufficient to the task of continuously raising test scores *over the long-run.* This assumption ignores the need for fundamentally restructuring school and community resources in ways that enable learning. It also maintains the *marginalization* of efforts to address major barriers to learning and teaching.

As a result, prevailing approaches to school improvement do not encompass comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approaches for enabling learning through addressing barriers. This is especially unfortunate in schools where large proportions of students are not doing well. Thus, one of the poignant ironies of continuing to proceed in this way is that the aim of providing equity of opportunity for many students is undermined.

**Toward Improving
School Improvement**

**Understand what's
missing . . .**

With a view to broadening the focus of planning, the report includes a set of guidelines for a comprehensive component to address barriers to learning and teaching. These guidelines provide a template for assessing what tends to be missing in school improvement planning guides.

The report also outlines major problems with the ways schools currently address learning, behavior, and emotional problems. For example, most programs, services, and special projects providing learning supports at a school and district-wide are treated as supplementary (often referred to as auxiliary services). The results of such marginalization are:

**and end the
marginalization
of learning
supports**

- Planning and implementation of a school's approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching usually are conducted on an ad hoc basis.

- Support staff tend to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with a great deal of the work oriented to discrete problems and with an overreliance on specialized services for individuals and small groups.

- In some schools, the deficiencies of current policies give rise to such aberrant practices as assigning a student identified as at risk for grade retention, dropout, and substance abuse to three counseling programs operating independently of each other. Such fragmentation not only is costly, it works against maximizing results.

Unfortunately, the tendency among reformers has been to focus mainly on the symptom – fragmentation. The main prescription for improving student supports has been to enhance coordination. Better coordination is a good idea. But it doesn't really address the problem that school-owned student supports are marginalized in policy and practice.

And, note that the trend toward fragmentation is compounded by efforts to enhance community involvement through school-linked services' initiatives. This happens because such initiatives focus primarily on coordinating *community* services and *linking* them to schools using a collocation model, rather than braiding resources and integrating such services with the ongoing efforts of school staff.

The report stresses that the long-standing marginalized status and the associated fragmentation of efforts to address student problems are likely to go unchanged as long as educational reformers continue to ignore the need to restructure the work of student support professionals. Currently, most school improvement guides and plans do not focus on using such staff to develop the type of comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approaches necessary to address the many overlapping barriers to learning and development. At best, most reformers have offered the notion of integrated school-linked services. Much more fundamental changes are needed.

Also mediating against developing school-wide approaches to address factors interfering with learning and teaching is the marginalized, fragmented, and flawed way in which these matters are handled in providing on-the-job education. For example, little or none of a teacher's inservice training focuses on improving classroom and school-wide approaches for dealing effectively with mild-to-moderate behavior, learning, and emotional problems. And little or no attention is paid to inservice for student support staff.

Needed . . .

Systemic Change

With respect to changing all this, the report concludes that addressing barriers to learning and teaching must be made an essential and high level focus in every school improvement planning guide. The intent must be to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach. This, of course, represents major systemic change and requires shifts in prevailing policy and new frameworks for practice and sufficient resources to develop an effective structural foundation and ongoing capacity building for such change.

Addressing barriers to learning and teaching must be made an essential and high level focus in every school improvement planning guide

For those concerned with school improvement, resource-oriented mechanisms are a particularly vital infrastructure consideration. Few schools have a mechanism related to learning supports to ensure appropriate use of existing resources and enhance supports. This is a major failing since such a mechanism could make major contributions to cost efficacy by ensuring that all learner supports are well planned, implemented, and evaluated. Such a mechanism also provides another means for reducing marginalization.

A comparable mechanism is needed to link feeder patterns and families of schools together to maximize use of limited resources. Such a mechanism can ensure that a group of schools in a geographic area collaborates and shares programs and personnel in many cost-effective ways related to addressing barriers. This includes achieving economies of scale by assigning learning support staff and implementing staff development across the group of schools. It encompasses streamlined processes to coordinate and integrate assistance to a family with children at several schools in a feeder pattern, all of whom require learning supports.

