Developing a Comprehensive System to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching:

Keeping the Big Picture in Focus

July, 2007

This Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates
under the auspice of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.
Center for Mental Health in Schools, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563
(310) 825-3634 Fax: (310) 206-8716; E-mail: smhp@ucla.edu Website: http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu

Support comes in part from the Office of Adolescent Health, Maternal and Child Health Bureau
(Title V, Social Security Act), Health Resources and Services Administration
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Project #U45 MC 00175)

The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones
John Maynard Keynes

I. A Call to Action

The data are clear: Too many students are not doing well in school.

Too many are experiencing interfering barriers, most of which are not internal dysfunctions but are associated with neighborhood, family, school, and peer factors.

If the situation is to change, schools must play a greater role in providing supports for students experiencing barriers to learning and teaching.

At this time, most school improvement plans do not effectively focus on enhancing student outcomes by *comprehensively* addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

For many students, such a focus is essential to (re)engaging them in classroom instruction and enabling classroom learning.

And, the straight forward psychometric reality is that in schools where a large proportion of students encounter major barriers to learning, test score averages are unlikely to increase adequately until barriers are effectively addressed.

So, it is time for schools to move forward in establishing the type of *comprehensive system* for addressing barriers to learning and teaching that can enable them to be more effective in

- reducing student dropout rates
- reducing teacher dropout rates
- re-engaging students in classroom learning
- narrowing the achievement gap
- eliminating the plateau effect related to efforts to improve achievement test performance
- reducing the growing list of schools designated as low performing
- minimizing the degree to which high stakes testing is taking a toll on students

How does this fit with current efforts to improve schools?

Good instruction delivered by highly qualified teachers alone cannot ensure that all students are engaged in learning and have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Schools already are concerned about improving how a variety of barriers to learning and teaching are addressed.

A comprehensive component for directly and systematically dealing with factors that keep too many students from doing well at school is essential. Pioneering work across the country already has begun to move “learning supports” to a prominent place in improving schools and student outcomes.

What are learning supports?

Ultimately, all school interventions to address barriers to learning and teaching are about supporting learning. As defined for policy purposes, *learning supports* are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports intended to address barriers to learning and teaching in ways that enable all pupils to have an equal opportunity for success at school. To be most effective, learning supports should be woven into a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of classroom and school-wide interventions and should be fully integrated with instructional efforts.

Why aren't current efforts sufficient?

Analyses of the current state of affairs find a tendency for student supports to be highly fragmented and marginalized in policy and practice at all levels. It is commonplace for support staff to be organized and to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders. And, a great deal of the work is oriented to discrete problems and overrelies on specialized services for individuals and small groups. All this not only is expensive in terms of direct costs, it produces inappropriate redundancy and counter-productive competition and works against developing cohesive approaches to maximize results. Limited efficacy and cost effectiveness seem inevitable in the absence of significant systemic change.

Student support programs and services as they currently operate can’t meet the needs of the many for whom barriers are interfering with their learning at school. The realities are that the problems are complex and that complex problems require comprehensive solutions. School improvement and capacity building efforts (including pre and in service staff development) have yet to deal effectively with these matters.

Leaders at all levels need to understand the full implications of all this. The time is long overdue for escaping old ways of thinking and moving in substantively new directions.

There is much work to be done in addressing barriers to learning and teaching as public schools across the country strive to leave no child behind. The next decade must mark a turning point in how schools and communities address the problems of children and youth. In particular, the focus must be on initiatives to reform and restructure how schools work to prevent and ameliorate the many learning, behavior, and emotional problems experienced by students. And, the end product must be schools where everyone – staff, students, families, and community stakeholders – feels supported. This means reshaping the functions of all school personnel who have a role to play in addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development. And, it means fully integrating their roles and functions into school improvement planning.

