Moving Forward

Addressing Barriers
to Learning *Vol. 26, #3*

Special Edition:

Using Summer to Prepare Better Ways to Address Concerns about Students' Learning and Mental Health

After a year and a half of challenges, many probably would just like to take the summer off. But after extending well-deserved congratulations to all (including students and families), the widespread call is for using the summer to help students recover and "catch-up." And it is viewed as a crucial time to plan how to use the coming year for renewal and innovation, especially for students experiencing learning and emotional problems.

While so many have been in crisis mode during the pandemic, it is widely recognized that crises also can generate opportunities. With the federal and state stimulus money, we need to take advantage of the current opportunity.

This issue of the Center's ejournal highlights the following matters that warrant particular attention in preparing staff for 2021-2022 in schools. It is important to embed these in ways that do not overwhelm school staff. Student/learning support staff can be mobilized to help with planning and ease the load on teachers.

With sufficient planning, teachers and support staff can team with families to:

- *Outreach and reengage disconnected students* – Besides finding and reengaging missing students, the team can work on improving ways to address chronic absenteeism

- *Improve differentiated instruction* – Superintendents and principals can use relief funding to support teaming in classrooms to enable personalized instruction and offer more classroom-based special assistance

- *Broadly embed social emotional learning and development*: Most schools are planning to emphasize social and emotional learning. The prospect ahead is for ensuring a focus on the whole school and everybody in it to strengthen a school climate that is rich with natural opportunities to foster positive social and emotional development

- *Reorganize student/learning supports*. At the central office and at schools, the opportunity is to revamp student/learning supports (including upgrading the MTSS framework) in order to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports to ensure that learning, behavior, and emotional problems are effectively addressed

   And don't forget staff well-being!

Contents

Outreaching to and Reengaging Disconnected Students

S chools can't teach students who aren't there. So, the new school year will require particular attention to

(1) finding students who were expected, but did not return

and

(2) pursuing new approaches in addressing the long-standing problem of chronic absenteeism.

(1) Outreach to Those who Haven't Returned

Reports from some school districts indicate that only about 35% of elementary school children are returning to campuses as they reopen. Among middle schoolers, the number of expected returns drops to 25%, and among high school students it plummets to 16%.

Given the nature and scope of the problem, it will not be easy to overcome. There are personal and institutional factors that must be addressed. On a personal level, some families are fearful about returning; some are angry and frustrated over the hardships encountered in schooling their children during the pandemic. Some have negative attitudes toward schools because of past encounters. Institutionally, concerns about equity and justice have been exacerbated by recent events.

There is no magic bullet intervention. A first step is to develop a good understanding of the different reasons students have not returned. A second step is to use that understanding to design a *social marketing* campaign to attract families back. The third step involves extending a personalized meeting invitation to each unenrolled student's family – with the clearly stated goals of (a) addressing their concerns and (b) establishing a mutually productive working relationship.

An Important Resource for Social Marketing

In pursuing a social marketing campaign, don't overlook the powerful role that can be played by students and families who have returned.

These students and families have seen the value in returning to school. Now is the time to organize and mobilize them as an outreach network to their reluctant neighbors. They can also help mobilize trusted community leaders to make ongoing outreach efforts.

A flow of informal messages from students, families, youth and religious leaders, and others in the neighborhood can take place through direct contacts, through social media, and through conversations in places where locals regularly gather.

In mobilizing the group, it is important to recognize that primary child caretakers differ. They include more than *parents*. Think about students being raised primarily by grandparents, aunts, older siblings, "nannies," and in foster homes. (That is why we stress the term *home involvement*.) And, of course, a degree of diversity among primary caretakers is to be expected. Some factors can limit involvement; others can enhance involvement and influence when outreaching in the neighborhood.

Like it or not, social marketing of in-school learning is critical at this time, and it is clear that neighbors have a potent influence on each other.

The process of organizing and mobilizing families provides a renewed opportunity to build a foundational infrastructure for ongoing parent/home involvement and engagement with a school and connecting it with efforts to establish a school-community collaborative.

