

Executive Summary:

Restructuring Boards of Education to Enhance Schools Effectiveness in Addressing Barriers to Student Learning.

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/studentsupport/toolkit/aidh.pdf>

The document is meant to encourage school boards to take another critical step in improving schools, specifically by focusing on how the district and each school addresses barriers to learning and teaching. The discussion explores

- why school boards need to increase their focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching
- the benefits accrued from doing so
- ways to build an enhanced focus on addressing barriers into a school board's committee structure
- lessons learned from a major district where the board created a committee dedicated to improving how current resources are expended to address barriers to learning and teaching.

The full report can be downloaded at: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/boardrep.pdf>

Barriers to Learning

Besides internal factors that can lead to learning and behavior problems, a host of external barriers interfere with learning and teaching. Besides language and cultural considerations and frequent school changes, teachers are confronted with violence, drug use, and students who have disengaged from classroom learning.

School boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers everywhere are eager for ideas on how to address these concerns more effectively. Unfortunately, most districts handle barriers to student learning in a piecemeal and fragmented manner. Even at schools pursuing major reforms, the predominant focus is on improving instruction and school management, with little attention paid to improving the ways barriers are addressed. As a result, too many students are unable to truly take advantage of instructional improvements. This is a central paradox of school improvement. Resolving the paradox is one of the most critical tasks confronting school boards.

How Many Are Affected?

Some estimates indicate that 40% of young people are in bad educational shape and at risk for failing to fulfill their promise. Obviously, the percentage is smaller in some schools; but, in many urban schools, the reality is that over 50% manifest significant learning, behavior, or emotional problems. Until the barriers hindering the progress of these students are addressed effectively, average achievement test scores for many schools and districts will change little over time, initial gains will level off, and efforts to improve instruction will be judged a failure.

What's Needed?

While emphasis on standards, high expectations, assessment, waivers, accountability, and no excuses is important, such demands are not enough to turn around schools where large numbers of students are performing poorly. In many districts, a school-by-school analysis shows most sites effectively address only a small proportion of students who manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems. And, most efforts are directed at severe problems and responding to crises. Prevention and early-after-onset interventions are rare. Moreover, efforts generally are fragmented and are *marginalized* in policy and daily practice. What's needed is a comprehensive, multifaceted approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Trends to counter fragmentation and reduce redundancy, waste, and lack of effectiveness have stressed (a) developing “integrated” services and (b) linking community services to schools in order to increase student/family access. Ironically, many of these efforts have increased fragmentation by co-locating community services on campuses without integrating them with existing school programs and services. Moreover, the dearth of services available in poor communities generally turns increased referrals into long waiting lists.

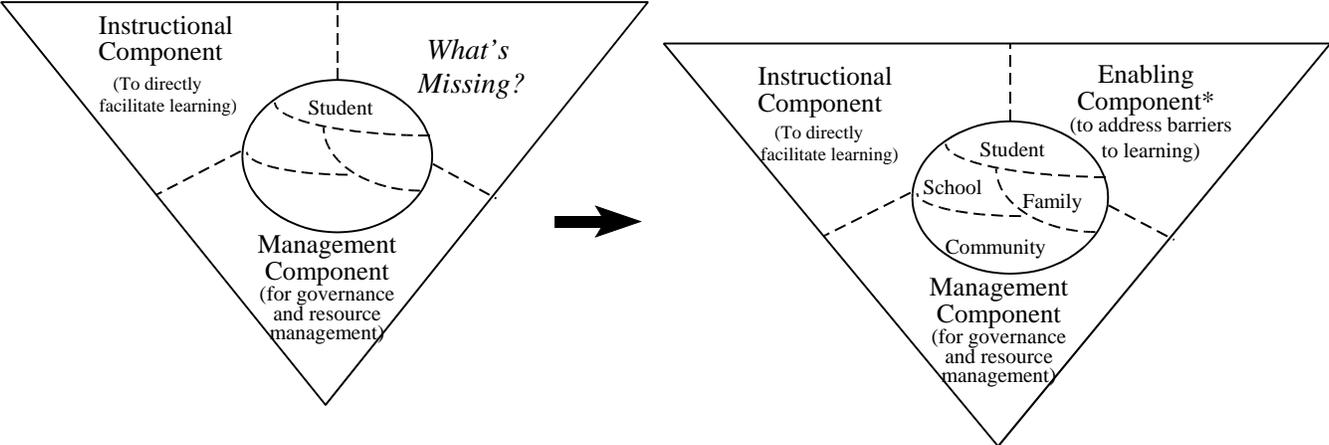
Because efforts to address barriers is so marginalized, schools devote relatively little serious attention to improving student support systems and integrating the activity with instruction. This neglect is seen in the lack of attention given this matter in consolidated plans and program quality reviews and in the token way these concerns are dealt with in the inservice education agenda for administrative and line staff. As a result, schools continue to operate with virtually no comprehensive frameworks to guide thinking about *potent* programs for addressing barriers to learning.

