

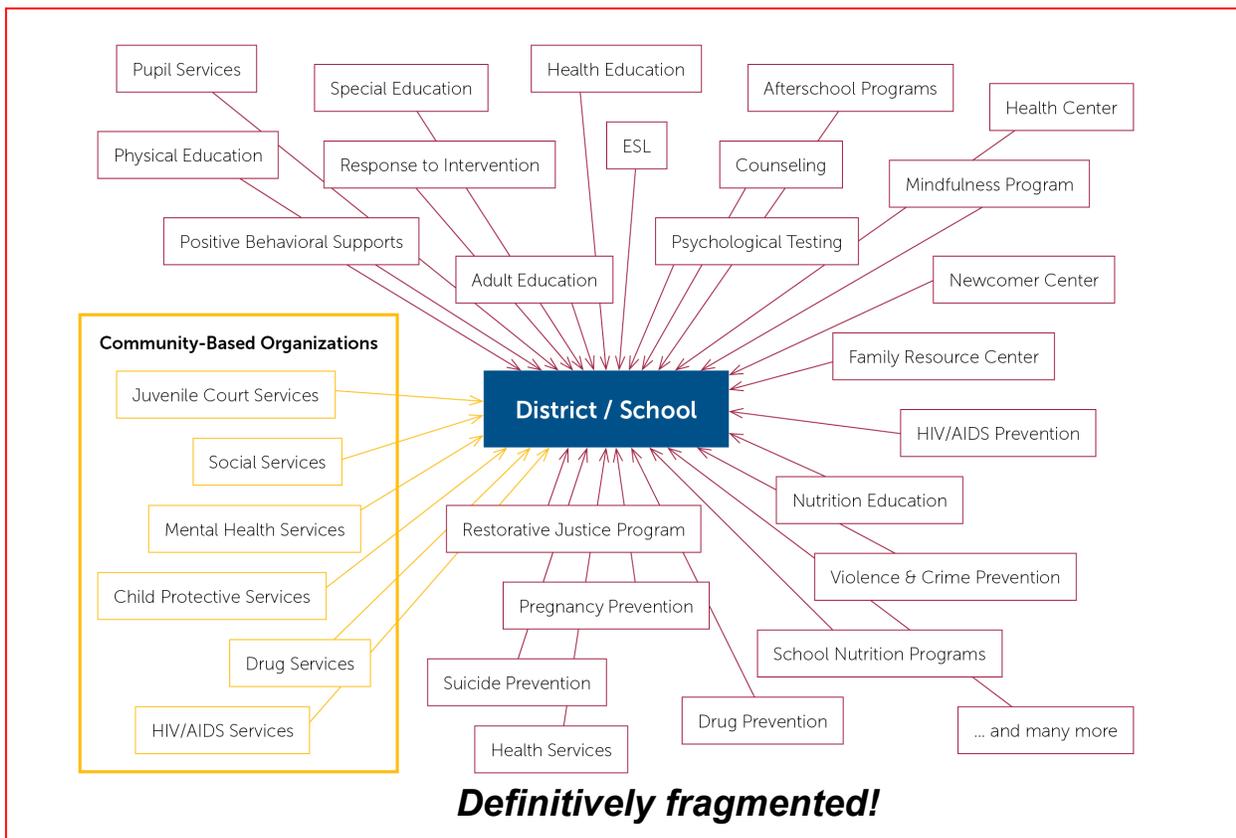
Addressing Barriers to Learning

... the Center's quarterly e-journal

Special Edition

Reversing the Fragmentation of Student/Learning Supports: *Are You Part of the Problem?* *Will You be Part of the Solution?*

For decades, concerns about the fragmentation of student/learning supports has been the focus of many initiatives and policy reports. (Early concern was seen in the human-service integration movement of the 1960s.) The problem has generated proposals for coordination and integration of interventions, often with an emphasis on improving the linkages between school and community services (e.g., full-service schools, wrap around services).