For more on these matters, see
>*Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/ch6home.pdf
>*Community Outreach and Collaborative Engagement* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/ch7comm.pdf

(2) Absenteeism: Beyond Reporting and Beyond Another Special Initiative

School absences reached unprecedented rates during the pandemic. As schools intensify their efforts to recover students, Robert Balfanz stresses that the tone of the interventions matters.

> "We really have to approach this from a problem solving, not a punitive, perspective," he says. Historically, the only place where people got noticed for missing a lot of school was through truancy. Most states still have rules on the books that would allow districts to refer students to the justice system if they meet the legal definition of truancy.
>
> That approach has proven to be ineffective, says Balfanz. Most kids want to be in school, and the issues that are keeping them out are real and need to be solved. It would be a mistake to tell students it's their own fault that they are disengaged.
>
> "As we make this more of an issue, we have to guard against falling back into seeing it as something to be handled legally and punitively and recognize that it should be handled with good data and problem solving — and that sometimes our own policies are counterproductive and we've got to fix them."
>
> From: *Chronic Absenteeism Is a Huge School Problem. Can Data Help?*
> https://www.governing.com/now/chronic-absenteeism-is-a-huge-school-problem-can-data-help?utm_source=ECS+Subscribers&utm_campaign=ec6de26f6b-ED_CLIPS_05_21_2021&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1a2b00b930-ec6de26f6b-53599575

Under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) states are required to report chronic absenteeism rates for schools, and school districts are allowed to spend federal dollars on training to reduce absenteeism. Since all schools take attendance, an immediate focus has been on establishing systems for reporting chronic absenteeism (including truancy).

Establishing a good reporting system is necessary and not too hard to accomplish. Significantly reducing chronic absenteeism always is difficult.

In 2016, the federal government decided to create a national *Every Student, Every Day* initiative to "address and eliminate chronic absenteeism"
http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-white-house-launches-new-national-effort-and-ad-council-campaign-eliminate-chronic-absenteeism-and-drive-student-success

The initiative outlined key steps that states, districts and communities could take to improve student achievement by monitoring and reducing chronic absence. For example, it emphasized the importance of

- looking beyond average daily attendance rates to identify students who are missing so much school that they are falling behind academically

- sharing strategies that work for improving attendance and achievement, including positive messaging, family outreach, student incentives and mentoring programs

- engaging community partners, such as health providers and criminal justice agencies, to launch this college-linked model as part of this effort

And, it provided a community toolkit to address and eliminate chronic absenteeism. (The Toolkit offers information, suggested action steps, and lists of existing tools and to begin or enhance the work of effective, coordinated community action to address and eliminate chronic absenteeism.)
http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/toolkit.pdf

The special initiative did focus attention on the problem, and the stated commitment, motivation, and aims were wonderful. The reality, however, is that effectively dealing with the problem of chronic absenteeism over the long-run requires a fundamental rethinking of policies and practices.

Moving Forward

A review of past policies indicates a primary emphasis on mandating attendance and delineating harsh punishments for unexcused absences. Analyses point out that such practices fail to take into account the range of underlying causes of attendance problems and the range of prevention, early intervention, and ongoing support that might more effectively address the problem. If, as often is said, school attendance is both a right and a responsibility, there is growing consensus that society must play a greater role in addressing barriers that are abridging student rights and enhance their motivation and capability to meet their responsibilities.

Given the variety of factors that play a role in school attendance problems, policies and practices must avoid lumping all youngsters together. A particular danger arises when the problem is truancy. Some truancy is reactive and some is proactive; the underlying motivation for not coming to school can vary considerably in both cases. For example, there are some students who experience school as not a good fit for them and, therefore, see school not as a right or a responsibility but as an infringement on their self-determination. This engenders avoidance motivation and psychological reactance. In such cases, addressing the problem requires strategies that are more psychologically sophisticated than the prevailing ones used by most schools and the society in general.

Policy and practice must now evolve to reflect the complexity of attendance problems. The complexity calls for moving to more comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated solutions. Focusing only on "What's wrong with that kid!" often is tantamount to blaming the victim and contributes to policies and practices that are not making significant inroads in addressing school attendance problems.