Specifically, school improvement planners must:

- reframe current student support programs and services and redeploy the resources to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive component to enable learning

- develop both in-classroom and school-wide approaches – including interventions to support transitions, increase home and community connections, enhance teacher's ability to respond to common learning and behavior problems, and respond to and prevent crises

- revamp district, school, and school-community infrastructures to weave resources together to enhance and evolve the learning supports system

- pursue school improvement and systemic change from the perspective of learning supports and the need to engage and re-engage students in classroom learning

##########

This planning guide is designed to help with the initial phases of school improvement planning for establishing a *Comprehensive System to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching.*

##########

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.
Carnegie Task Force on Education

II. Keeping the Big Picture in Focus

Those who want to establish a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching must mobilize a critical mass of committed support among key leaders and other stakeholders. Such commitment must be reflected in policy statements and creation of an infrastructure that ensures essential leadership, resources, motivation, and capability for developing an effective system of learning supports.

This brief document highlights key planning considerations by outlining major steps, functions, and tasks and related infrastructure concerns. Also included are examples of relevant tools to guide and aid planning.

This section is intended to encourage planners to begin by

(a) reflecting on the underlying rationale for developing a system of learning supports

(b) adopting a comprehensive intervention framework

(c) outlining the major steps in the process.

Specifically, an underlying set of considerations are sketched out as examples of the type of "big picture" matters that stakeholders need to discuss, adopt, and keep in focus. A framework is presented to illustrate a comprehensive approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Then, it is suggested that 11 major steps are involved in establishing such a comprehensive component

A. Examples of Underlying Points to Keep in Focus

Note: As schools move forward to develop a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, it is essential over time to revisit matters related to the "big picture" rationale, assumptions, and science underlying changes. As the work proceeds it is wise to ensure that all stakeholders are operating with a full understanding that it's about:

All students – Ultimately, the intent is to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed at school. This requires not only personalized instruction, but developing the type of *comprehensive system* for addressing barriers to learning and teaching (a learning supports or enabling component) that can effectively

- reduce student dropout rates
- reduce teacher dropout rates
- re-engage students in classroom learning
- narrow the achievement gap
- eliminate the plateau effect related to efforts to improve achievement test performance
- reduce the growing list of schools designated as low performing
- minimize the degree to which high stakes testing is taking a toll on students

Engaging and re-engaging students – The need to engage and re-engage students in classroom instruction must be a central focus, and this requires increased emphasis on intrinsic motivation. Of particular importance are practices that (a) enhance students' feelings of competence, self-determination, and connection with significant others and (b) minimize threats to such feelings.

Using resources appropriately – It is essential to use existing resources in ways that are most effective. It is recognized. however, that effectiveness is not just a matter of achieving specific outcomes for a few youngsters through specialized services and enhancing coordination to reduce service fragmentation. It involves deploying resources in ways that meet the needs of the many.

Evolving new directions – Meeting the needs of the many requires rethinking how resources should be used to provide learning supports and then deploying and (re)deploying resources in ways that evolve a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach that addresses barriers and supports student learning, development, and well-being. A comprehensive and cohesive approach consists of (a) a continuum of interventions to meet the needs of all children and youth and (b) a well-delineated set of content arenas. It is by effectively developing such a comprehensive approach that schools evolve not only a safe, but a nurturing environment.

Improving standards, evaluation processes, and accountability procedures – All efforts to develop a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching should be standards-based and results-oriented.

Integrating learning supports fully with instruction – In developing a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching, the intent is to fully integrate a learning supports component with the instructional component in all school improvement planning.

Pursuing resource-oriented functions – Developing a system to address barriers to learning and teaching involves the ability to carry out a variety of resource-oriented *functions* in a proactive way. These include providing leadership, capacity building, and oversight for mapping what exists, analyzing current resource use, establishing priorities for program development, making recommendations for resource (re)deployment and enhancement to improve programs and systems, participating in decision making, and more.

Improving the organizational and operational infrastructure – Developing a system to address barriers to learning and teaching requires rethinking current infrastructure. The organizational and operational infrastructure must facilitate stakeholders working together with a dedicated task focus in planning, implementing, and evaluating the new approach. For infrastructure to be efficient and effective, mechanisms must be well-designed and interconnected. And, of course, there must be effective, task-focused facilitation for each mechanism. With all this in mind, planners need to rethink:

> ***School-site*** **infrastructure** – Planning, implementation, and evaluation of new directions requires effectively establishing, linking, and sustaining all organizational and operational mechanisms at a school.

