

Addressing Barriers to Learning

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Special Edition:

Welcome back to School!

As schools reopen, the challenges involve much more than implementing mitigation strategies that limit transmission of COVID-19. The transition back calls for a psychologically welcoming environment and enhancing student and learning supports.

With this in mind, this edition reissues excerpts from and expands on material sent out from the Center over the past year.

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Support Transition-back for Students, Families, and Staff

Transitions can be challenging. One major transitional concern has always been initial entry or reentry into a school. In that context, most schools take steps to ease the start of a school year. These include (a) introductory and welcoming strategies (e.g., welcoming receptions, orientations, and related resources), (b) provision of some social, emotional, and academic supports, and (c) accommodations for special populations.

While usual transition concerns are present as schools re-open, it is anticipated that the unique circumstances surrounding this return to school will be particularly difficult for some. Everyone, (students, families, staff) has experienced considerable stress, some have been ill, some are grieving for a relative or friend who died. And transition-back stressors are likely to exacerbate other factors that interfere with school adjustment and thus with learning and teaching. It is predictable that schools will see an increased number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Transition-back to school may be relatively easy for some, but care-filled transition supports are essential for others. Below we highlight three foci for planning. Resources related to each are offered at the end.

Welcoming, Immediate Social and Academic Support, and Outreach

The importance of accommodating individual differences is a given. While many students are returning to their former schools, some are entering a new school. Many are more than pleased to return to school, many others are not. Some are “stressed-out.” And, special assistance and even outreach always is indicated for some subgroups (e.g., those with learning problems and special education IEPs, homeless youth, those in foster care, immigrants, those who previously were chronic truants, dropouts).

A first focus for planning is on how to maximize perceptions of the school as friendly, inviting, helpful, and caring. Each initial encounter between school staff and students and their families presents an opportunity and a challenge for welcoming and providing supports.

With respect to student/learning supports, transition-back involves strategies that establish supportive social and academic connections and actively engage students at school. Examples include matching-up peer buddies, providing immediate tutoring to those who need it, orchestrating entrance into ongoing groups and activities, and personalizing instruction.

Of course, not all students show up when schools re-open. With all the challenges involved, it may be tempting to put off attending to these students. However, at a minimum, planning should include regular outreach and re-engagement strategies.

And, as painful as it is, the situation calls for some recognition of those not returning (e.g., those who succumbed to the disease, those who graduated or moved away).

Rapid Identification of Students who aren't Successfully Adjusting at School

The first weeks back are a critical period in the transition process. Before schools closed, many already were addressing traumatized students. As schools re-open, students, as well as families and staff, who are having trouble recovering from recent events may have difficulty readjusting to school. For example, besides those with lingering anxiety reactions, there are individuals grieving someone who died and more than a few who experienced domestic violence and abuse.

As school gets underway, teachers who monitor how well their students readjust to school can readily identify those who are having difficulty. Similarly, administrators can monitor and identify staff who are having adjustment problems.

To address school readjustment concerns, transition planning focuses on preparing school staff to implement early warning and response procedures that

- quickly identify any student, family, or staff having adjustment problems
- provide personalized supports to aid those with minor adjustment problems
- initiate specialized assistance and referrals when necessary for those who have major adjustment problems.

Daily Transitions During the First Weeks

Many schools will once again have significant problems with tardies, bullying, substance abuse, and other forms of out-of-classroom behavior that contribute to poor student performance and a negative school climate. Unstructured times at school can be dangerous, especially for vulnerable students.

Planning to prevent problems and encourage proactive behavior during daily transitions focused on before school, moving from class to class, breaks, lunch, and after school. The emphasis is on (a) ensuring positive supervision and safety and social supports, (b) providing attractive, well-designed and structured recreational, enrichment, and academic support activities, and (c) using problems that arise as teachable moments.

Attractive before school activities bring students to the campus early and reduces tardies. Those offered at lunch can reduce the incidence of harassment and other negative interactions. After school programs provide positive opportunities for enriched and personalized academic support, they offer renewed hope for those who have problems learning.

When problems arise during daily transitions, those monitoring the situation have natural opportunities for helping students enhance social-emotional and moral development. For all students, daily transitions can be used as personalized, teachable moments to enhance learning and development. And, as feasible, follow-ups can be implemented to deepen knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Concluding Comments

This is the time for schools to ensure they have addressed the variety of initial transition concerns that confront students, their families, and staff as schools re-open.

- How is everyone, staff, students, and families, being welcomed, oriented, and positively connected to the school?
- What are the plans for outreaching to those students and families who were expected but did not return?
- What's in place to minimize problems during daily transition times (e.g., before school, during breaks, lunch, after school)?
- What supports are available to quickly address those not adjusting well?

Note: As always, we stress that transition supports are best addressed when they are embedded in a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. Appropriately planned and implemented such a system can play a critical role in the emergence of a positive school climate. Our Center's research and development delineates such a system as encompassing classrooms and schoolwide interventions, coordination among families of schools, and collaboration with community resources. Given tight budgets, the framework stresses ways to redeploy existing school resources and weave whatever the community can add to fill gaps. See discussion at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Some Resources to Aid in Planning Transition-Back

Coalescing assistance from family, friends, peers, and community can enhance school capacity to handle transition-back concerns. The following are a few online aids.

> *What Schools Can Do to Welcome and Meet the Needs of All Students and Families*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/welcomeguide.htm>

> *Addressing School Adjustment Problems* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/adjustmentproblems.pdf>

> *Students and Anxiety Problems* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/anxiety.pdf>

> *School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/winter11.pdf>

> *Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagei.pdf>

For a guiding framework, see

> *Support for Transitions*, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/ch5trans.pdf>

For more specific examples of ways to enhance Supports for Transitions, see

> *Self-Study Survey* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/toolsforpractice/transitionssurvey.pdf>

The Center's online clearinghouse Quick Finds provide links to other useful resources; see

> *Supports for Transitions* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm

> *Motivation, Engagement, Re-engagement* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>

The following books have been developed by the Center to provide an in-depth presentation of the Center's work related to school improvement and addressing barriers to learning and teaching; they can be freely accessed online at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html.

> *Improving School Improvement*

> *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

> *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

*Are you looking forward
to going back to school?*



*I am, but I'm not sure that
my teacher is looking forward
to my return!*

Re-opening Schools with a Sense of Exciting Renewal: Generating Hope

School re-openings provide the opportunity to start with a “clean slate” and an agenda for renewal. With all the discussion about school climate in mind, this is the time to revisit school improvement planning to see how well it encompasses an exhilarating agenda for renewal.

Renewal begins with planning events to kick-off the re-opening. In such planning, it is critical to work against pressures to primarily cover the many bureaucratic things that “need to be understood” (e.g., procedures, regulations, requirements, rules). Such messages generate a perception of “more of the same;” this counters feelings of renewal and hope about a new beginning.