The COVID19 pandemic has heightened the concern about fragmentation because more students are seen as experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and in need of special assistance. In particular, the enhanced concern about students' mental health has produced a rush to use relief funds just to hire more service personnel and add volunteers to help a few more students.

The desire to reverse the fragmentation reflects an appreciation that connecting school-home-community is essential to the well-being of children and youth and to enhancing equity of opportunity for them to succeed at school and beyond. It also is seen as a way to provide more support for schools, students, and families. Weaving together school and community resources is seen

as critical to increasing the pool of resources for student and learning supports and addressing disparities. However, given the sparsity of community services in many neighborhoods, the trend has been to fund demonstration projects that have linked and co-located a few health and social services and after school programs to a few school campuses. This has benefitted the chosen schools but usually has reduced resources available to other schools in the community, thereby increasing inequity (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/integpolicy.pdf>).

When community resources are brought to a school, community personnel generally encounter an already fragmented set of student/learning supports. Such supports are provided by school psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, dropout/graduation support staff, special educators, and others who focus on preventing and ameliorating learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Too often, the addition of community services and programs increases fragmentation.

A fragmented set of student and learning supports usually intensifies advocacy for specific programs, services, and initiatives and exacerbates competition for sparse resources. This, of course, is counterproductive to efforts to enhance cooperation, coordination, integration, and collaboration.

School staff working with students recognize the value of working together and that the need for coordinated collaboration increases when community resources are added. However, the ongoing failure to do so is seen in how often personnel work with the same students and families with too little shared planning or ongoing communication.

So the call for integrating student supports is a rational reaction to all the fragmentation. However, the problem is that advocates focused just on integrating supports tend to ignore the research suggesting that the fragmentation is a symptom of an underlying problem, namely that student/learning supports are *marginalized* in school improvement policy and practice. Furthermore, the widely publicized projects that are cited as successfully demonstrating an integrated approach have not led to unified, comprehensive, and equitable systems of student/learning supports. Moreover, the successes attributed to such demonstrations must be understood as related to the exceptional resource base upon which they were built and operated. A reality is that the expense of replication of such projects across a school district generally is prohibitive. (And since scalability is an essential facet of equity, it is well to keep in mind that there are over 13,000 school districts and over 130,000 K-12 schools in the USA.)

Fragmentation: Are You Part of the Problem? *Will You be Part of the Solution?*

Because of the emphasis in schools on framing interventions as a multi-tiered continuum (a Multi-Tiered System of Support – MTSS), the call for integrating student/learning supports increasingly is associated with that framework. Our Center’s analyses indicate this emphasis only can have limited impact because it fails to deal with ending the policy marginalization of such supports (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/threetier.pdf>).

Ending the fragmentation requires ending the marginalization. Ending the marginalization requires putting aside counterproductive advocacy and competition for sparse resources in order to generate a united call for expanding the prevailing school improvement policy framework.

Currently, school improvement efforts are primarily guided by a two component framework (i.e., an instructional component and a management component). As a result, all interventions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. This subverts ongoing efforts to improve how schools, working with the community and home, ameliorate the many overlapping learning, behavioral, and emotional problems that are far too prevalent in districts. Ending this state of affairs requires expanding school improvement policy to a three component framework, with the third component established with a primary commitment to addressing barriers to learning and teaching (see figure on next page).

We hope you agree that ending the marginalization is of primary importance and are ready to play a role in making it happen. If so, we are asking you to take a few minute and send us a response to the following questions. We hope to hear from a range of stakeholders, including representatives of major advocacy organizations, associations, guilds, unions, etc.