> ***Feeder pattern*** **infrastructure** – In order to maximize use of available resources and achieve economies of scale, new forms of connection can be made with other schools in a complex or feeder pattern (e.g., a family of schools)

> ***Central office*** **infrastructure** – Infrastructure connections with a district's central office must be reworked to ensure that site-based and school cluster efforts are effectively nurtured.

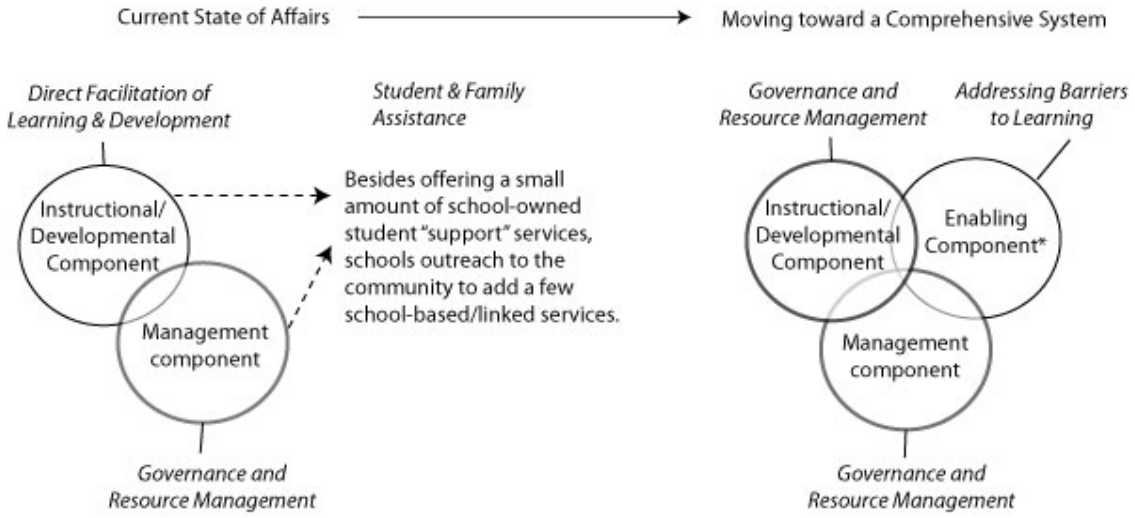
> ***School-community collaboratives*** – Ultimately, the emphasis on enhancing school and community connections leads to considerations of how school infrastructure mechanisms braid with those in the community to establish effective, function-oriented school-community collaboration.

Building capacity with a strong emphasis on stakeholder development – Meeting the needs of all students and staff requires careful attention to capacity building and especially to enhancing on-the-job opportunities and inservice training for learning new roles and functions. Stakeholder mobility calls for particular attention to the needs of newcomers. And, throughout, special attention must be paid to the problem of the match between intervention processes and stakeholder motivation and capabilities.

B. A Comprehensive Intervention Framework for Addressing Barriers to Learning

Exhibit 1 portrays a component for addressing barriers to learning as an essential facet of school improvement.

Exhibit 1. Toward a Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Moving from a Two- to a Three-component Framework for School Improvement



*The Enabling Component is designed to enable learning by addressing factors that interfere with learning, development, and teaching and with re-engaging students in classroom instruction. It is established in policy and practice as primary and essential and is developed into a comprehensive approach by weaving together school and community resources. Some venues where this comprehensive approach is adopted refer to the third component as a Learning Supports Component.

When policy and practice are viewed through the lens of this third component, it becomes evident how much is missing in current efforts to enable all students to learn and develop. Establishment of this "enabling" component or system of learning supports elevates efforts to address barriers to a high policy level and fully integrates the work as a fundamental and essential facet of school improvement. It is important to stress that addressing barriers is not a separate agenda from the instructional mission. A three-component framework calls for fully integrating the enabling, instructional, and management components with each other.