Comprehensive frameworks are needed to shape development of a continuum of learning support systems focused on individual, family, and environmental barriers. Such a continuum must be multifaceted and integrated, encompassing systems of prevention, systems to address problems as soon after onset as feasible, and systems to assist those with chronic and severe problems. A policy emphasis on developing these systems is the key not only to unifying fragmented activity, but to using all available resources in the most productive manner.

A Basic Policy Shift

Documented failures of so many reforms over the last thirty years suggest it is time for a basic policy shift. As highlighted in Figure 1, such a shift should move away from the inadequate two component model that dominates school improvement efforts. There is no way to avoid the fact that better achievement requires more than good instruction and well-managed schools. Also essential is an enabling or learning supports component that comprehensively addresses barriers. Such a component must be treated as a fundamental facet of school improvement. When policy and practice are viewed through the lens of this third component, it becomes evident how much is missing in current efforts to ensure *all* young people *truly* have an equal opportunity to learn at school.

Figure 1. Moving from a two to a three component framework for school improvement.



The three component framework calls for elevating efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching to a high level of policy. The usefulness of the concept of an enabling component in formulating policy is evidenced in its adoption by states and localities as a framework for school improvement. As it spreads, the concept is referred to using a variety of terms. For example, the California and Iowa Departments of Education and districts such as the Los Angeles Unified School District call their enabling component a “Learning Supports” component. This is also the terminology used by the New American Schools’ Urban Learning Center comprehensive school reform model. Some states use the term “Supportive Learning Environment.” The Hawaii Department of Education calls it a “Comprehensive Student Support System” (CSSS). Following Hawai`i’s lead, the Speaker Pro Tem of the California Assembly has introduced legislation for a “Comprehensive Pupil Learning Support System.”

**What
Are the
Benefits?**

The most fundamental benefits to be accrued from school boards increasing their focus on these concerns are enhanced student academic performance and achievement. The reality is that the best instructional reforms cannot produce the desired results for a large number of students as long as schools do not have a comprehensive approach for addressing external and internal barriers to learning and teaching.

In reviewing the benefits of their board’s enhanced focus on addressing barriers to learning, one district stressed that the work contributed to