From an intervention perspective, current policy is mainly reactive. There is a clear need for greater attention to prevention and intervening as early as feasible after attendance problems are noted. There is a need for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that that weaves together the resources of school and community to directly address barriers to learning, reengage disconnected students in classroom instruction, and reengage disconnected families in working with schools.

As the folks at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory have noted in discussing dropouts in their School Improvement Research Series:

"Children at-risk need to be identified at a young age (as early as preschool) so that early sustained intervention can be applied. Success in the elementary grades diminishes the possibility of later dropping out in high school. The key ... is helping youth to overcome their sense of disconnectedness. It is imperative not to isolate or alienate any students from the school. Not all factors related to dropout [and truancy] reduction are school controllable, and solutions to the complex problem[s] of dropouts [and truancy] cannot be achieved by the schools alone. ... It requires resources that go beyond the school, and solutions require a team approach – the combined efforts of students, parents, teachers, administrators, community-based organizations, and business, as well as the federal, state, and local governments."

Mother to her son: *Time to get up and go to school.*

      Son: *I don't want to go. It's too hard and the kids don't like me.*

Mother: *But you have to go – you're their teacher.*

A Note About Reengaging Students

During the current period of transition, greater attention is needed to designing potent interventions to ensure all students are welcomed and connected with ongoing social supports. For those who are tasked with reengaging disconnected students we recommend four general strategies:

(1) *Clarifying student perceptions of the problem* – Talk openly with students about why they have become disengaged so that steps can be planned for how to alter the negative perceptions and prevent others from developing such perceptions

2) *Reframing school learning* – In the case of those who have become disengaged, it is unlikely that they will be open to schooling that looks like "the same old thing." Major changes in approach are required if they are even to perceive that anything has changed.

   Minimally, exceptional efforts must be made to have these students (a) view the teacher as supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (b)perceive content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. It is important, for example, to eliminate threatening evaluative measures; reframe content and processes to clarify purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences and underscore how it all builds on previous learning; and clarify why procedures can be effective– especially those designed to help correct specific problems.

(3) *Renegotiating involvement in school learning* – New and mutual agreements must be developed and evolved over time through conferences with the student and where appropriate including parents. The intent is to affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. The focus throughout is on clarifying awareness of valued options, enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the student in meaningful, ongoing decision making. For the process to be most effective, students should be assisted in sampling new processes and content, options should include valued enrichment opportunities, and there must be provision for reevaluating and modifying decisions as perceptions shift.

   In all this, it is essential to remember that effective decision making is a basic skill (just as fundamental as the three Rs).If a student has difficulty making appropriate decisions, this is not a reason to move away from student involvement in decision making. Rather, it is an assessment of a need and a reason to focus on improving this basic skill.

(4) *Reestablishing and maintaining an appropriate working relationship* (e.g., through open communication, creating a sense of trust, providing supports, guidance, and accommodations as needed, highlighting accomplishments, and generally minimizing threats to feelings of competence, self determination, and relatedness to valued others)

To further highlight the topic and provide a tool for discussion by school policy makers and practitioners, see the following Center brief:

>*School Attendance Problems: Are Current Policies & Practices Going in the Right Direction?*
   http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/school%20attendance%20problems.pdf
This brief (1) provides some background and overview of issues related to school attendance problems and (2) discusses new directions for policy and practice.

Also see Chapter 5. "About Re-engaging Disconnected Students" in *Improving School Improvement* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

For more, see the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds which provide easy access to a variety of resources relevant to intervening to enhance school attendance.
   Start with the Quick Finds on
         >*Attendance* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/attendance.html
         >*Motivation* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm

Improving Differentiated Instruction: Moving Toward Personalized Learning and More Special Assistance in Classrooms

Learning is an ongoing, dynamic, and transactional process. Students differ – so must instructional practices.

Personalized Instruction

Personalized instruction is meant to enable school staff to effectively pursue the art, craft, and science of teaching in ways that more optimally match the range of individual differences in *both motivation and capabilities* that exist in every classroom.

Properly conceived and implemented personalized instruction and student and learning supports are essential to enabling equity of opportunity, closing the achievement gap, assuring civil rights, promoting whole child development, and fostering a positive school climate.

