Standards Debates Continue to
Ignore Student and Learning Supports

(September, 2014)

It is not enough to say that all children can learn or that no child will be left behind;
the work involves . . . achieving the vision of an American Education system that
enables all children to succeed in school, work, and life.
Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)
Mission Statement (emphasis added)

Standards Debates Continue to Ignore Student and Learning Supports

O ver the last few years, controversies have burgeoned over the movement for "Common Core State Standards" (CCSS). The arguments, of course, are not about the importance of education standards; some policy makers just don't want to adopt CCSS.

One fundamental concern about CCSS and other sets of standards for improving schools is the inadequate attention to student and learning supports. This reflects the degree to which school improvement policy marginalizes this essential component for *enabling all students* to have an equal opportunity for success at school. The absence of a unified and comprehensive learning supports component contributes to the failure of too many schools, particularly those in economically disadvantaged locales, to stem the ongoing tide of learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Broadening the Framework for School Improvement

Many students encounter barriers preventing them from benefitting from good instruction. To enhance equity of opportunity, schools must play a greater role in classrooms and school-wide to help students surmount those barriers and (re)engage in schooling.

To date, almost all school improvement efforts have been dominated by a two component model. One component emphasizes instruction, the other management/governance.

As research has clarified, a third component is necessary.[1] Such a component comprehensively and directly focuses on (a) addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (b) re-engaging students who have become disconnected from classroom instruction. Pioneering efforts have designated the third component as the learning supports component.[2]

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights

At this critical juncture in the history of public education and civil rights, school improvement policy and practice must establish a three component policy framework and ensure that the third component is pursued with a priority equivalent to the other two. This involves adopting a set of standards and accountability indicators for the third component. Such standards delineate how schools should address barriers and re-engage disconnected students and must be fully integrated with standards for instruction and student/learning supports. Standards for a learning supports component will help redefine the roles and functions and professional preparation of administrators, teachers, and student and learning support staff.

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Curriculum Standards Are Not Enough

Taken alone, curriculum standards tend to convey the false presumption that all students are *motivationally* ready to learn what the teacher has planned to teach and that the teacher only needs to enhance existing motivation. This presumption is evident from the fact that curriculum standards primarily emphasize creation of *developmentally* appropriate instruction. That is, in general, references to individual learner differences are keyed to developmental differences with little attention to the importance of motivational differences. Note that the CCSS website states the standards are designed to "help teachers figure out the knowledge and skills their students should have so that teachers can build the best lessons and environments for their classrooms" (http://www.corestandards.org/). Ignored is that the "best lessons and environments" require considerable attention to engagement and re-engagement. Curriculum must be designed with *attitudinal/motivational* considerations in mind.

I guess I have everything I need for school.

Except the right attitude.

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In general, school improvement requires

- curriculum standards designed to enhance positive attitudes and intrinsic motivation as well as knowledge and skills

- teaching standards that guide teachers to fully engage students

- learning supports standards that address barriers to learning and the re-engagement of disconnected students.

Broadening How Schools Account for Interfering Factors & Individual Differences

It is easy to say that schools must ensure that *all* students succeed. If all students came motivationally ready and able to profit from "high standards"curricula, then there would be little problem. But *all* encompasses those experiencing *external* and *internal* barriers that interfere with benefitting from what their teacher is offering.

Given the range of individual differences in most classrooms, providing all students an equal opportunity to succeed requires *more than* higher expectations, greater teacher accountability, differentiated instruction (and certainly more than refining social control and school safety practices). Standards clearly must account for the broad range of student differences (including interests, strengths, weaknesses, and limitations). That is, school standards must ensure that schools strive to provide

- instruction that is a good match for *both* motivation and developed capabilities

Equity requires a high policy priority for learning supports

and

- a unified and comprehensive classroom and school-wide component for countering factors that interfere with learning and teaching.

Education standards increasingly are concerned about engaging students, but offer little to account for motivational differences and the problem of re-engaging disconnected students. Engagement involves more than addressing differences in interests; it includes overcoming low or negative/avoidance/reactive motivation, providing structure in terms of personalized support and guidance, and designing instruction to enhance and expand intrinsic motivation for learning and problem solving.*

In a significant number of instances, a school's ability to first and foremost address motivational concerns (including providing added supports, guidance, and special accommodations) is key to engaging and re-engaging students.