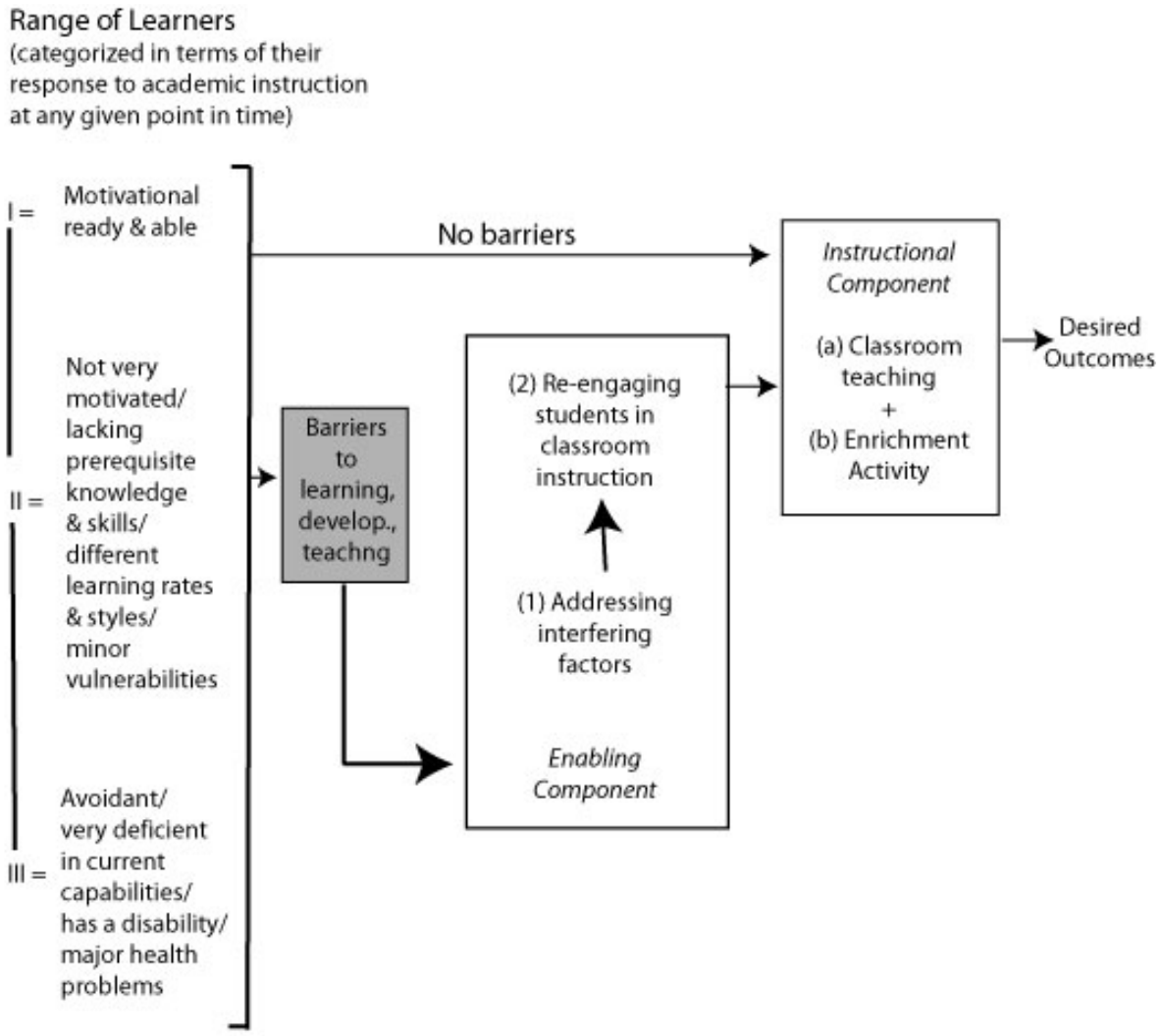
About the Component to Address Barriers to Learning

A enabling component to address barriers to learning provides both a basis for combating marginalization and a focal point for developing a comprehensive framework for policy and practice. It can also help address fragmentation by providing a focus for weaving together separate initiatives for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The usefulness of the concept of an enabling component as a broad unifying force is evidenced by the growing attention it is receiving at state and local education agencies (where it often is called a "Learning Supports Component" or a "Comprehensive System of Student Support").

A major breakthrough in the battle against learning, behavior, and emotional problems can be achieved only when school improvement policy, planning, implementation, and accountability fully address factors interfering with learning. This requires *more than* outreach to link with community resources, *more than* coordinating school-owned services, *more than* coordinating school services with community services, *and more than* creating family resource centers, full service schools, and community schools. None of these alone constitute the type of comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach portrayed in Exhibit 2. The approach depicted focuses first on addressing barriers to learning, development, and teaching and then on re-engaging students in classroom instruction.