Policy makers have embraced the concept of personalized learning, but personnel preparation and continuing professional development for most school personnel has not included an in-depth focus on making it a reality in classrooms.

It is commonplace to see references to meeting learners where they are; analyses indicate the emphasis often is on individualized approaches that stress matching individual differences in developmental capabilities. In contrast, we define personalization as the process of accounting for individual differences in both capability and motivation. Furthermore, from a psychological perspective, we stress that it is the learner's perception that determines whether the instructional fit is good or bad. Given this, personalizing learning means ensuring learning opportunities are perceived by learners as good ways to reach their goals. Thus, a basic intervention concern is that of eliciting learners' perceptions of how well what is offered matches *both* their interests and abilities. This dual emphasis has fundamental implications for all efforts to improve education.

Discussions of personalized learning often leave the impression that the process is mainly about incorporating technological innovations. Moreover, personalized learning often is not discussed in the context of conditions that interfere with student learning and performance.

Personalizing instruction is intended to ensure a student *perceives* instructional processes, content, and outcomes as a good match with his or her interests and capabilities.

- A primary emphasis is on *motivation*. Practices focus on (re)engaging the student in classroom instruction, with special attention paid to increasing intrinsic motivation and minimizing psychological reactance.

- Matching *developmental capabilities* is a parallel concern. Practices focus on accounting for current knowledge and skills.

> Based on our work over many years, we have detailed a personalized approach for classrooms. It is highlighted in "School Improvement & Personalizing Classroom Instruction" which is Chapter 8 in *Improving School Improvement* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html). We also have developed a set of continuing education modules around the approach (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/personalizeI.pdf).

Personalization First, then *Special Assistance in the Classroom* (as needed)

Effective personalization of instruction is step 1 in countering learning problems. Special assistance is step 2. We conceptualize special assistance in terms of a sequence and hierarchy of interventions that are *added immediately* to personalized instruction whenever an instructional problem arises.

In keeping with the principle of using the least intervention necessary (e.g., doing what is needed in ways that are least intrusive, restrictive, disruptive), special assistance interventions are first applied in the classroom, and they are pursued as follows:

- students with minor problems maintain a direct focus on readily observable problems interfering with classroom learning and performance (Level A);
- students who continue to have problems often require addressing prerequisites (e.g., readiness attitudes, knowledge, and skills) they haven't acquired (Level B);
- when interventions at Levels A and B don't ameliorate the problem, the focus shifts to possible underlying factors.
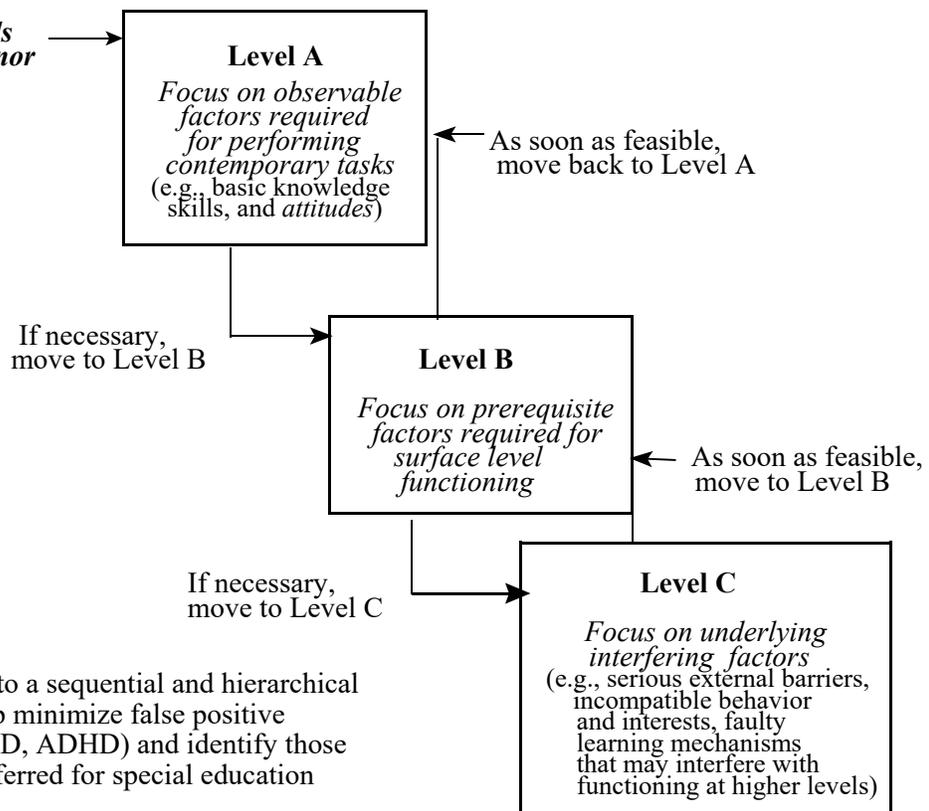
Students with severe and chronic problems require attention at all three levels and usually require some specialized assistance outside the classroom.