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*Given the inappropriate overemphasis and overreliance on reinforcement theory in all facets of schooling, school staff need standards that minimize *extrinsic* motivational strategies and fully incorporate what *intrinsic* motivation research has emphasized about learning and teaching over the last 50 years.[3]

How many students does it take to change a light bulb?

Only one . . . but the student has to want to change the bulb!

3

It is the effort to pursue instructional processes and content with in-depth attention to current levels of motivation and not just matching differences in developed abilities that distinguishes *personalized* instruction from *individualized* instruction. It is critical that education standards clearly emphasize this distinction in discussing differentiated instruction.

Furthermore, because strategies such as "Response to Intervention" (RtI) begin in the classroom, standards for RtI should delineate what should happen prior to referral for specialized assistance and what should be done during the referral process if referral proves necessary.

Teachers Can't Do It Alone!

The three component school improvement framework highlights that teachers can't and shouldn't be expected to meet curriculum and instructional standards without effective learning supports. Identifying and addressing barriers and differential needs and re-engaging disconnected students often can only be accomplished through collaborative processes. School improvement policy and practice must ensure that standards for teaching and providing learning supports delineate collaborative working relationships not only among teachers but between teachers and students, family members, learning and student support staff, administrators, and all others who can help.

Standards for a Unified & Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

Adopting standards for learning supports in no way diminishes the importance of curriculum and teaching standards. Every teacher must have the ability and resources to bring a sound curriculum to life and apply strategies that make learning meaningful and effective, and to these ends, appropriate curriculum and teaching standards are foundational. But, such standards are insufficient for enhancing equity of opportunity to succeed at school and beyond.

Standards for learning supports are long overdue. A start has been made with the standards various student support professional associations have formulated for their individual constituencies. Now it is time to establish a *unified* set of standards for student/learning supports.

The following Exhibit outlines such a set of standards. These were developed as part of the new directions for student and learning supports initiative and reflect prototype frameworks for a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm).

A cursory reading of the standards underscores how much is not being discussed in the current movement to improve education standards.

Standards for a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*

Area: *Framing and Delineating Intervention Functions*

Standard 1. **Establishment of an overall *unifying intervention framework* for a comprehensive, systemic, and equitable component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, including re-engaging disconnected students.**

A *Learning Supports Component* is a systemic approach that is fully and equitably integrated into the school's strategic improvement plan as a primary and essential component overlapping the instructional and management components. The supports are operationalized into a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive intervention framework.[1] One facet of this framework is a continuum of integrated, overlapping subsystems that embrace both school and community resources (e.g., subsystems to promote positive development, prevent problems, respond early after problem onset, and treat severe-chronic problems) . Note that this intervention continuum is not well operationalized simply as tiers or levels of school intervention. Rather, the standard is that each level is developed as a subsystem that weaves together school and community resources, and each subsystem covers a delineated set of "content" arenas.

A conceptualization that organizes a delineated set of content arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching is the other facet of the framework.[1] To illustrate standards for content arenas, the following uses the six arenas designated in the intervention framework prototype being used by pioneering states and districts.

> *Standard 1 addendum:* **Specific standards for the content arenas of a learning supports component**

> > While the number and labels for designated content arenas may differ, as Standard 1 indicates: Schools need a conceptualization that organizes a delineated set of content arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. (As one of the quality performance indicators for Standard 1 indicates, rather than a fragmented, "laundry-list" of programs, services, and activities, the learning supports need to be organized into a concise content or "curriculum" framework that categorizes and captures the essence of the multifaceted ways schools need to address barriers to learning.)

> > *Standard 1a.* **Continuous enhancement of regular *classroom strategies to enable learning*** (e.g., improving instruction for students with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems and re-engaging those who have become disengaged from learning at school)

> > *Standard 1b.* **Continuous enhancement of a programs and systems for a full range of transition supports** (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes, daily transitions, etc.)

> > *Standard 1c.* **Continuous enhancement of programs and systems to increase and strengthen *home and school connections***

> > *Standard 1d.* **Continuous enhancement of programs and systems for responding to, and where feasible, preventing *school and personal crises*** (including creating a caring and safe learning environment)

> > *Standard 1e.* **Continuous enhancement of programs and systems to increase and strengthen *community involvement and support*** (e.g., outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)

> > *Standard 1f.* **Continuous enhancement of programs and systems to facilitate *student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.***

(cont.)