Developing a cohesive enabling component in schools requires significant systemic changes. The initial emphasis is primarily on weaving together what schools already have (e.g., pupil services, special and compensatory education and other categorical programs). Then, the focus expands to enhance an integrated set of systems and to link school resources with those in homes and communities (e.g., formally connecting school programs with assets at home, in the business and faith communities, and neighborhood enrichment, recreation, and service resources). Accomplishing all this not only involves reframing intervention, it requires redesigning organizational and operational infrastructure, and rethinking the roles and functions of personnel at schools and central offices.

Exhibit 2. An enabling component to address barriers, re-engage students in classroom instruction, and enhance healthy development*

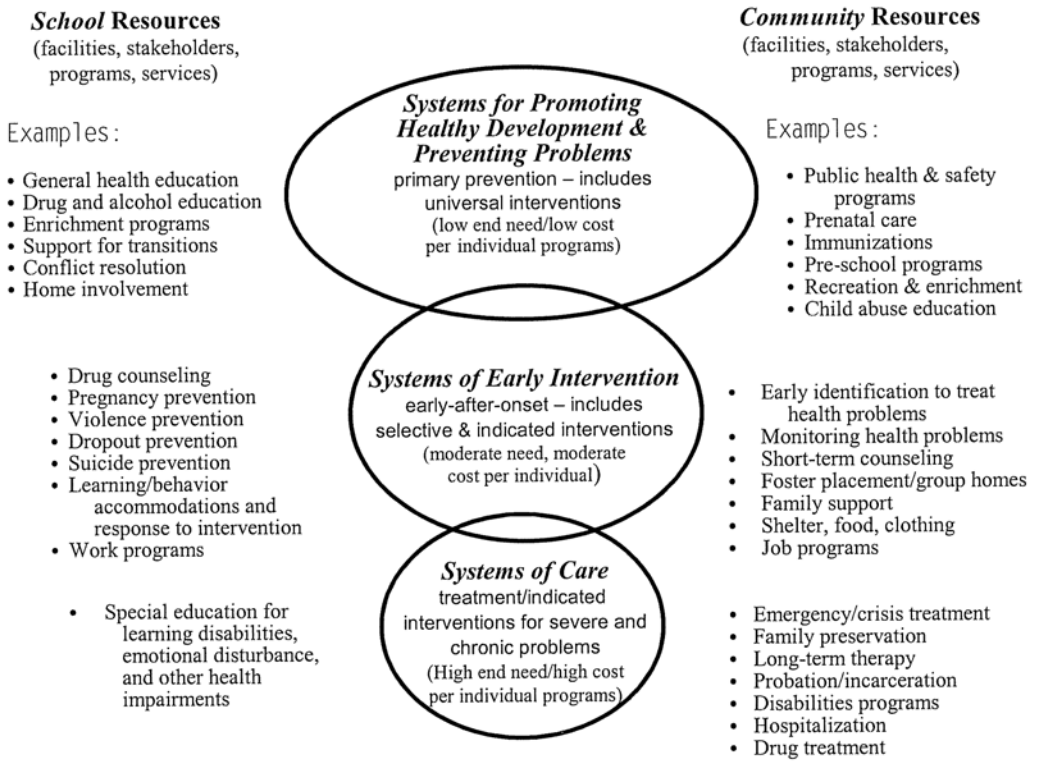


Adapted from Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (1994). On understanding intervention in psychology and education. Westport, CT: Praeger.

*All categorical programs can be integrated into a comprehensive enabling component. Examples of initiatives, programs, and services that can be unified into such a component include positive behavioral supports, programs for safe and drug free schools, programs for social and emotional development and learning, full service community schools and family resource and school based health centers, Safe Schools/Healthy Students projects, CDC's Coordinated School Health Program, bi-lingual, cultural, and other diversity programs, compensatory education programs, special education programs, mandates stemming from the No Child Left Behind Act, and many more.