Creating an optimistic mood and a sense of excitement requires welcoming and supportive participatory activities that highlight

- how much all the stakeholders are valued and the critical role they play
- an exciting agenda for renewal
- plans for making renewal a reality
- new opportunities for stakeholder participation and taking on leadership roles

Making it Happen

Our Center stresses that school renewal is a time for transforming student/learning supports. A key to planning and developing renewed student/learning supports is establishment of a *Learning Supports Leadership Team* – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/resource%20coord%20team.pdf>. Under the leadership of this team, planning and implementation *work groups* are established. For the emphasis on renewal, the following two workgroups would be established:

(1) a “Kick-off” Planning Work Group to

- create a variety of attractive ways to present and publicize what makes the coming year so special (e.g., a colorful handout, a feature on the website, a news release, email announcements, a brief video, etc.)
- plan several participatory kick-off events, including
 - >keynote presentations by the leadership that focus on renewal and hope, followed immediately by small discussion groups focused on (a) ways each stakeholder can play a role in making renewal a reality and (b) clarifying what personnel and other stakeholders indicate they will need in order to take on a meaningful role
 - >welcoming events for teachers and staff, families, students, community members (including volunteers) – with buddy and mentor systems set up to support newcomers until they are functioning effectively (Note: Welcoming events are not information sessions; they are meant to be celebratory and relationship-building – the capstone for the series of welcoming events might be a communal picnic open to all stakeholders.)
 - >first day and first week welcoming and transition supports for all students

(2) a *Renewal Facilitation Work Group* to develop an implementation action plan for

- each kick-off activity
- each of the welcoming activities
- substantive orientations and support for newcomers (e.g., teachers, staff, families, students, volunteers)
- newcomer induction and transition supports
- building capacity and ongoing support and care related to the renewal agenda
- mobilizing and sustaining stakeholder engagement to move forward with the renewal agenda
- identifying and correcting any problems that arise early in the renewal process
- celebrating the work and publicizing outcomes

What Are Schools Doing About the Increased Number of Emotional, Behavioral, and Learning Problems?

As this extraordinary school year moves along, little doubt exists that schools will need to address a greater number of mental health, psychosocial, and academic concerns. We are being contacted regularly by folks asking about how to meet the challenges ahead for students, families, and staff.

Here's what we share with folks.

While the pandemic has introduced considerable challenges to teaching and learning, it must be remembered that students were struggling prior to COVID-19. The causes and numbers vary, but every school has students who are not doing well.

All schools devote resources to address this reality. Some strategies are designed to reach the entire student body, others are targeted interventions that address discrete problems, and a few are specialized services that can only be provided to a relatively small number of students. In some schools, principals have reported that up to 25 percent of their budget is consumed in efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

For a variety of reasons, schools differ with respect to the student and learning supports they have in place. Common, however, is the fragmented and disorganized way supports are developed and implemented.

The piecemeal and disjointed approach to addressing student learning, behavior, and emotional problems is long-standing concern. Rivalry for sparse resources has produced counterproductive competition among support staff and with community based professionals who link with schools. Each new initiative compounds the competition. These matters can be expected to be exacerbated as student needs increase in the wake of the pandemic and because school budgets are always tight.

Analyses of current approaches to providing student and learning supports indicate limited results and redundancy in resource use. As schools strive to help students manifesting problems, they must do so in more productive ways.

As those who follow the Center's work know, we stress fundamental systemic changes that go beyond the prevailing and unrealistic calls for more individual and small group *services*. Our aim is to provide a blueprint to enable states, LEAs, and schools to play a greater role in providing student and learning supports systemically and in ways that enhance equity of opportunity.

From this perspective, we were invited recently by the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) to prepare a brief entitled: *Restructuring California Schools to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching in the COVID 19 Context and Beyond*. See

https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/pb_adelman_nov2020.pdf

In the brief, we highlight the need for and ways to systematically transform how schools address learning, behavioral, and emotional barriers interfering with effective instruction. Here is an excerpt:

Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching is Critical to Transitioning All Students Back to School

The unique circumstances surrounding the transition back to physical schooling introduces challenges for all students, their families, and staff. Everyone has experienced considerable stress. Some have been ill, some have experienced economic hardship, some are grieving for a relative or friend who died. While many students are coming back to their former schools, some are entering a new school. While many are pleased to return, others are not. On top of this, there are students for whom special assistance and outreach is always indicated (e.g., those experiencing learning difficulties, homelessness, foster care; English learners; those who previously were chronically absent).

Educators, families, and students are eager for school to go "back to normal," however, in order for schools to effectively transition students back and accelerate their learning, schools must address barriers to learning, some of which have been long standing and some of which have emerged during the pandemic. ...

Comprehensive School Improvement Policy Requires Elevating the Emphasis on Addressing Barriers to Learning

Our analysis of school improvement policy and planning in the wake of ESSA indicate that districts and schools tend not to address – directly and comprehensively – barriers to learning and teaching. Policy and practice planning is guided primarily by a two-component framework, namely (1) instruction and (2) governance/management. School improvement plans focus on these two components; interventions for addressing learning barriers and re-engaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. This marginalization is a fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports. An enhanced policy framework is needed to ensure that efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching are pursued as a primary and essential component of school improvement (see Fig. 2 at the previously cited URL).

We conceive the Learning Supports Component as enabling learning by (1) addressing factors that impact learning, development, and teaching and (2) reengaging students in classroom instruction. The reality is that students experience overlapping learning, behavior, and emotional problems; any system of interventions must be designed with this in mind. The intent of the expanded framework is to help districts and their schools unify all efforts to prevent and minimize the impact of barriers interfering with learning and teaching. The expanded framework requires personnel and an operational infrastructure that coalesces programs, services, initiatives, and projects that (a) provide compensatory and special assistance, and (b) promote and maintain safety, physical and mental health, school readiness, early school adjustment, and social and academic functioning. The point is to weave school and a wide range of community resources together, and to move away from approaching diverse student concerns as if they had no relationship to each other.

Strategically, given limited resources, developing a comprehensive system involves deploying, redeploying, and weaving together all available school and community resources used for student and learning supports to equitably strengthen interventions and fill critical gaps.

Our prototype for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system to address barriers and re-engage students has two facets:

- a full continuum of integrated intervention subsystems that interweave school-community home resources
- an organized and circumscribed set of classroom and schoolwide student/learning support domains

The remainder of the brief delineates the prototype and the five elements that have been identified as essential in implementing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. We conclude by noting:

The COVID-19 pandemic and growing concerns about social justice mark a turning point for how schools, families, and communities address student and learning supports. Those adopting the prevailing MTSS framework have made a start, as have the initiatives for community schools, integrated student supports, and school-based health centers. Given the growing challenges, however, States, districts, and schools need to develop and implement a more transformative, comprehensive approach. The prototype for addressing barriers to teaching and learning highlighted in the brief is such an approach.

We know from experience how hard it is to achieve the outlined policy and practice changes at a district. And given the scale of public education, the degree of transformative system change proposed here gives rise to many complications.

For example, the approach calls for a major reworking of the operational and organizational infrastructure for a school, a family of schools, the district, and for school family community collaboration. It also calls for enhancing in classroom supports by retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., student and learning support personnel - psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, Title I staff, special educators, dropout/graduation support staff, etc.). In particular, the jobs of these personnel need to be modified to include working collaboratively with regular teachers in classrooms (in person and online) for part of each day. Improving student/learning supports in classrooms requires such collaboration, which is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

Certainly, the challenges are daunting. But maintaining the status quo is untenable, and just doing more tinkering will not meet the need. Addressing the pervasive and complex barriers that impede students requires a systemwide approach that comprehensively supports whole-child development.

Schools Can't Afford More Support Staff So They Need to Provide Student and Learning Supports in New Ways

From the Education Commission of the States:

Data suggest that schools lack the mental health staff they need. Federal data suggest that school counselors, psychologists and social workers might confront overwhelming caseloads as the pandemic continues. In the 2018-19 school year, there were roughly 425 students for every school counselor Twenty three percent of students attended schools with no psychologists and 53% attended schools with no social workers. The pandemic may be worsening such shortages. Recent data on jobs postings suggest that schools and districts are hiring far fewer counselors, psychologists and social workers than in previous years.

https://ednote.ecs.org/data-you-can-use-students-mental-health-needs-in-2020/?utm_source=ECS+Subscribers&utm_campaign=8978eda20d_ED_CLIPS_10_19_2020&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1a2b00b930_8978eda20d_53599575

These data are hardly a surprise. The reality is that the prevailing model for student and learning supports precludes there ever being enough student support personnel to effectively address the many barriers interfering with learning and teaching at schools.