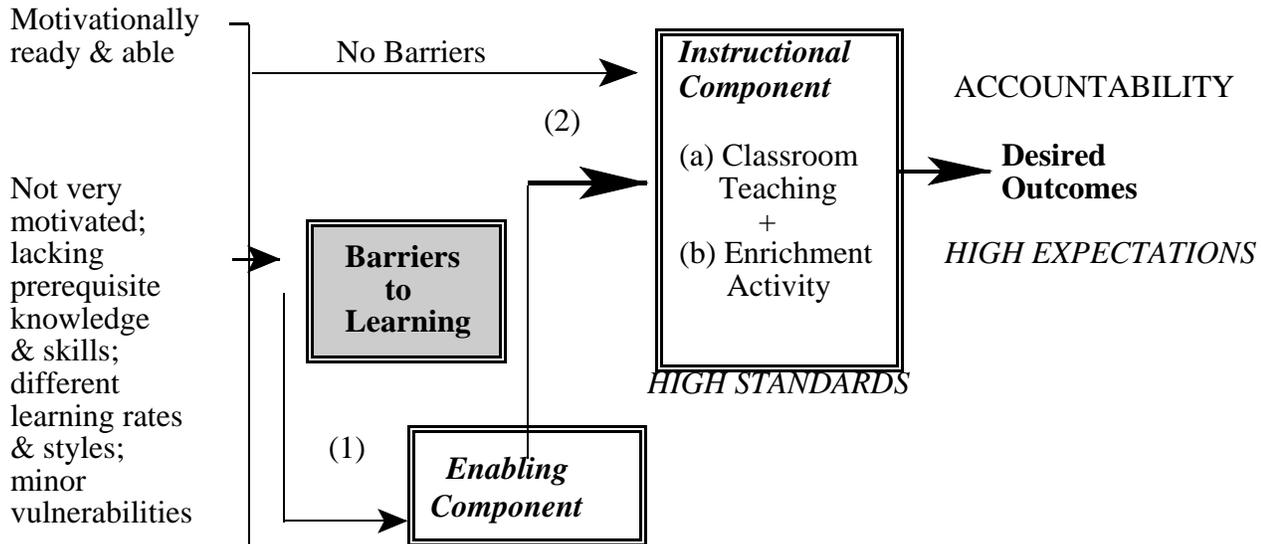
- formulating a policy framework and specific recommendations for ways to improve efforts to address barriers to student learning and enhance healthy development
- continuous school improvement in addressing barriers (e.g., more early intervention in dealing with the problems of social promotion, expulsion, dropout, and too many inappropriate referrals for special education)
- morale-boosting open forums where line staff and community stakeholders had opportunities to propose changes, offer ideas, and raise concerns
- more integrated and mutually sensitive connections with community agency resources
- regular access by board members and district staff, *without fees*, to an array of invaluable expertise from the community in exploring how the district should handle complex problems arising from health and welfare reforms and the ways schools should provide learning supports
- expanding the informed cadre of influential advocates and stakeholders in support of district reforms

Analyses indicate that schools can build an Enabling or Learning Supports Component by developing programs in six basic areas (see below).

Figure 2. An enabling component for a school site.

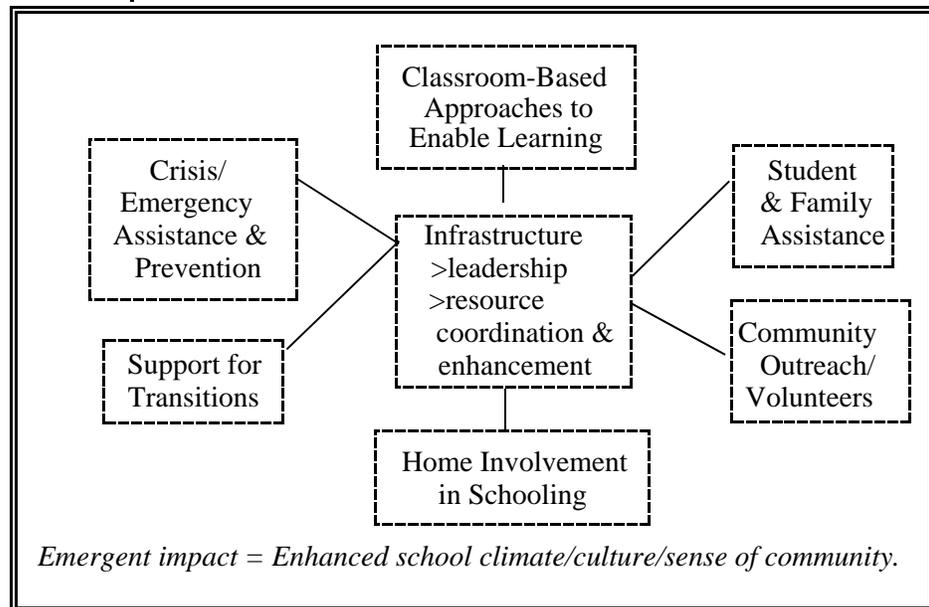
Range of Learners

(categorized in terms of their response to academic instruction)



The Enabling Component = A Comprehensive, Multifaceted Approach for Addressing Barriers to Learning

Such an approach weaves six clusters of enabling activity (i.e., an enabling component curriculum) into the fabric of the school to address barriers to learning and promote healthy development for *all* students.