For schools, a comprehensive framework for a system of learning supports combines a (a) continuum of intervention systems with (b) a scheme that organizes all support programs, services, and activities into a set of six content arenas. As can be seen in Exhibit 3, the continuum is conceived in terms of three interconnected levels of intervention: (1) systems to promote healthy development and prevent problems, (2) systems to intervene as early after the onset of a problem as is feasible, and (3) systems of care. As illustrated in the exhibit, the assumption is that effectiveness at the upper levels will result in fewer persons requiring intervention at lower levels. Note that the continuum encompasses the concepts of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention, as well as those efforts that classify a continuum of care into a three-tiered categorical schema, namely universal, selective, and indicated, according to target population.

Exhibit 3. A Continuum of Interconnected Systems for Meeting the Needs of All Students*



Systemic collaboration* is essential to establish interprogram connections on a daily basis and over time to ensure seamless intervention within each system and among *systems* of *prevention, systems* of *early intervention*, and *systems of care*.

---

*Such collaboration involves horizontal and vertical restructuring of programs and services
(a) within jurisdictions, school districts, and community agencies (e.g., among departments, divisions, units, schools, clusters of schools)
(b) between jurisdictions, school and community agencies, public and private sectors; among schools; among community agencies

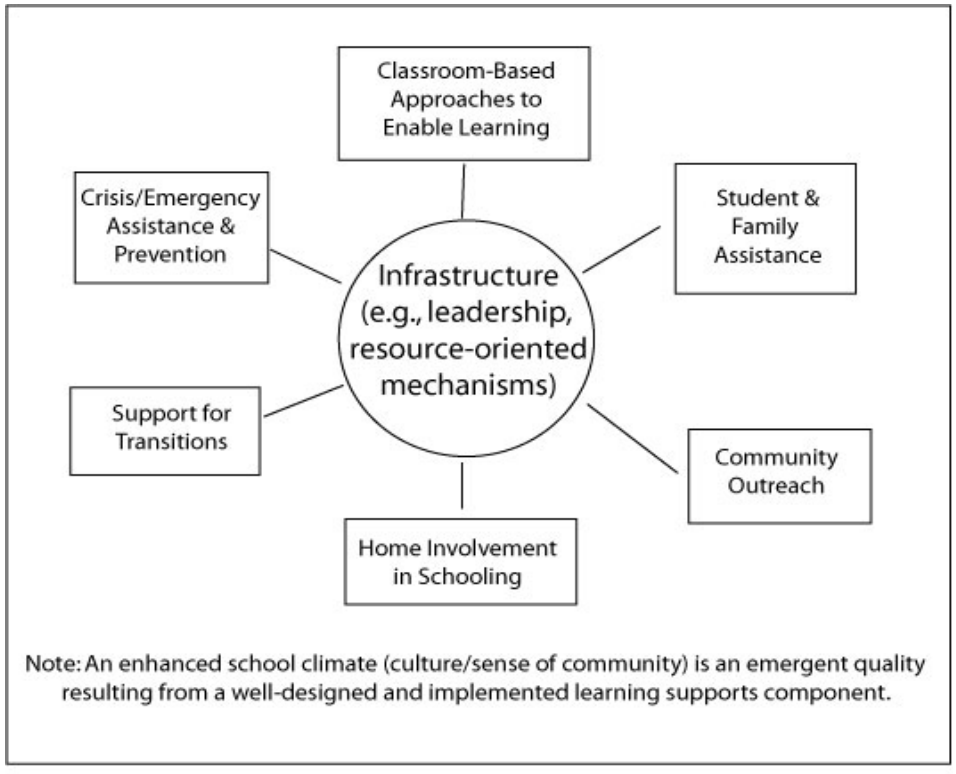
By stressing the importance of integrating interventions across a continuum of *systems*, the framework illustrated in Exhibit 3 moves discussion beyond a focus on discrete interventions. Specifically, it underscores the importance of horizontal and vertical restructuring of programs and services (a) within jurisdictions, school districts, and community agencies (e.g., among departments, divisions, units) and (b) between jurisdictions, school and community agencies, public and private sectors, among clusters of schools, and among community agencies.

Finally, note that the continuum includes a system for promoting healthy development and has the intention of incorporating a holistic and developmental emphasis that envelops individuals, families, and the contexts in which they live, work, and play. Also implicit is the principle that the least restrictive and nonintrusive forms of intervention required to appropriately address problems and accommodate diversity are to be used.