Exhibit

Special Assistance Sequence and Hierarchy

Step 2 is introduced as necessary using best practices for special assistance (remediation, rehabilitation, treatment). These are applied differentially for minor and severe problems.

If needs are minor →

Level A

Focus on observable factors required for performing contemporary tasks (e.g., basic knowledge skills, and *attitudes*)

← As soon as feasible, move back to Level A

If necessary, move to Level B →

Level B

Focus on prerequisite factors required for surface level functioning

← As soon as feasible, move to Level B

If necessary, move to Level C →

Level C

Focus on underlying interfering factors (e.g., serious external barriers, incompatible behavior and interests, faulty learning mechanisms that may interfere with functioning at higher levels)

Note: Responses to a sequential and hierarchical approach can help minimize false positive diagnoses (e.g., LD, ADHD) and identify those who should be referred for special education assessment.

More on special assistance in Chapter 9 of *Improving School Improvement*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html.

Intrinsic Motivation: A Primary Concern Throughout Both Steps

Among the constant instructional matters confronting schools are (a) enhancing motivational readiness and engaging students, (b) minimizing conditions that decrease engagement in learning and that maintain engagement, (c) reengaging students who become disengaged, and (d) increasing intrinsic motivation as an outcome. In addressing these matters, it is invaluable to understand what enhances and what undermines intrinsic motivation.

Self-determination theory emphasizes that people are intrinsically motivated by their feelings of self-determination (not being controlled, having choices) competency, and connectedness to significant others. Personalized instruction and special assistance stress practices that capitalize on intrinsic motivation to enable and support learning. Such practices include offering a broad range of content, outcomes, and procedural options, including a personalized structure to support and guide learning, as well as significant enrichment opportunities. With real options come real opportunities for involving learners in decision making.

The emphasis on intrinsic motivation also stresses the importance of developing nonthreatening ways to support and guide learning and behavior and provide ongoing information about learning and performance. An understanding of intrinsic motivation cautions that an overemphasis on controlling behavior generally produces psychological reactance, and overreliance on extrinsic motivation risks undermining enhancement of intrinsic motivation and can produce avoidance reactions in the classroom and to school. And when learning problems are identified, restricting the focus mainly to "remedying" problems cuts students off from experiences that enhance good feelings about learning at school. All this can undermine positive learning and development of positive attitudes. Over time, such practices result in too many students disengaging from classroom learning.

> In sum, an understanding of intrinsic motivation clarifies how essential it is to
>
> - minimize coercive social control interactions (especially strategies designed only for purposes of social control)
> - increase real options and choices (including an emphasis on real life interests and needs)
> - enable a meaningful role in decision making (which involves enhancing a students' desire and ability to enter into open dialogues with the adults at school)
> - provide effective support and guidance (structure, scaffolding)

A Note About Personnel Preparation

In keeping with the primary accountability focus on academic achievement, the emphasis of school improvement and teacher preparation is mainly on curriculum content and instruction. Nobody should minimize the importance of thorough and ongoing preparation related to curriculum and instruction. Every teacher must have the ability and resources to bring a sound curriculum to life and apply strategies that make learning meaningful. At the same time, however, teachers and student support staff must learn how to "enable" learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching – especially factors leading to low or negative motivation for schooling.