**Enhancing
a School
Board's
Focus on
Barriers to
Learning**

Most school boards do not have a standing committee giving full attention to the problem of how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. This is not to suggest that boards are ignoring such matters. Indeed, items related to these concerns appear regularly on every school board's agenda. The problem is that each item tends to be handled in an ad hoc manner, without sufficient attention to the "Big Picture." One result is that the administrative structure in most districts is not organized in ways that coalesce the various programs and services used to address barriers. The piecemeal structure reflects the marginalized status of such functions and both creates and maintains fragmented policies and practices.

Given that every school endeavors to address barriers to learning and teaching, school boards should carefully analyze how their committee structure deals with these functions. Because boards already have a full agenda, such an analysis probably will require use of an ad hoc committee. This committee should be charged with clarifying whether the board's structure, time allotted at meetings, and the way the budget and central administration are organized allow for a thorough and cohesive overview of all functions schools pursue to enable learning and teaching. In carrying out this charge, the committee should consider work done by pupil services staff (e.g., psychologists, counselors, social workers, attendance workers, nurses), compensatory and special education, safe and drug free schools programs, dropout prevention, aspects of school readiness and early intervention, district health and human service activities, initiatives for linking with community services, and more. Most boards will find (1) they don't have a big picture perspective of how all these functions relate to each other, (2) the current board structure and processes for reviewing these functions do not engender a thorough, cohesive approach to policy, and (3) functions related to addressing barriers to learning are distributed among administrative staff in ways that foster fragmentation.

If this is the case, the board should consider establishing a standing committee that focuses in depth and consistently on the topic of how schools in the district can enhance their efforts to improve instruction by addressing barriers in more cohesive and effective ways.

**What a
Standing
Committee
can Do**

The primary assignment for a standing committee is to develop a comprehensive policy framework to guide reforms and restructuring so that *every school* can make major improvements in how it addresses barriers interfering with student learning. Developing such a framework requires revisiting existing policy with a view to making it more cohesive and, as gaps are identified, taking steps to fill them.

mapping

Current policies, practices, and resources must be well-understood. This requires using the lens of addressing barriers to learning to do a complete mapping of all district owned programs, services, personnel, space, material resources, cooperative ventures with community agencies, and so forth. The mapping process should differentiate between (a) regular, long-term programs and short-term projects, (b) those that have the potential to produce major results and those likely to produce superficial outcomes, and (c) those designed to benefit all or most students at every school site and those designed to serve a small segment of the district's students. In looking at income, in-kind contributions, and expenditures, it is essential to distinguish between "hard" and "soft" money (e.g., the general funds budget, categorical and special project funds, other sources that currently or potentially can help underwrite programs). It is also useful to differentiate between long- and short-term soft money. It has been speculated that when the various sources of support are totaled in certain schools as much as 30% of the resources may be going to addressing barriers to learning. Reviewing the budget through this lens is essential in moving beyond speculation about such key matters.

analysis Because of the fragmented way policies and practices have been established, there tends to be inefficiency and redundancy, as well as major gaps in efforts to address barriers to learning. Thus, a logical focus for analysis is how to reduce fragmentation and fill gaps in ways that increase effectiveness and efficiency. Another aspect of the analysis involves identifying activities that have little or no effects; these represent resources that can be redeployed to help underwrite the costs of filling major gaps.

rethinking policy A framework offering a picture of the district’s total approach for addressing barriers to learning should be formulated to guide long-term strategic planning. A well-developed framework and accompanying standards and quality indicators are essential tools for evaluating all proposals in ways that minimize fragmented and piecemeal approaches. These tools also provide guidance in outreaching to connect with community resources in ways that fill gaps and complement school programs and services. That is, they help clarify cohesive ways to weave school and community resources together, thereby avoiding the creation of a new form of fragmentation.