As schools plan to deal the problems ahead, what critically needs to be discussed is how to rethink student and learning supports. Schools, working with home and community stakeholders, need to devote enough of their limited time and sparse resources to the task of *transforming* student/learning supports. Given the current depleted state of school resources, the transformation must be accomplished by reframing and redeploying how existing resources are used.

Currently, many schools are planning using a multitier system of supports (MTSS) model and hopefully are going beyond the limitations of the framework. MTSS provides a good *starting point* for transforming student/learning supports. Other initiatives to build on are the Community Schools movement and efforts to collocate health and social services at schools.

Our Center's approach to transforming student/learning supports calls on policy makers to establish a component dedicated *directly to both* (1) addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (2) reengaging disconnected students. The emphasis on both these concerns is essential because interventions that do not ensure students are engaged meaningfully in classroom learning usually are insufficient in sustaining, over time, student engagement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.

The current state of affairs underscores the long-standing imperative to reframe student and learning supports. A prototype framework for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports is available to stimulate discussion and planning.*

Related Center documents:

- > *Task Forces Forming to Provide Recommendation for Re-opening Schools: Student/Learning Supports Leaders Need to be at the Table* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/taskforces.pdf>
- > *COVID-19 is Killing District/School Budgets: What to Do and Not to Do about Student/Learning Supports* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/budgetx.pdf>

***Ready to rethink student and learning supports?** See the following

- > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
- > *Improving School Improvement*
- > *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

All three books are freely accessible at:

http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

For those interested in transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching, see the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Schools Must Provide Effective Student and Learning Supports Before Implementing a *Formal* Screening Program and Labeling Students

This article is excerpted from *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* –see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>

Strong images are associated with diagnostic labels, and people act upon these images. Sometimes the images are useful generalizations; sometimes they are harmful stereotypes. Sometimes they guide practitioners toward good ways to help; sometimes they are assigned to a person inaccurately. And sometimes they contribute to "blaming the victim" – making young people the focus of intervention rather than pursuing system deficiencies that are causing the problem in the first place.

Inevitably, the benefits of assigning a diagnostic label are accompanied by some negative effects on the person labeled.

Youngsters manifesting emotional upset, misbehavior, and learning problems commonly are assigned psychiatric labels that were created to categorize internal disorders. With high frequency, terms such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Depression, and Learning Disabilities (LD) are in vogue. This happens despite the fact that the problems of most youngsters are not rooted in internal pathology. Indeed, many of their troubling symptoms would not have developed if environmental circumstances had differed in good ways.

As schools re-open, the number of students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems will be on the up-swing. Care must be exercised to avoid mislabeling the impact of COVID-19 on youngsters as a pathological condition.

Concern

Misdiagnosis/Mischaracterization

Of particular concern for schools is the widespread *misuse of the terms ADHD and LD*. This includes the problem of nonprofessional applications of these labels, and the reality of the number of misdiagnoses. At one point in time, almost 50% of those assigned a special education diagnosis were identified as having learning disabilities. This contributed to the backlash to LD seen in the last reauthorization of *Individuals with Disabilities Act* (retitled the *Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act* but still widely referred to as IDEA). A similar concern has arisen about the number of students who manifest "garden-variety" misbehavior who are misdiagnosed as ADHD. Reports appear rather regularly that suggest a growing backlash, especially as related to the increasing use of medication to treat these youngsters. For example, reports of significant overdiagnosis have led to hearings and community forums and even legislative acts prohibiting school personnel from recommending psychotropic medications for students.

About Diagnosing Behavioral, Emotional, and Learning Problems

Comprehensive formal systems used to classify problems in human functioning convey the impression that all behavioral, emotional, or learning problems are instigated by internal pathology. Some efforts to temper this notion see the pathology as a vulnerability that only becomes evident under stress. However, most differential diagnoses of children's problems still are made by focusing on identifying one or more disorders (e.g., oppositional defiant disorder, ADHD, or adjustment disorders), rather than first asking: *Is there a disorder?*

Bias toward labeling problems in terms of personal rather than social causation is bolstered by factors such as (a) attributional bias – a tendency for observers to perceive others' problems as rooted in stable personal dispositions and (b) economic and political influences – whereby society's current priorities and other extrinsic forces shape professional practice.

Overemphasis on classifying problems in terms of personal pathology skews theory, research, practice, and public policy. For instance, comprehensive classification systems do not exist for problems caused by environmental factors or for psychosocial problems (caused by the transaction of internal and environmental factors). As a result, these factors often are deemphasized in assessing cause. The irony is that so many practitioners who use prevailing diagnostic labels understand that most problems in human functioning result from the interplay of person and environment.

Countering nature *versus* nurture biases in thinking about problems involves approaching diagnosis guided by a reciprocally determined perspective of what produces human behavior.

*In the last analysis, we see only what we are ready to see.
We eliminate and ignore everything that is not part of our prejudices.*
Jean-Martin Charcot

The Debate About the Role of Schools in Screening

Reasonable concern for the well-being of children and adolescents and the need to address barriers to learning and teaching has led schools to deploy resources to deal with a variety of health and psychosocial matters (e.g., bullying, depression, suicide, ADHD, LD, obesity, etc.). Over time, agenda priorities shift, and resources are redeployed.

Some of the activity is helpful; some is not; some has unintended negative consequences. And concerns arise.

*Are schools colluding with practices that sensationalize and
pathologically label young people's behavior?*

*Should schools be involved in universal, first-level screening
for behavior and emotional problems?*

We all have experienced the tendency to generalize from extreme and rare incidents. While one school shooting is too many, fortunately few students ever act out in this way. One suicide is too many; fortunately, few students take their own life. Some young people commit violent crimes, but the numbers are far fewer than news media convey, and the trajectory is downward.

No one is likely to argue against the value of preventing violence, suicide, and other mental health and psychosocial concerns. In recent years, schools have had to be increasingly vigilant about potential violent incidents on campus. And the COVID-19 crisis has everyone concerned about the impact on mental health.

Even so, the debate continues over whether schools should play an institutionalized role in *screening* for mental health problems. Issues arise around:

Is such monitoring an appropriate role for schools to play? If so:

*What procedures are appropriate and who should do it?
How will schools avoid doing more harm than good in the process?*

Advocates for primary and secondary prevention want to predict and identify problems early. Large-scale screening programs, however, can produce many false positives, lead to premature prescription of "deep end" interventions, focus mainly on the role of factors residing in the child and thus collude with tendencies to "blame victims," and so forth. As with most such debates, those in favor emphasize benefits (e.g., "Screening lets us identify problems early, and can help prevent problems such as suicide."). Those against stress costs. For example, one state legislator is quoted as saying: "We want all of our citizens to have access to mental health services, but the idea that we are going to run everyone through some screening system with who knows what kind of values applied to them is unacceptable."

Examples of student screening include:

- *Early-age screening for behavioral, emotional, and learning disabilities, (e.g., enhancing Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment [EPSDT] and screening in preschool and kindergarten).*
- *Drug testing at school to deter substance abuse.*
- *Student threat profiling to prevent school violence.*
- *Screening for suicide risk.*

In discussing these issues, concerns are raised about (a) the lack of evidence supporting the ability to predict who will and won't be violent or commit suicide, (b) what will be done to those identified as "threats" or "at risk"— including a host of due process considerations, (c) whether the procedures are antithetical to the schools education mission, and (d) the negative impact on the school environment of additional procedures that are more oriented to policing and monitoring than to creating school environments that foster caring and a sense of community.