Analyses indicate that implicit in much school personnel preparation is a presumption that students are motivationally ready and able to absorb the lesson being taught. Recognition that the teacher must deal with some misbehavior and learning problems generally is treated as a separate matter calling for training in classroom management and help from student support personnel.

Typically, schools offer a few, relatively brief sessions on various social control techniques. Examples include eye contact, physical proximity, being alert and responding quickly before a behavior escalates, using rewards as a preventive strategy, assertive discipline, and threats and other forms of punishment. All this, of course, skirts right by the matter of what is causing student misbehavior and ignores the reality that social control practices can be incompatible with enhancing student engagement with learning at school. Indeed, such practices can lead to greater student disengagement.

For the most part, pre-service teacher preparation provides little or no discussion of what to do when students are not motivationally ready and able to respond appropriately to a lesson as taught. This lapse in training is less a problem for teachers in classrooms where few students are doing poorly. In settings where large proportions are not doing well, however, and especially where many are "acting out," teachers decry the gap in their training. In such settings, one of the overriding inservice concerns is to fill this gap.

> For more, see Chapter 9. "Improving Special Assistance" and Chapter 10 "Providing More Special Assistance In the Classroom" in *Improving School Improvement* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html Chapter 10 emphasizes the need to broaden current approaches to response to intervention (RTI) and ensuring a wide range of accommodations. Also see Chapter 5. "About Re-engaging Disconnected Students"

Our current school system follows a one-size-fits-all model that does not account for differences in backgrounds, assets or opportunities. And so we tend to overlook strategies that are responsive to the differentiated characteristics of families, communities and schools. My concern is that an exclusively instructional focus optimizes teaching and content, but if the students aren't present and able to concentrate then we'll never be able to truly support all children on their path to realizing their full academic potential, which is the aspirational goal of education reform.

In other words, instruction alone is not enough to help all students succeed.

Paul Reville, former Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts & Founding Director, Harvard Graduate School of Education's Education Redesign Lab (http://edublog.scholastic.com/post/instruction-alone-not-enough-help-all-students-succeed)
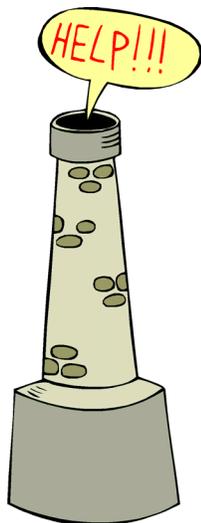
Broadly Embedding
Social Emotional Learning and Development

Referencing the U.S. Department of Education's *COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs*, a recent article notes that SEL is taking "center stage" as schools reopen. Another article stressed that, after a year of upheaval and disruption, trauma-informed SEL is needed to help students heal, cope, and build resilience.

> An earlier article in EducationWeek noted some concerns about SEL:
>
> > Teaching social-emotional skills in class sounds great, and the idea has a broad and growing following in K-12 schools. In practice, however, executing evidence-based strategies to teach skills like empathy and self-control to students can be challenging for schools, and prohibitively so. Comprehensive SEL curricula on the market today can be expensive, putting them out of reach for lower-income school districts. They are complex and can be difficult to graft onto existing curricula and school day routines. And they may not be culturally relevant to all students.

While it is clear that SEL is on the minds of school planners, it is also evident that there are major differences in focus.

- Some are approaching it as a curriculum matter designed to
  >promote social emotional development

  and/or

  >promote mental health and enhance students' personal and social well-being.

- Others see it as part of student/learning supports with an emphasis on special interventions for targeted students to address skill deficiencies related to social and emotional functioning.

- Another emphasis is on addressing social and emotional growth through natural opportunities in the classroom and schoolwide. This includes concerns about creating an atmosphere of caring, cooperative learning, and a sense of community by capitalizing on natural opportunities at schools to promote social and emotional development and minimize transactions that interfere with positive growth in these areas. (Natural opportunities are authentic examples of "teachable moments.")

All the above have merit. We suggest that students and schools will benefit the most if planners take a broad approach that includes

- providing integrated, formal instruction for all students
- using natural school opportunities to facilitate social and emotional development
- enhancing supports and coping strategies for those experiencing problems.