Every school system has developed some programs and services that fit along the entire continuum illustrated in Exhibit 3. However, the emphasis is mostly on discrete services, and interventions are not coalesced into integrated systems. Moreover, the tendency to focus mostly on the most severe problems has skewed the process so that too little is done to prevent and intervene early after the onset of a problem. As a result, public education has been characterized as a system that "waits for failure."

For schools, it is useful to organize all support programs, services, and activities into a well-circumscribed set of content arenas. Exhibit 4 provides an example that groups the interventions into six content arenas.

Exhibit 4. Intervention content arenas



Adapted from Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (1994). On understanding intervention in psychology and education. Westport, CT: Praeger.

The arenas included in Exhibit 4 encompass interventions to:

- *Enhance regular classroom strategies to enable learning* (e.g., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems; 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*
- *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*

As illustrated in Exhibit 5, the three levels and six arenas can be formed into a comprehensive intervention framework for addressing barriers to learning. See the matrix on the following page.

See Attachment 1 for how to use the matrix to map and analyze the nature and scope of current interventions. The map provides data for analyzing what is in place and what is missing.

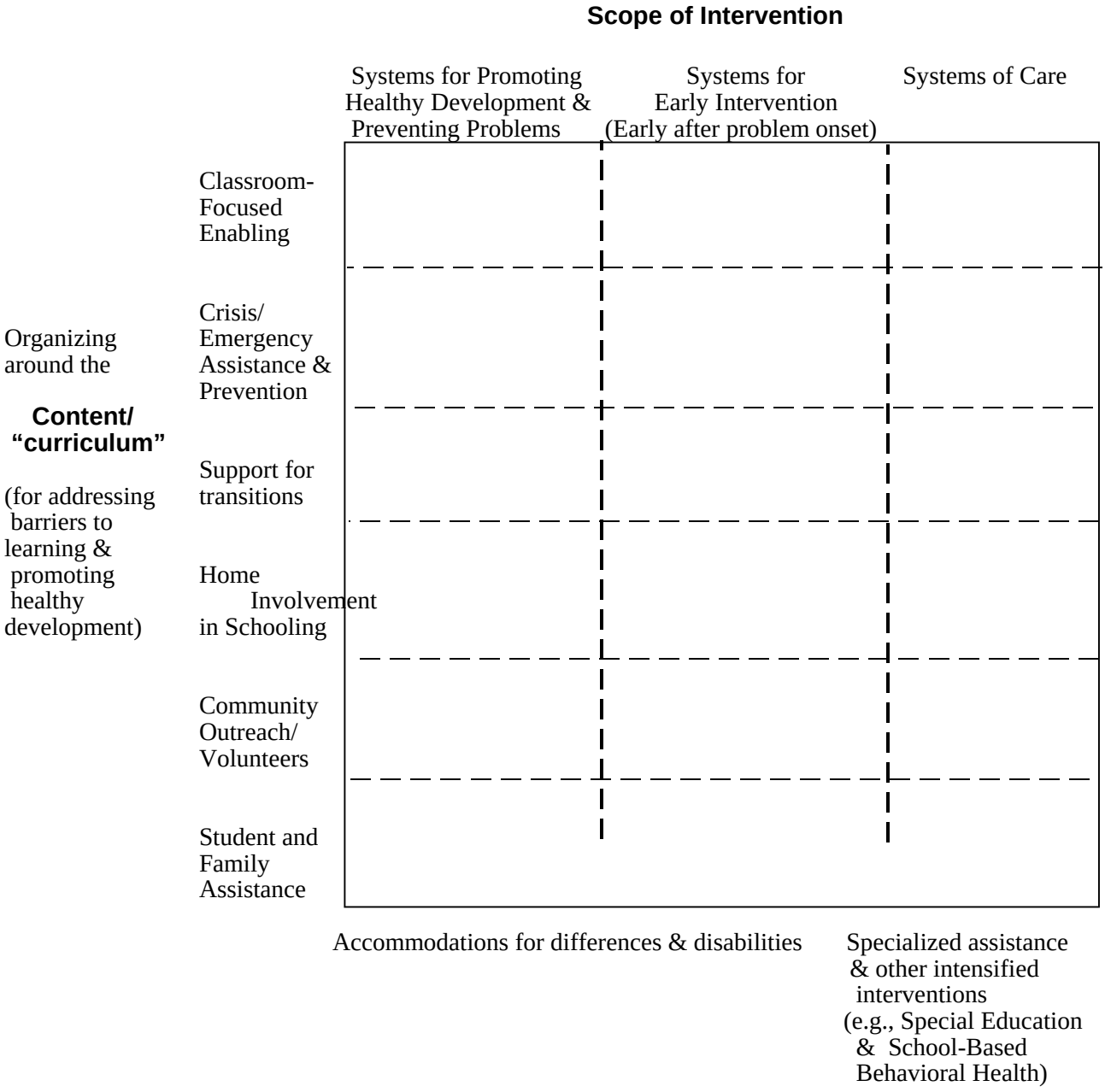
Building from What is There and What is Mandated