Concerns also arise about parental consent, privacy and confidentiality protections, staff qualifications, involvement of peers, negative consequences of monitoring (especially for students who are false positive identifications), and access and availability of appropriate assistance.

The following are often heard examples of pro and con positions:

- > *School staff are well-situated to keep an eye on kids who are "risky" or "at risk."*
- > *Teachers can't take on another task and aren't qualified to monitor such students.*
- > *Such monitoring can be done by qualified student support staff.*
- > *Monitoring infringes on the rights of families and students.*
- > *It's irresponsible not to monitor anyone who is "risky" or "at risk."*
- > *It's inappropriate to encourage kids to "spy" on each other.*
- > *Monitoring is needed so that steps can be made to help quickly.*
- > *Monitoring has too many negative effects.*

Those arguing that schools should implement first-level screening programs emphasize that it is essential to monitor anyone who is at risk or a risk to others in order to intervene quickly. They believe that school staff are well-situated to do so and with good training can screen using effective safeguards for privacy and confidentiality. Moreover, they suggest that positive benefits outweigh any negative effects.

A central argument against screening students to identify threats and risks is that the practice infringes on the rights of families and students. Other arguments stress that teachers should not be distracted from teaching; teachers and other non-clinically trained school staff are seen as ill-equipped to monitor and make such identifications; students are inappropriately encouraged to play a role in screening peers; existing monitoring practices are primarily effective in following those who have already attempted suicide or have acted violently; and that monitoring others has too many negative effects (e.g., costs are seen as outweighing potential benefits).

Concern**Screening**

From an article in the *New York Times* –
<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/17/national/17DRUG.html?pagewanted=print>

With respect to drug testing at school, Lloyd Johnston and colleagues at the University of Michigan reported the first major study (76,000 students nationwide) on the impact of drug testing in schools. They conclude such testing does not deter student drug use any more than doing no screening at all. Based on the study's findings, Dr. Johnston states "It's the kind of intervention that doesn't win the hearts and minds of children. I don't think it brings about any constructive changes in their attitudes about drugs or their belief in the dangers associated with using them." At the same time, he stresses "One could imagine situations where drug testing could be effective, if you impose it in a sufficiently draconian manner - that is, testing most kids and doing it frequently. We're not in a position to say that wouldn't work." Graham Boyd, director of the ACLU Drug Policy Litigation Project who argued against drug testing before the Supreme Court last year said, "In light of these findings, schools should be hard-pressed to implement or continue a policy that is intrusive and even insulting for their students." But other researchers contend that the urinalysis conducted by schools is so faulty, the supervision so lax and the opportunities for cheating so plentiful that the study may prove only that schools do a poor job of testing. Also noted is that the Michigan study does not differentiate between schools that do intensive, regular random screening and those that test only occasionally. As a result, it does not rule out the possibility that the most vigilant schools do a better job of curbing drug use.

Comment on Trauma Screening as Schools Re-open

As plans for schools to re-open progress, discussion is increasing about the mental health needs of students. Some Departments of Education have placed a high priority on the matter – even to the point of noting that attention to mental health should come first.

At the same time, advocates around the country are calling for schools to do trauma screening.

We know that there will be an increase in students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Teachers will be referring many more to student study teams, and they won't need a first level screening device to do so. And, as in the past, such teams will be overwhelmed and unable to process more than a small number of the referrals.

That is why we argue that schools should not add yet another first level screening survey. Rather schools need to devote their limited time and sparse resources to transforming student/learning supports into a system that better addresses barriers to learning and teaching.

Concluding Comments

Normality and exceptionally (or deviance) are not absolutes; both are culturally defined by particular societies at particular times for particular purposes. Ruth Benedict

Strong images are associated with diagnostic labels, and people act upon these notions. Sometimes, the images are useful generalizations, but often they are harmful stereotypes. Sometimes, they guide practitioners toward good ways to help. But often, they contribute to blaming the victim by making young people the focus of intervention rather than pursuing system

deficiencies that are causing the problem. In all cases, diagnostic labels can profoundly shape a person's future – in good and bad ways.

A large number of young people are unhappy and emotionally upset; only a small percent are clinically depressed. A large number of youngsters behave in ways that distress others; only a small percent have ADHD or a conduct disorder. In some schools, the majority of students have garden variety learning problems; only a few have learning disabilities. Thankfully, those suffering from true internal pathology represent a relatively small segment of the population. Society must never stop providing the best services it can for such individuals and doing so means taking great care not to misdiagnose others whose "symptoms" may be similar but are caused to a significant degree by factors other than internal pathology.

As community agencies and schools struggle to find ways to finance programs for troubled and troubling youth, they continue to tap into resources that require assigning youngsters labels that convey severe pathology. Reimbursement for mental health and special education interventions is tied to such diagnoses. The situation dramatically illustrates how social policy shapes decisions about who receives assistance and the ways in which problems are addressed. It also represents a major ethical dilemma for practitioners. That dilemma is not whether to use labels, but rather how to resist the pressure to inappropriately use those labels that yield reimbursement from third party payers.

Misdiagnoses lead to policies and practices that exhaust available resources in serving a relatively small percent of those in need. That is one major reason why there are so few resources to address the barriers interfering with the education and healthy development of so many youngsters who are seen as troubled and troubling.

For these and other reasons, considerable criticism exists about some diagnostic labels, especially those applied to young children. Nevertheless, sound reasons underlie the desire to differentially label problems. One reason is that, if properly identified, some problems can be prevented; another is that proper identification can enhance correction.

However, the labeling process remains difficult. Severity has been the most common factor used to distinguish many student problems (e.g., ADHD and LD) from the many commonplace behavior, learning, and emotional problems that permeate schools. Besides severity, there has been concern about how pervasive the problem is (e.g., how far behind an individual lags in academic and social skills). Specific criteria for judging severity and pervasiveness depend on prevailing age, gender, subculture, and social status expectations. Also important is how long the problem has persisted.

Because the number of misdiagnoses has increased dramatically over the last 30 years, prior to the COVID-19 crisis greater attention was being paid in schools to differentiating commonplace student problems from personal pathology. With an increased number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems, this trend is likely to have a set-back. Practices such as *response to intervention* can be helpful. However, as underscored in subsequent chapters, how to mobilize unmotivated and disengaged students remains a core concern in any effort to rule out whether a student has a true disability/disorder (see Exhibit on next page).

*Can you tell me what
"status quo" means?*



*Sure. It's a fancy name
for the mess we're in!*

As they re-open: Are Schools Doing Enough to Counter Pathological Labeling?

(1) Are student support staff:

- providing general info – about the wide range of “normal” behavior and individual differences and the importance of not over-pathologizing? (e.g., distributing info and fact sheets, offering info as part of a school’s inservice program)
- offering specific feedback on specific incidents and students? (e.g., using staff concerns and specific referrals as opportunities to educate them about what is and is not pathological and what should be done in each instance)
- resisting the pull of special funding? (One of the hardest things to do is avoid using the need for funds and other resources as justification interpreting a student’s actions as “pathological.”)
- using the least intervention needed when it becomes essential to provide students with special assistance?

(2) Is there a focus in the professional development of teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to

- engage all students in learning?
- re-engage students who have become disengaged from classroom learning?
- accommodate a wider range of individual differences when teaching?
- use classroom assessments that better inform teaching?