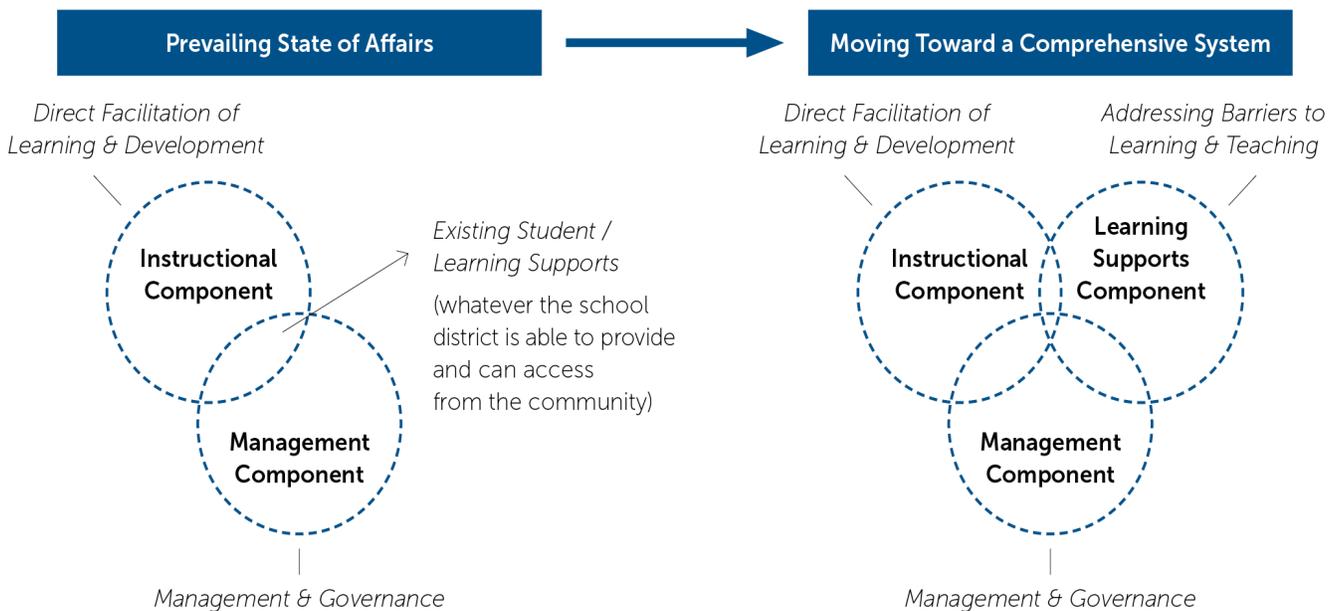
We hope you will respond to the following questions and send your responses to Ltaylor@ucla.edu .

- **We will compile and circulate responses for interchange and to elicit specific recommendations about how to move forward.**
- **We will subsequently host a national panel (on Zoom) focused on the recommendations received and strategies for moving forward.**

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

- (1) What is the degree of importance you place on ending the marginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and practice ?
- (2) What is your understanding of the factors that are interfering with moving forward?
- (3) What role does competing advocacy by organizations, associations, guilds, experts, etc. play in maintaining the marginalization (and fragmentation)?
- (4) What plans do you (and your constituents/colleagues) have for ending the marginalization and establishing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports?

Can you help make this happen?*



*For a detailed discussion of expanding school improvement policy to a three component framework, see *Improving School Improvement* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improve.pdf> .

A Caution About How the Feds Think About Student/Learning Supports and Mental Health

For various reasons, the focus on mental health by federal agencies has increased. Recently (May 25), six agencies across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a Joint Letter to states, tribes, and jurisdictions encouraging them to prioritize and maximize their efforts to strengthen children's mental health and well-being.¹ Efforts to bring together fragmented resources certainly are needed, especially in the wake of the pandemic and the horrific mass killings in Buffalo, NY and at the Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX.

The U.S. Department of Education's increased focus on mental health in schools also has been evident. See their recent document *Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health*.² The document offers much to consider about mental health in schools. We note that it does concur with many of the concerns our Center has raised about mental health in schools and student/learning supports.