The report notes that to help in moving forward, districts can draw on the resources of both the No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Acts. Both acts call for coordination of programs and services and, in doing so, provide mechanisms for using federal dollars to move school improvement in new directions through supporting systemic changes.

Recommendations

#1 *Every school improvement planning guide should have a focus on development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive learning supports system which is fully integrated with plans for improving instruction at the school.*

> Of course, for such a recommendation to become a reality, policy makers will have to act. Policy at the district level (and at the state and federal levels, if feasible) should be formulated to guide and facilitate development of a potent component to address barriers to learning at every school. Such policy should specify that an enabling or learning supports component is to be pursued as a primary and essential facet of school improvement and in ways that complement, overlap, and fully integrate with initiatives to improve instruction and promote healthy development. It also should recognize that development of an enabling or learning supports component requires major systemic changes and must be phased-in building on existing practices and incorporating best practices as the component evolves.

#2 *Guidelines for school improvement planning should delineate the content of an enabling or learning supports component.*

> In keeping with pioneering efforts already underway across the country this would include six arenas of programmatic activity: programs to (a) enhance classroom based efforts to enable learning, including re-engaging students who have become disengaged from classroom learning and promoting healthy development, (b) support transitions, (c) increase home involvement, (d) respond to and prevent crises, (e) outreach to develop greater community involvement, and (f) provide prescribed student and family assistance.

#3 *Guidelines for school improvement planning should incorporate standards and accountability indicators for each area of learning supports content.*

> This would include standards and accountability indices directly related to addressing barriers to learning such as increases in attendance, reductions in tardiness, reductions in problem behaviors, reductions in suspensions and dropout rates, abatement of the large number of inappropriate referrals for special education, and so forth. And, if not already part of school improvement planning, there also should be a focus on expanding standards and accountability related to increasing personal and social functioning (e.g., goals for enhancing civility, teaching safe and healthy behavior, and character education). These accountability indices would be combined with those for instruction to yield data, over time, that evaluate the relationship between learning supports and academic achievement and enable cost-benefit analyses.

#4 *Guidelines for school improvement planning should specify ways to weave school and community resources into a cohesive and integrated continuum of interventions over time.*

> Such a continuum involves integrated systems to (a) promote healthy development, (b) prevent problems, (c) intervene early to address problems as soon after onset as feasible, and (d) assist those with chronic and severe problems.

#5   *Guidelines for school improvement planning should include an emphasis on redefining and reframing roles and functions and redesigning infrastructure to ensure learning supports are attended to as a primary and essential component of school improvement and to promote economies of scale.*

This would include (a) redefining administrative roles and functions to ensure there is dedicated and authorized administrative leadership; (b) reframing the roles and functions of pupil services personnel and other student support staff in keeping with the functions that are required to develop the component;(c) redesigning school infrastructures to enable the work at each school site and establish formal connections among feeder pattern schools to ensure each supports each other's efforts and achieves economies of scale (e.g., establish a learning supports resource-oriented mechanism, such as a team, at a school and for the schools with which it collaborates); and (d) enhancing related administrative and staff capabilities.

A final recommendation is for researchers. Given the need to build on an evolving research base and given the demand by decision makers for data showing that student support activity improves student achievement, it is recommended that a large scale initiative be developed to address these matters.

Current initiatives for program evaluation and research projects should be redesigned to include a focus on amassing and expanding the research-base for building and evaluating such an enabling or learning supports component, with a long-range emphasis on demonstrating the component's long-term impact on academic achievement.

Reforms in Hawai`i and Iowa are described to illustrate movement in the recommended direction. In reviewing school improvement planning guides, Hawai`i's is the only one found to date that includes a major focus on student support. Iowa has renewed its commitment to strengthening learning supports for all students by developing a design for a system of learning supports to facilitate learning by alleviating *barriers*, both external and internal, that can interfere with learning and teaching. These pioneering reforms provide particularly important examples of new directions for student support that can help enhance school improvement planning.

In concluding, it is emphasized that the growing body of resources and such pioneering efforts as those cited provide a solid base and ample precedents upon which to expand the focus of school improvement planning guides. The work recognizes the full implications of the statement issued by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development that stresses

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.