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*Adapted from: *Standards & Quality Indicators for an Enabling or Learning Supports Component* online at – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/qualityindicators.pdf

<p style="text-align: center;">**Area:** *Reworking Operational Infrastructure*</p>

Standard 2. **Establishment of an *integrated operational infrastructure* framework for a comprehensive, systemic, and equitable component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.**

Developing and institutionalizing a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports requires mechanisms that are integrated with each other and are fully integrated into school improvement efforts. The need at all levels is to rework infrastructure to support efforts to address barriers to learning in a cohesive manner and to integrate the work with efforts to promote healthy development and with instruction and with the management/governance mechanisms. This requires dedicated administrative leadership (with leaders involved in system governance, planning and implementation), a learning supports leadership team and work groups (focused on functions such as mapping, analysis, and priority setting for intervention development and resource allocation; integration, communication and information management; capacity building; quality improvement and accountability).

<p style="text-align: center;">**Area:** *Enhancing Resource Use*</p>

Standard 3. **Appropriate resource use and allocation for developing, maintaining, and evolving the component.**

Appropriate use of resources is based on up-to-date gap and outcome analyses and established priorities for improving the component. Resource allocation involves (re)deployment of available funds to achieve priorities. Cost-efficiencies are achieved through collaborations that, in common purpose, integrate systems and weave together learning support resources within the school, among families of schools, from centralized district assets, and from various community entities.

<p style="text-align: center;">**Area:** *Continuous Capacity Building*</p>

Standard 4. **Capacity building for developing, maintaining, and evolving the component.**

Capacity building involves enhancing ongoing system and stakeholder development and performance. The work requires allocation of resources to provide effective and efficient mechanisms and personnel to carry out a myriad of capacity building functions.

<p style="text-align: center;">**Area:** *Continuous Evaluation and Appropriate Accountability*</p>

Standard 5. **Formative and summative evaluation and accountability are fully integrated into all planning and implementation.**

Formative evaluation provides essential data related to progress in improving processes and achieving benchmarks and outcomes. In the initial phase of component development, formative evaluation focuses heavily on feedback and benchmarks related to specific developmental tasks, functioning of processes, and immediate outcomes. Formative evaluation is an ongoing process with an increasing focus on intermediate and then long-range outcomes. Summative data on intermediate outcomes are gathered as soon as the component is operating as an integrated system. Summative data on long-range outcomes are gathered after the component has operated as an integrated system for two years. Accountability indicators should fit the phase of component development. This means the primary focus is on developmental benchmarks in the early phases. When the accountability focus is on student impact, the primary emphasis is on the direct enabling outcomes for students that each arena of the component is designed to accomplish. As these accountability indicators show solid impact, they can be correlated with academic progress to estimate their contribution to academic achievement.

Concluding Comments

School improvement discussions across the country are standards-based and accountability driven. Disconnects are inevitable when curriculum and teaching standards are developed separately. And this is a problem that needs correction.

Beyond this problem, however, is the failure of the current standards movement to deal with the reality that curriculum and teaching standards fall far short of providing a focus on how schools can enhance equity of opportunity for *all*. Such standards continue to give short shrift to factors that *interfere* with successful teaching and pay too little attention to the many students manifesting *moderate-to-severe learning, behavior, and emotional problems*. Establishing standards for student/learning supports is essential to rectifying these short-comings.

None of this argues against the necessity of improving standards for curriculum and instruction. The intent here is to highlight that the current standards movement does little to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. The policy need is for a third component that does so directly and systematically. Standards generated for such a component can then help drive and guide component development and personnel preparation.

The next decade must mark a turning point for how schools and communities address the many barriers to learning experienced by children and youth. Needed in particular are initiatives to transform how teachers and their many colleagues work to stem the tide of learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Such a transformation is essential to enhancing achievement for all, closing the achievement gap, reducing dropouts, and increasing the opportunity for schools to be valued as treasures in their neighborhood.

Notes

[1]Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006). *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions*
    for addressing barriers to learning. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
 Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2008). *Rebuilding for learning: Addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging students*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/rebuild/RebuidlingV11RD28.pdf

[2]*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Trailblazing Initiatives!*
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/summer14.pdf

[3]Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. (2002). The paradox of achievement: The harder you push, the worse it gets. In J. Aronson (Ed.), *Improving academic achievement: Contributions of social psychology.* (Pp. 59-85). New York: Academic Press.
 National Research Council (2004). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn* Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press.

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School improvement standards are a tool that reflects the public's aspirations for its education system.

Such standards become a political problem when they are prematurely turned into accountability demands.

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