And remember that diagnostic labels can be inaccurate and they can profoundly shape a person's future

For resources related to the above concerns, see the links in relevant Quick Finds developed by our Center at UCLA – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm>

And for more on all this, see the links provided by our Center’s Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds:

- > *Assessment and Screening* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm#p1405_01
- > *Stigma Reduction* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm#stigma>

... consider the American penchant for ignoring the structural causes of problems. We prefer the simplicity and satisfaction of holding individuals responsible for whatever happens: crime, poverty, school failure, what have you. Thus, even when one high school crisis is followed by another, we concentrate on the particular people involved – their values, their character, their personal failings – rather than asking whether something about the system in which these students find themselves might also need to be addressed.

Alfie Kohn

Re-engaging the Disconnected in Instructional Activity

Many folks helping youngsters at home and online with their school lessons have experienced students who are not engaged, and some who are actively disengaged. Some of these young people are reacting to current events, but some are repeating previous school behavior.

Engaging students is a constant motivational concern; re-engaging disconnected students is a major motivational *problem*. Most teachers tell us they usually have received at least a bit of preparation for the former, but have had almost no professional development for addressing the latter. And we know that those trying to help at home are often at a loss when youngsters act disinterested in doing school work.

One motivational interpretation of student disengagement is that the youngster perceives the activities as threats to feelings of competence, autonomy, and/or relatedness to significant others. Under such circumstances, individuals (especially those with learning, behavior, and emotional problems) can be expected to react by trying to protect themselves from the perceived threats to their well-being. Not surprisingly, over time they tend to develop strong motivational dispositions to avoid such activities.

A youngster may *proactively* disconnect (e.g., to pursue some preferable, desired activities). Or the disconnection may be *reactive* – a protective form of coping stemming from motivation to avoid and protest against situations in which s/he feels unable to perform and/or is coerced to participate (e.g., instruction that is too challenging; activities that seriously limit options; activities where those providing instruction are over-controlling). The underlying motivational differences have profound implications for successful re-engagement.

Options, Decision Making, and Engagement

Decreasing negative attitudes and behaviors is no easy task. Personalized strategies are necessary. Research suggests that providing students with options and involving them in decision making are key facets of addressing the problem of engagement. For example, numerous studies have shown that opportunities to express preferences and make choices lead to greater motivation, academic gains, increases in productivity and on-task behavior, and decreases in aggressive behavior. Similarly, researchers report that student participation in goal setting leads to more positive outcomes (e.g., higher commitment to a goal and increased performance).

One difficulty in reversing conditions that produce disconnection is that too few currently available options may be appealing and some may even be eliciting strong avoidance tendencies. The emphasis for school work that engages and maintains engagement is on

- expanding the range of curricular and instructional options (content and processes)
- enhancing opportunities for the student to make personal and active decisions
- accommodating a wider range of individual differences (e.g., matching a student's motivation and capabilities, widening limits on behavior).

Given a good range of options, the importance of involving students in decision making cannot be overstated. Those who have the opportunity to make decisions among valued and feasible options tend to be committed to following through. In contrast, those not involved in decision making may manifest little commitment. And if individuals feel coerced, besides not following through, they may react with hostility.

Personalized Strategies for Re-engagement

Some disconnected students are at a point where the most fundamental decision they have to make is whether they want to participate or not. Before such students will re-engage, they have to perceive the learning environment as positively different – and quite a bit so – from the one in which they have come to dislike. This raises the question of how far adults are willing to go to re-engage such students since it usually requires temporarily putting aside standard practices and proceeding with a set of intensely personalized strategies.

Those willing to make major changes in order to re-engage students need to begin by entering into a *dialogue* with the youngster. The discussion is a starting point for (a) understanding the motivational underpinnings of the disconnection, (b) formulating a personalized plan for re-engaging the youngster, and (c) continuing to modify the plan when necessary.

Dialogue for Personalized Reengagement

The aim of the dialogue is to

Talk openly with (not talk at) the youngster to clarify reasons for the disengagement.

Reframe learning activities – exploring changes that help the student (a) view instructional activity and those guiding the work as supportive (rather than controlling) and (b) perceive content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. Examples include eliminating threatening evaluative measures; reframing content and processes to convey purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences; enhancing expectations of personal benefits.

Renegotiate involvement in learning activities – developing new and mutual agreements that will be evolved over time. The intent is to affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. The focus throughout is on clarifying awareness of valued options (including valued enrichment opportunities), enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the youngster in meaningful, ongoing decision making. Arriving at and maintaining an effective mutual agreement involves assisting the youngster in sampling what is proposed and ensuring provision for reevaluating and modifying decisions as perceptions shift.

Reestablish and maintain an appropriate instructional relationship – ensuring that ongoing interactions are designed to create a sense of trust, open communication, and provide personalized support and direction.

Maintaining Re-engagement and Preventing Recidivism

As school improvement enhances the focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching, the practices will help maintain re-engagement and prevent relapses. Special attention must be given to

- minimizing threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to valued others
- maximizing such feelings (included here is an emphasis on a school taking steps to enhance its image as a welcoming, caring, safe, and just institution)
- providing a wide range of potentially interesting options and including students in decision making
- guiding and supporting motivated learning and providing opportunities for continued application and generalization (e.g., ways in which students can pursue additional, self-directed learning or can arrange for additional academic and social supports and guidance)
- ensuring a range of enrichment opportunities
- providing continuous information on learning and performance in ways that highlight accomplishments and strengths
- implementing special assistance as needed.

A Cautionary Note

Rather than addressing the reasons for disengagement, the focus often turns to managing the associated behavior problems. This tends to lead to overrelying on social control strategies. Such strategies can temporarily suppress negative behaviors but are not usually effective in re-engaging a youngster in learning. And, without re-engagement, unwanted behavior will very likely reappear. (For more on this, see Chapters 4-6 in *Improving School Improvement* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html .)

Equity of Opportunity Now and for the Rest of the Year

As schools re-open, some students are experiencing difficulties adjusting, others are not showing up. In addressing these concerns, the tendency is to ask teachers to do more. Of course, teachers cannot and should not be expected to take these problems on by themselves. Student and learning support staff are essential as schools play their role throughout the coming year in addressing various factors that interfere with learning and teaching.

Enabling School Adjustment: In Person or Online

It is particularly poignant to see a student who is trying hard, but can't keep up. Over the first few weeks, teachers realize quickly who has and hasn't made a good adjustment to the new formats for school learning. This is the time to address any problems before they get worse. If adjustment problems are not addressed, student motivation for school dwindles.

The first month is the time for all school staff to start to work collaboratively and proactively. In particular, it is time for student support staff to join with teachers to intervene before adjustment and school disengagement problems become severe and pervasive. Special attention needs to be given to enhanced personal contacts with those youngsters and their families who are having adjustment problems to build a positive working relationship. Examples of things to explore in discussion with them include:

- a student's assets (e.g. positive attributes, interests, hobbies, what the youngster likes about school)
- what the youngster doesn't like about school and the reasons for "dislikes" (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Is the youngster embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments?)
- other possible causal factors (health/safety restrictions, technology demands)
- what the youngster and those in the home think can be done to make things better (including extra support from a volunteer, a peer, friend, etc.)

Of course, this is just a way to improve understanding of the problem and hopefully a start in building a good working relationship. The bigger consideration is how to provide the type of learning supports for the youngster and all others manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems. In this context many schools are discussing MTSS. In doing so, we emphasize the importance of broadening the framework. See how to do this in the Center's recent in-depth discussions of

>*Improving School Improvement*

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

(all three are freely accessed online at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

Will the Spring Slump Add to the Student Engagement Problems?