Every school system has developed some programs and services that fit along the entire continuum illustrated in Exhibit 3. The exhibit refers to many examples. Each is the product of efforts to address various barriers. Some reflect efforts to cope with federal, state, and local policy mandates. For example, the latest reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* calls for greater attention to "Early Intervening" and using "Response to Intervention" in determining student needs; the *No Child Left Behind Act* focuses greater attention on closing the achievement gap and reducing dropout rates by requiring disaggregation of test scores; the Department of Agriculture has instituted an initiative for schools to develop a "Wellness Plan;" and legislation is calling for increasing the focus on promoting social and emotional development.

All current initiatives can be viewed as "opportunities" that can be built upon in moving schools toward a comprehensive system of learning supports. And, future initiatives should be integrated into such a system.

A set of guidelines related to defining the nature and scope of a comprehensive component for student support is included in Attachment 8.

Matrix Framing the Scope and Content of a Component to Address Barriers to Learning*



*Note that specific school-wide and classroom-based activities related to positive behavior support, "prereferral" interventions, and the eight components of Center for Prevention and Disease Control's Coordinated School Health Program are embedded into the six content ("curriculum") areas.

See Attachment 1 for guidance in using the matrix as a mapping tool.

C. Overview of Major Steps

Establishing a Comprehensive, Multifaceted, and Cohesive Component for Addressing Barriers to Learning (a *Learning Supports* or *Enabling Component*)

First Phase – *Orientation: Creating Readiness*

- Introduce basic ideas to relevant groups of stakeholders to build interest and consensus for enhancing efforts to develop a comprehensive component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and to garner feedback and support
- Establish a policy framework and commitment – the leadership should make a commitment that adopts a comprehensive approach to enabling learning by addressing barriers as a primary and essential component of school improvement
- Identify a leader (equivalent to the leader for the Instructional Component) to ensure policy commitments are carried out for establishing the new component

Second Phase – *Start-up and Phase-in: Building Infrastructure and Capacity*

- Establish temporary mechanisms to facilitate initial implementation/systemic change (e.g., a steering group, an organization change facilitator) and develop the capacity of these mechanisms to guide and manage change and provide essential leadership during phase-in
- Formulate specific start-up and phase-in actions
- Refine infrastructure so that the component is fully integrated with the instructional and management components

  > Establish and train an administrative leader

  > Ensure there is a resource-oriented mechanism (e.g., a Learning Supports Resource Team) and train those who staff it in how to perform major resource-oriented tasks (e.g., mapping, analysis, coordinating, planning, setting priorities for program development, enhancing intervention systems

  > Help organize work groups for each major arena of component activity and facilitate their initial mapping and analysis of resources and formulation of recommendations

  > Develop ad hoc work groups to enhance component visibility, communication, sharing, and problem solving
- Establish a system for quality improvement and evaluation of impact and integrate it into school improvement planning, evaluation, and accountability
- Attempt to fill program/service gaps and pursue economies of scale through outreach designed to establish formal collaborative linkages among families of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern) and among district-wide and community resources (e.g., through establishing a Learning Supports Resource *Council*)

Third Phase – *Sustaining, Evolving, and Enhancing Outcomes*

- Plan for maintenance
- Develop strategies for maintaining momentum and progress

Fourth Phase – *Generating Creative Renewal and Replication to Scale*