systemic reforms The above tasks are not simple ones. And even when they are accomplished, they are insufficient. The committee must also develop policy and restructuring proposals that enable substantive systemic changes. These include essential capacity building strategies (e.g., administrative restructuring, leadership development, budget reorganization, developing stakeholder readiness for changes, well-trained change agents, strategies for dealing with resistance to change, initial and ongoing staff development, monitoring and accountability). To achieve economies of scale, proposals can capitalize on the natural connections between a high school and its feeders (or a “family” of schools). Centralized functions should be redefined and restructured to ensure that central offices/units support what each school and family of schools is trying to accomplish.

Ensuring the Work Bears Fruit The committee’s efforts will be for naught if the focus of their work is not a regular topic on the board’s agenda and included as a coherent section of the budget. Moreover, the board’s commitment must be to addressing barriers to learning in powerful ways that enable teachers to be more effective – as contrasted to a more limited commitment to providing a few mandated services or simply increasing access to community services through developing coordinated/integrated school-linked services.

Given the nature and scope of necessary changes and the limited resources available, the board probably will have to ask for significant restructuring of the district bureaucracy. (Obviously, the aim is not to create a larger central bureaucracy.) Moreover, it is essential to adopt a realistic time frame for fully accomplishing the substantive changes that are needed.

Establishing and building the capacity of a board committee to address barriers to learning is a challenging undertaking. Problems arise, but most are the rather common ones associated with committee and team endeavors. And, most can be anticipated and minimized. The document underscores some key concerns and suggests strategies for countering them.

Committee Composition

The nature and scope of the work call for a committee that encompasses

- one or more board members who chair the committee (all board members are welcome and specific ones are invited to particular sessions as relevant)
- district administrator(s) in charge of relevant programs (e.g., student support services, Title I, special education)
- several key district staff members who can represent the perspectives of principals, union members, and various other stakeholders
- nondistrict members whose jobs and expertise (e.g., public health, mental health, social services, recreation, juvenile justice, post secondary institutions) make them invaluable contributors to the tasks at hand .

To be more specific:

- >It helps if more than one board member sits on the committee to minimize proposals being contested as the personal/political agenda of a particular board member.
- >Critical information about current activity can be readily elicited through the active participation of a district administrator (e.g., an associate/assistant superintendent) responsible for “student support programs.”
- >Similarly, a few other district staff usually are needed to clarify how efforts are playing out at schools across the district and to ensure that site administrators, line staff, and union considerations are discussed. Consideration also should be given to including representatives of district parents and students.
- >Finally, the board should reach out to include members on the standing committee from outside the district who have special expertise and who represent agencies that are or might become partners with the district in addressing barriers to learning. For example, in one district, the committee had key professionals from post secondary institutions, county departments for health, and social services, public and private organizations for youth development and recreation, and the United Way. The organizations all saw the committee’s work as highly related to their mission and readily donated the staff time.

Concluding Comments

As school boards strive to improve schools, the primary emphasis is on high standards, high expectations, assessment, accountability, and no excuses. These are all laudable guidelines for reform. They are simply not sufficient.

It is time for school boards to deal more effectively with the reality that, by themselves, the best instructional reforms cannot produce desired results when large numbers of students are not performing well. It is essential to enhance the way every school site addresses barriers to learning and teaching. Each school needs policy support to help evolve a comprehensive, multifaceted, and well-integrated approach for addressing barriers and for doing so in ways that weave the work seamlessly with the school's efforts to enhance instruction and school management.

Progress along these lines is hampered by the marginalized status of programs and personnel whose primary focus is on enabling learning through learning supports that effectively address barriers. Most school boards do not have a standing committee that focuses exclusively on this arena of policy and practice. The absence of such a structural mechanism makes it difficult to focus powerfully and cohesively on improving the way current resources are used and hinders exploring the best ways to evolve the type of comprehensive and multifaceted approaches that are needed to produce over time major gains in student achievement.

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