Teachers have long experienced a "Spring Slump" among students (and staff). An emerging concern is whether the situation will worsen during the pandemic.

While such a slump may have a small effect on motivated and successful students, it is likely to exacerbate the problems of those who aren't doing well (academically, emotionally, socially).

For some, the school year may just feel like it is dragging on. For others, it is clear that they aren't doing well and are unlikely to catch up. For those in their last year at a school, a version of "senioritis" hits, and they hope to coast through and survive the last few months.

This is a good time to review some resources on engaging and reengaging students in instruction.

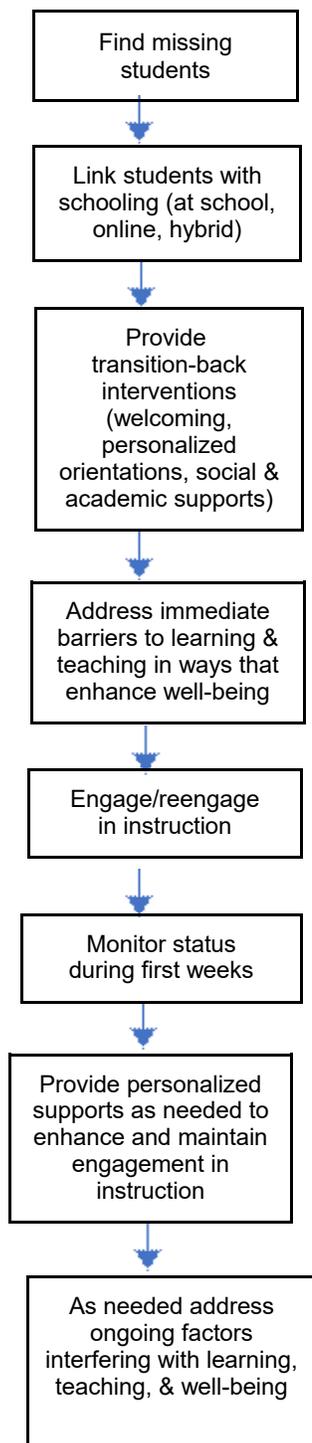
See the Center's Quick Find on

>*Motivation, Engagement, Re-engagement* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>

Outreach to Find and Reengage the Many Students Who Have “Disappeared” from the Rolls at School

Finding them, of course, is the first challenge.

However, schools also must plan for successfully engaging/reengaging these youngsters in instruction. This involves a series of steps and tasks such as those highlighted below.



About Reengaging Disconnected Students

Teachers in all-remote environments reported higher student absenteeism and less student work completion than teachers in face-to-face classrooms. These online teachers also said that they needed more support and guidance in planning instruction than their colleagues who were teaching in-person. Online teachers were more likely to say that they needed guidance on how best to support students with severe disabilities, English-language learners, and students experiencing homelessness or poverty. They also said they needed more general instructional support—in adapting curriculum, in motivating students, in accelerating them academically, and in assessing their learning—than teachers who are in the physical classroom every day.... Student engagement and reengagement always are concerns for schools, and it is especially critical in efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

For students who are still enrolled – As an immediate place to start, teachers, student support staff, and those working with youngsters at home can Ask students WHY they are disengaged? For example: students’ learning, behavior, and emotional problems often stem from instructional experiences that make them feel less competent, disempowered, and/or isolated/alienated. Any of these factors (and others) can set in motion a negative cycle of problems related to disengagement. Take steps to RECONNECT!

1. Initiate a personalized dialogue. Schools need to facilitate time for teachers to conference individually with each student who is not doing well. In many cases, the student's family needs to be included. Student support staff can play a role in arranging such conferences and then covering the teacher's class to enable such conferences. Discussions (a) ask about the reasons why things aren't going well (without getting into a "blame-game"), (b) explore some new ways that the student thinks could make things better (for all concerned), and (c) arrive at some mutual agreements (not one-way "contracts") for renewing positive working relationships and reengaging the student in instruction.
2. Add some extra caring support and ways for the student to feel positively special. Support staff, family members, volunteers, aides, and/or other students can provide additional social and academic support. In doing so, the emphasis is on providing caring and supportive ways that enable the student to discover the value of what is being taught and enhance feelings of competence, autonomy, and a working relationship with others. For students who have acquired a negative reputation, it is vital to develop immediate opportunities for them to take on attractive, positive roles and to bond with at least one adult.

3. Personalize instruction. Account for differences in motivation as well as capability. Design learning opportunities and implement them in ways that enhance intrinsic motivation for ongoing learning. Accommodations may be needed with respect to presentation of material, workload, nature of feedback, and more
4. Build on any positive nonschool activities. Capitalize on any special and positive out-of-school pursuits in which the student likes to engage. Connect such intrinsically motivating activities to project-based learning opportunities. Reengaging disconnected students is one facet of a school's efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching. As schools re-open, it will be painfully clear that, for too many students, schooling "isn't working." School staff and families often feel ineffective, frustrated, and even angry about this. And they know they need to do something different. Winnie the Pooh comes to mind as we reflect on this: As Pooh says (while Christopher Robin is dragging him by his heel downstairs and his head is bumping on each stair), I think there is a better way to do this if only I could stop bumping long enough to think of it. This is the time to stop bumping and plan better ways to engage and reengage students.

Given the relatively small pool of student/learning support staff available at schools and the range of students in need, *system (re)building* is essential so that the sparse resources available can be deployed in more potent ways.

The focus of system (re)building is on unifying the district's student/learning supports and then weaving into the unified system whatever resources the community and those at home can add. Schools that have adopted some form of MTSS can build on that model by reframing each level of intervention into an integrated set of subsystems that braid school and community resources at each level.

At the same time, it is important to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that encompass a school's efforts to reengage disconnected students and provide student and learning supports each day in the classroom and schoolwide.

A Few More Resources

The National League of Cities (NLC) provides a resource guide that highlights strategies for finding and connecting with students. See *Addressing Student Engagement in the Time of COVID-19*

https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Resource-Guide_Addressing-Student-Reengagement-in-the-Time-of-COVID19_10302020.pdf

School Attendance: Adapting to Our New Normal and New Strategies for Chronic Absence

<https://www.preventionworksct.org/resources/school-based-prevention-resources/attendance-works-toolkit.html>

Re-engaging Disconnected Students Online and at School: Focus on Intrinsic Motivation

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

Finally, given the increasing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems confronting educators after the COVID-19 pandemic, states, districts, and schools will find it increasingly necessary to start a process for transforming student/learning supports in ways that substantially and substantively address a broad range of barriers to learning and teaching. For a perspective on this, see the recently released policy analysis prepared for PACE:

Restructuring California Schools to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching in the COVID-19 Context and Beyond

https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/pb_adelman_nov2020.pdf

Minimizing Dropouts and Maximizing Graduation Rates During the Pandemic

Here's a few examples of what we see reported:

"...Even before COVID-19 struck, students in low-performing schools had graduation rates of 41 percent on average, compared to students in other high schools who had graduation rates of 90 percent or higher. Students experiencing homelessness, English language learners, and students of color all had lower graduation rates than their peers.

COVID-19 has exacerbated these challenges. To address these issues, many districts are [using] ... Learning Management Systems (LMS) that help teachers choreograph online learning. These systems allow teachers to push out assignments to students, organize content, videos, and activities, as well as facilitate communication. In addition to these benefits, LMS can provide early warning indicators for student disengagement, which can trigger follow-up actions from the school, including reaching out to students and their families to understand their circumstances. This kind of outreach often uncovers underlying equity issues, such as a lack of access, connectivity or stable learning environment, that the school can help address once they are aware of the barrier. This kind of outreach to our most vulnerable learners needs to be prioritized and is most effective when the entire school community can be mobilized to assist through a coordinated effort...."

