

School Improvement, School Transformation – Some Straight Talk

As has been the case for some time, David Berliner clearly stresses the daunting realities for efforts to improve schooling outcomes of students growing up in poverty:

It's neither this nation's teachers nor its curriculum that impede the achievement of our children. ... So many of [the] problems of American education have their start in the tracking of America's children — but not necessarily by their schools! Our children are tracked into different neighborhoods on the basis of their family's income, ethnicity, and race. This is where our school problems begin. We seem blind to the fact that housing policies that promote that kind of segregation are educational policies, as well. ... The neighborhood school in a society with an apartheid-lite housing policy is killing us! ... These realities of contemporary American life have powerful effects on schooling in America. For example, I can predict quite accurately the percentage of kids that score at certain levels on standardized tests by knowing characteristics of the families who send their kids to their neighborhood school. I don't need to know anything at all about the teachers or curriculum at that school. If I want to, I can probably skip the expense of the test! ... Although demographics may not be destiny for an individual, it is the best predictor of a school's outcomes — independent of that school's teachers, administrators and curriculum! ... The higher the poverty rate, the lower the scores.
(https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2018/10/22/education-professor-my-students-asked-who-i-would-vote-heres-what-i-told-them/?utm_term=.993987fac8ee).

Since schools cannot solve society's fundamental economic imbalances, where does this leave schools? Just where a Carnegie task force on education noted some time ago:

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

Meeting the Challenge Involves More than Focusing on Improving Teaching

Most school improvement and transformation talk gives short shrift to addressing barriers that are directly affecting learning. This trend is reinforced when such changes are made in schools that have a majority of students who in a position to profit from the changes. This limited focus is a recipe for continued failure in all other schools.

Transforming Schools and Comprehensively Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Naturally, every school must do as much as feasible to improve instruction and how it is managed/governed. At the same time, it must develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing as many factors as feasible that are interfering with students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond.

Every school has some resources devoted to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Some devote as much as 25% of their budget to such concerns. But in most schools, the efforts are fragmented and marginalized and focused on a relatively few students with major behavior, learning, and emotional problems. Now is the time to improve the situation by moving forward in efforts to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. Such a system involves more than just doing better coordination of existing activity. It involves more than linking with a few community services and declaring the school is now a community school. It involves more than adopting a multi-tiered support system (MTSS) framework. All these efforts are relevant, but fall short of what is needed.

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Framing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports: Broadening MTSS

A well-developed system of learning supports encompasses resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and cognitive supports in the classroom and schoolwide. A comprehensive, cohesive, and coherent system is essential to reducing dropout rates, narrowing the achievement gap, and strengthening whole school improvement and is essential for enabling whole child improvement and enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond for all students.

Thinking about a continuum of interventions is a good starting point for framing the nature and scope of a comprehensive system. The levels of such a continuum involve an interrelated and overlapping intervention subsystems focused on

- (1) promoting development and preventing problems
- (2) responding to problems as early-after-onset as feasible
- (3) treating severe, pervasive, and chronic problems.

While MTSS stresses a continuum of interventions, it does little to guide development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. MTSS must be reconceived. That is:

- each of the three levels of MTSS must be developed as an integrated set of *subsystems*,
- the subsystems must *link school and community interventions* in ways that weave resources together, and
- across the subsystems, the laundry list of fragmented programs and services must be coalesced into a circumscribed set of arenas reflecting the content purpose of the various interventions.

With respect to this latter concern, pioneering work across the country emphasizes six arenas encompassing interventions to:

- >Enhance regular classroom strategies to enable learning (e.g., improving instruction for students who with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems and those have become disengaged from learning at school; includes a focus on prevention, early intervening, and use of strategies such as response to intervention)
- >Support transitions (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
- >Increase home and school connections and engagement
- >Respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises
- >Increase community involvement and support (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- >Facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.

All this is spelled out in two recent books that are free and readily accessible online:

- >*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
- >*Improving School Improvement*

Both available at this time as free resources at:

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

Not ready for a book length presentation? Then, here are some brief introductory resources

- >*Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf>
- >*What are Learning Supports?*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/whatlearnsupports.pdf>
- >*What Is a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports?*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/whatis.pdf>
- >*What Every Leader for School Improvement Needs to Know About Student/Learning Supports*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/whateveryleader.pdf>

>Steps and Tools to Guide Planning and Implementation of a Comprehensive System to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

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

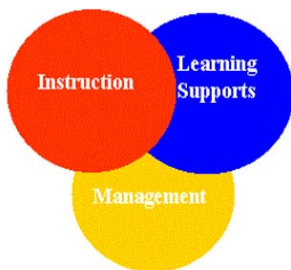
>Leadership Training: Moving in New Directions for Student Support

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

Also see the Center's Toolkit for Rebuilding the System

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

*Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to
enabling equity of opportunity, promoting whole child development,
and enhancing school climate.*



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<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>