Examples of shared concerns are reflected in statements such as:

"The current system is not working for many children, students, families, and staff, with notable problems that existed before the pandemic made much worse during the pandemic."

"Current systems focus on individual level needs, leaving out community supports."

"There is increasing recognition of the need to (a) move away from co located programs involving ad hoc involvement of mental health system staff in schools or programs and (b) move toward approaches that clearly integrate education and mental health systems."

The document cites our Center's work when it notes that "...within schools, those providing direct services to children and students, including teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and social workers, are often siloed and work in relative isolation from one another affecting all children and students ..."

It stresses the importance of starting to improve the focus on mental health by establishing "positive, nurturing environments where all children, students, and staff thrive; and layer on additional supports to address the unique needs of some." And it stresses that "Children and students learn more, report feeling safer, and develop more authentic trusting relationship with peers and adults if the learning and social environments of the school are positive. Educators foster safe and supportive environments by maximizing child and student connections, arranging engaging and successful learning, and being positively constructive in responding to the needs of children and students."

In recommending development of an integrated framework, it recognizes the problem of fragmented approaches and discusses blending funding, developing policy, changing job descriptions, etc.

(Detailed discussion about all these matters and more can be found in resources developed by our Center that are online for free access. We have listed some of the resources in our recent brief commentary on *Mental Health in Schools: Taking Stock, Moving Ahead*³.)

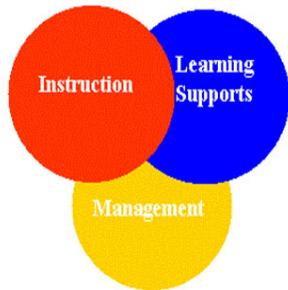
While we do share the above concerns, unfortunately the document from the U.S. Department of Education also contributes to some core problems facing the efforts to improve student/learning supports for students. In particular, it contributes to marginalizing efforts to move toward the type of unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that schools need to effectively address students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems and promote healthy development.

For example, in its recommendation for establishing "an Integrated Framework of Educational, Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Health Support," it treats schools as if they were primarily in the mental health business rather than having a much larger role to play in our society. For instance, the document fails to *embed* the focus on Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health into the school's mission to educate or to discuss implications for designing *a comprehensive system of student/learning supports*. Instead, it only recommends establishing "a comprehensive system of *mental health support*" and integrating systems such as education, health, and mental health within a MTSS framework. There is no effort to clarify the limitations of the MTSS framework or the narrowness of the concept of a "comprehensive system of mental health" or how to enhance mental health in schools by embedding the efforts into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.⁴ In discussing policy, the document doesn't address the need to expand the frameworks for school improvement policy and school accountability in order to end the marginalization of how schools pursue student/learning supports.

So, while the document emphasizes seven key challenges to and offers recommendations for "providing school or program based mental health support across early childhood, K-12 schools, and higher education settings," we are concerned that the narrow focus skews and contributes to the prevailing limited thinking about student/learning supports at schools. The feds, states, and localities need to expand school improvement policy in ways that embed mental health concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Such a system is essential for schools to effectively address factors interfering with learning and teaching, reengage disconnected students and families, and promote the well-being of students, families, and school personnel.

Notes:

- ¹ Joint letter from federal agencies <https://www.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/hrsa/about/news/2022-joint-letter-childrens-mental-health.pdf>
- ² *Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health*, <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/students/supporting-child-student-social-emotional-behavioral-mental-health.pdf>
- ³ *Mental Health in Schools: Taking Stock, Moving Ahead* (includes links to resources detailing matters involved in improving student/learning supports in classrooms and schoolwide and replicating district-wide) <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/5-12-22.pdf>
- ⁴ *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>



For information about the

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

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

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights; transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to promoting whole child development, advancing social justice, and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.

If you share our concerns, please share this with others.

And as always, we hope you will send us for sharing what you think others might find related and relevant. Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Also, note that our Center offers free technical assistance and coaching; see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>

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