From: *Ten ways to make online learning work* <https://www.covidcollaborative.us/issues/education>

"To support struggling students during the pandemic, the Los Angeles Unified School District has decided that secondary students who are failing their courses can have more time to try and bring their grades up before an "F" or "no pass" mark is entered into their academic record.

In a memo to secondary school principals on Monday, Dec. 14, district officials announced that students who would otherwise receive an F can have until Jan. 29 to submit makeup assignments that might improve their grades....

All make-up work must be turned in Jan. 29, and teachers will have until Feb. 15 to grade the work and change the student's final grade from an "incomplete" to a letter grade. Teachers who hold online drop-in sessions over winter break, afterschool or on Saturdays over the next several weeks to provide additional support to students seeking help in specific subject matters will be paid their hourly rate for the extra work....

Students who aren't able to raise their grades from an F after January can still take part in credit recovery later in the school year." A link to the district credit recovery programs is <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/15212>

From: *LAUSD students with Fs will have more time to bring grades up*
<https://www.dailynews.com/2020/12/15/lausd-students-with-fs-will-have-more-time-to-bring-grades-up/>

A "Meeting the Moment Plan" to sustain gains in H.S. graduation rates

- >National response to COVID-19 that includes an integrated approach to social, emotional, and academic development
- >Customized State Plans: get to a 90% HS grad rate, college-and career-ready, for all students, based on pre-COVID-19 data & COVID-19 impact
- >Spread On-Track / Early Warning Systems to monitor progress of all students with predictive indicators and multi-tiered support systems
- >Strategic deployment of additional person power via National Tutoring Corps to close relationship and support gaps (e.g. School Success Coaches)
- >Structures and funds to support enhanced teacher, school leader collaboration, professional learning, continuous improvement, high school redesign, & community partners/family involvement
- >Alignment of high school graduation requirements with admissions criteria of state university system—including flagships and workforce prep"

From: *Meeting the Moment Plan to Sustain Gains in High School Graduation Rates*
<https://www.covidcollaborative.us/issues/education>

Center Comments:

Clearly there is a segment of students who will proceed to graduation without much difficulty. There are, however, many who require a good deal of special attention if schools are to minimize dropouts and maximize graduate rates.

At this critical juncture, teachers need to work with learning support staff with an emphasis on (a) helping students who need special assistance to "catch-up" (e.g., homework help, tutoring, peer to peer support) and (b) turning things around for students who are falling further and further behind. The need

in both instances is for personalized problem solving. This usually requires an in-depth conference and a series of follow-ups with students and families.

The essence of these exchanges is to clarify specifics related to the problem and formulate flexible steps to solve it; the process itself aims at establishing and continuously enhancing a positive working relationship and monitoring the intervention steps closely to make immediate changes as necessary. Special attention needs to be paid to addressing any underlying factors interfering with school learning and performance.

For more related to this topic, see the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds on:

> *Dropout Prevention* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/dropout.html>

> *Barriers to Learning* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/barriers.htm>

> *Accommodations* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/idea.htm>

> *Transition from Adolescence* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transition_from_adolescence.htm

A Note About Extending the School Year

We have received requests about the topic of extending the school year to help school districts address academic loss. We have responded as follows:

We view calls for extending the school year as related to the general call for getting kids back in school. As such, the discussion needs to focus on what schools need if they are to be effective in doing more than being a repository for the young.

The discussion should be carried out in the context of understanding that there will be an increase in the number of students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Moreover, students will vary considerably in the academic and social-emotional help they need. In addition, a school will need to continue the process of finding and reengaging the many students who have “disappeared” from its rolls. And all this probably will have to be done with a reduced budget.

These realities mean that, in too many schools, even the most expert teachers with the best curricula cannot be expected to be successful with quality instruction alone. Schools that were struggling before will find it even harder to

- (1) ensure a safe environment (safe from COVID-19 and other all too familiar problems)
- (2) provide personalized instruction
- (3) enhance the ability to address the variety of other factors that will interfere with learning and teaching.

And, the difficulty here is that many of these factors are the result of long-standing, unresolved structural and systemic barriers that require transformative school improvements.

Educators, families, and students are eager for school to go “back to normal.” We all want to make up for learning-loss. In doing so, it is essential to avoid widening the opportunity gap. Any agenda for schools must include enhancing equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond.

Addressing Grief and Loss

As schools re-open, we all must be prepared to respond to those who are experiencing grief and loss. The death rate is staggering. Physical isolation creates a sense of loss with respect to interactions with friends and family.

Many useful “what to do” resources are available. Ideas culled from various sources are offered below. Links to more on this topic are in the Center’s Quick Find on *Grief and Bereavement* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3003_01.htm

Stages of Grieving

Grieving disrupts normal functioning, but it need not be a long lasting problem. “Working through” grief can help restore emotional health. Although grief stages may not occur in the following order, they are described as follows:

- *Shock* – usually the first reaction – often experienced as numbness or physical pain and withdrawal.
- *Denial* – acting as if no loss has occurred
- *Depression* – feeling pain, despair, emptiness – may not be accompanied by an emotional release such as crying
- *Guilt* – self-blame for not having expressed more caring or belief the loss was his/her fault
- *Anxiety* – panic reactions as reality sets in
- *Aggression* – toward those who might have prevented the loss and sometimes toward the lost object (may have trouble acknowledging anger toward the object of loss, but expressing such anger is seen as helping recovery)
- *Reintegration* – loss is accepted (although there may be periods of relapse).

Helping Others Deal with Loss

One of the most difficult losses is the death of someone who was loved. As in all loss situations, those grieving need to perceive they are in a safe place to think about and express loss. To this end, anyone trying to help needs to:

- (1) Recognize loss; encourage talking about what happened and how they feel. (“Tell me what happened.” “I’m so sorry.”)
- (2) Tell others who are in contact with the person grieving what happened and do so without hiding your own feelings. Directly relate the facts. Let them know how you feel. (“It hurts to know your grandmother died.”)

- (3) Allow others to express their reactions and then validate the emotions that emerge at each grief stage. Offer time for them to share feelings and facilitate the process with warmth and understanding. Validate the feelings expressed – even if they seem harsh. (There will be expressions of anger, fear, guilt, and so forth. Some will even indicate relief that what happened to someone else didn't happen to them. Others may find it hard to express anything.) All need to be told it is O.K. to cry.
- (4) Answer questions directly and sensitively. Relate the facts of an event as best you can. In discussing death, recognize its finality – don't compare it with sleeping (that can lead to sleep problems).
- (5) When school is in session, be sure that students and staff are prepared for what to say and how to act. It is critical that they not shy away from someone who is grieving (“Glad you're here, sorry about your brother.” “When you feel like it, let's talk about it.”).
- (6) Helpers need to also take care of themselves – especially if the loss is one for them as well.

Helping the Bereaved Return to School

Individuals experiencing loss sometimes don't want to return to school. There are many reasons for this. Plans should address what to do to maximize return after a loss.

- *Outreach*. A home visit can help assess needs and how to address them. A step-by-step plan can be made with the individual's family.
- *Special support and accommodations at school*. Steps need to be in place to inform teachers and other staff about plans and specific ways to help a student or colleague readjust. Supports include connecting the person to special friends and counselors who will be especially supportive. Ensuring that everyone understands grief reactions and is ready to be appropriately responsive. Adding support around classroom learning activities and job functions to help if someone is having trouble focusing.
- *Counseling to help the person through the stages of grief*. In general, the individual needs to have prompt and accurate information about what happened, honest answers to questions, an opportunity to work through the grief, and lots of good support.

A Caution About Overpathologizing Student Emotional Reactions

It is essential to keep emotional problems in perspective and not overpathologize. It is commonplace for youngsters to be emotional and at times not very happy. This is not surprising, especially for those living in economically impoverished neighborhoods where daily living and school conditions frequently are horrendous. But even youngsters with economic advantages often report feeling alienated and lacking a sense of purpose. And the pandemic, of course, is exacerbating emotional responses.

Unhappy youngsters may "internalize" such their feelings; some "act out;" and some respond in both ways at different times. The variations can make matters a bit confusing. Is the youngster just sad? Is s/he depressed? Is this a case that requires diagnosis and clinical help?

It is important to understand that individuals may display the same behavior and yet the causes may be different and vice versa. The causes of negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors range from environmental/system deficits to relatively minor group and individual vulnerabilities on to major biological disabilities (that affect only a relatively few individuals). It is the full range of causes that need to be considered before concluding that a youngster has a pathological condition.

As Ruth Benedict noted some time ago: *Normality and exceptionally (or deviance) are not absolutes; both are culturally defined by particular societies at particular times for particular purposes.*

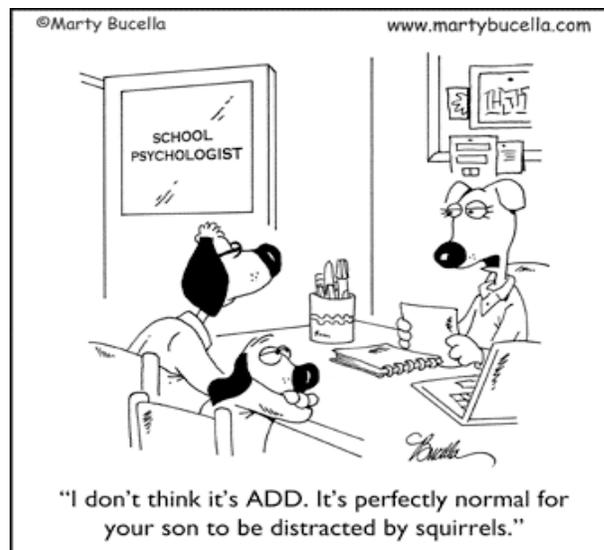
For more, on mental health in schools, see

> *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
available at this time as a free resource at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

Also see the Practitioner and Professional Development resources in the Center's

> Virtual Toolbox for MH in Schools
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/toolbox.htm>

> Quick Finds' menu <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm>



Minimizing Stress Reactions and Preventing Student & Staff “Burnout”

“... while having too much to do can cause stress, it doesn't necessarily cause burnout ... More often, burnout happens when people feel out of control. If employees are working in a chaotic environment where it's not clear who is in control, they can burnout... Other critical factors that contribute to burnout are a lack of recognition and reward, a lack of community and support in the workplace...”

Christina Maslach

Sound like what's been happening over the last year?

Staff wellness is key to the well-being and progress of students. Because the psychological needs of staff often are overlooked, the following highlights staff burnout and what can be done to prevent it. It should be evident that much of what is presented is relevant to stress in general and can be applied to students and their families.

As with so many problems, it is too easy to view burnout as a personal condition. And, as in many other instances, this would be the least effective way to understand what must be done over the long-run to address the matter. The problem is multifaceted and complex. While stress-reduction activities often are prescribed, they are unlikely to be a sufficient remedy for the widespread draining of motivation. Reducing environmental stressors and enhancing job supports are more to the point, but again, these strategies alone are insufficient.

From this perspective, we offer the following resource on how to use the coming months to increase support for school staff:

>Promoting Staff Well-being and Preventing Burnout as Schools Re-open
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/staffwellbeing.pdf>

Here's an excerpt:

Needed: a caring environment, effective mentoring, teaming, and other collegial supports – Stress is a common place phenomenon for almost everyone who works in school settings. Some of the stress comes from working with troubled and troubling youngsters. Some stems from difficult working conditions and staggering workloads. Some is the result of the frustration that arises when everyone works so hard and the results are not good enough. The many frustrations, large and small, affect staff (and student) morale and mental health. Over time, such stressors can lead to widespread staff demoralization, exhaustion, and burnout....

As schools continue online or re-open, promoting staff well-being and preventing burnout call for ensuring a school climate that is experienced by staff and students as a caring environment in which there is a strong collegial and social support structure, personalized opportunities for growth, and meaningful ways to participate in decision making....

Both online and as schools re-open, an increasing number of students will bring problems with them that affect their learning and perhaps frustrate the teacher's efforts to teach. In some geographic areas, many youngsters always have brought a wide range of problems stemming from restricted opportunities associated with poverty and low income, difficult and diverse family circumstances, high rates of mobility, lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, problems related to substance abuse, inadequate healthcare, and lack of enrichment opportunities....

As with so many problems, it is easiest to view burnout as a personal condition. And, as in many other instances, this would be the least effective way to understand what must be done over the long-run to address the matter. The problem is multifaceted and complex.

Wellness and health promotion programs and stress-reduction activities often are advocated and sometimes pursued in meaningful ways. However, these approaches are unlikely to be a sufficient remedy for the widespread draining of motivation. Reducing environmental stressors and enhancing job supports are more to the point, but again, alone these are insufficient strategies. The solution requires reculturing schools in ways that minimize undermining and maximize enhancement of intrinsic motivation. This requires policies and practices that ensure a regular, often a daily, focus on school supports that (1) promote staff and student well-being and (2) enhance how barriers to teaching and learning are addressed. ...”

An Intrinsic Motivational Perspective of Burnout

The behavior referred to as burnout is a psychological phenomenon. One way to understand the problem is in terms of three psychological needs that theorists posit as major intrinsic motivational determinants of behavior. These are the need to *feel competent*, the need to *feel self-determining*, and the need to *feel interpersonally connected*. From this perspective, burnout can be viewed as among the negative outcomes that result when these needs are threatened and thwarted. (See the work of Deci & Ryan <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-04680-000>)

For resources related to minimizing stress and preventing burnout, see the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Burnout* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/burnout.htm>. The Quick Find provides easy access to a variety of online resources from our center and elsewhere.

See, for example, these earlier Center resources:

- > *Understanding and Minimizing Staff Burnout* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Burnout/burn1.pdf>
- > *School Staff Burnout* <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/quicktraining/schoolstaffburnout.pdf>

Invitation to All Stakeholders

As schools re-open, this is a critical time for action and sharing. Please share what you are doing, seeing, and learning so we can share it with the over 120,000 on our listserv. Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

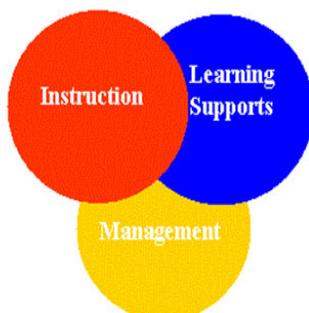
And feel free to send this resource on to others.

Want resources? Need technical assistance? Coaching?
Use our website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>
or contact us – E-mail: Ltaylor@ucla.edu or Ph: (310) 825-3634
Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS)?
Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange*?
Send requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

The Center for Mental Health in Schools operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

Center Staff:

Howard Adelman, Co-Director
Linda Taylor, Co-Director
Perry Nelson, Coordinator
... and a host of students



For those interested in transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching, see the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>