At the same time, we caution that it is important not to frame the work as a special initiative with a separate operational infrastructure. Rather, the effort should be fully *embedded* into school improvement policy and practice. This means incorporating (1) regular instructional facets into curriculum and instruction design and planning and (2) interventions designed for those with problems into the design and planning for student/learning supports.

Successful implementation and sustainability depend on:

- school policy that institutionalizes social emotional learning and development and that deploys appropriate resources for implementation and necessary systemic changes

- fully integrating the work into the operational infrastructure mechanisms established for (a) curriculum and instruction and (b) student/learning supports

- personnel development and related capacity-building for daily implementation.

If you missed it, see the discussion of ecological approaches to social emotional learning being tested by Harvard University. The article emphasizes using flexible, bite-sized lessons ("kernels") "designed to be adaptable to students' interests and needs to teach social and emotional learning." (https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/09/11/can-bite-sized-lessons-make-social-emotional-learning-easier.html)

One example offered in that article deals with the problem of the transition from recess back to classroom learning. As described: "teachers began using exercises after recess that included structured discussions about what took place during recess, and if there had been a problem, how students could solve it and move on. The goal is to help them leave behind the drama of the playground and refocus on their academics." This is a good example of a natural opportunity (e.g., daily transitions) for promoting social emotional development. See our Center's earlier discussion *Natural Opportunities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning and MH* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/naturalopportunities.pdf)

Also see *Common Behavior Problems at School: A Natural Opportunity for Social and Emotional Learning* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/behaviorsocialemot.pdf) and the Center's Quick Find on *Classroom Climate* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm)

A final note: Here are some additional matters to think about as schools wrestle with the challenges of pursuing an agenda related to Social Emotional Learning (SEL).

(1) Keep the big picture in mind: The aim is to continuously promote positive social emotional development – not just teach a limited set of social skills.

(2) Identify places in existing curricula to embed social emotional learning.

(3) Map natural opportunities for promoting and supporting social emotional development at school.

(4) Stress ways to improve how the school staff models social and emotional functioning every day.

(5) Ensure that students have many opportunities and support for connecting and building strong relationships with positive peers and adults at school.

(6) Also transform how the school staff responds to students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems to ensure that the responses enhance social and emotional growth and a positive school climate. Addressing these matters goes beyond just thinking about SEL. The need is to embed the growing emphasis on SEL into the school's efforts to both promote positive development and address barriers to learning and teaching.

And with specific respect to the pandemic, everyone, (students, families, staff) has experienced considerable stress, some have been ill, some are grieving for a relative or friend who died. Students, as well as families and staff, who are having trouble recovering from recent events need support in readjusting to school. As a consequence, there is a critical need at this time to address the problems experienced by students, their families, and staff. The focus on SEL and mental health concerns is helpful. And, more broadly, this time is an opportunity to focus on fundamental systemic changes in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

There are many relevant online resources available.
A good starting place is with CASEL (https://casel.org/resources/)

We also have various resources on our Center website that may be of some help.
See our online clearinghouse Quick Find on *Social Emotional Development* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2102_05.htm)
It has links to resources from our Center and from others.

For context, see:
>*Improving School Improvement*
>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
  (All three accessible at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

CASEL's Definition of SEL (2020 Update)

https://www.the74million.org/article/niemi-casel-is-updating-the-most-widely-recognized-definition-of-social-emotional-learning-heres-why/

"Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities."

...

While SEL alone will not solve the deep-seated inequities in the education system, it can help adults and students build more meaningful relationships and develop knowledge, skills and mindsets to interrupt inequitable policies and practices, create more inclusive learning environments and nurture the interests and assets of all individuals,

... our updated framework reflects expanded definitions and examples of five core social and emotional competencies — self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. The updated language pays attention to personal and social identities, cultural competency and collective action as part of SEL. It also emphasizes the skills, knowledge and mindsets needed to examine prejudices and biases, evaluate social norms and systemic inequities, and promote community well-being.

...

SEL is most beneficial when school leaders and educators enhance both the competencies of young people and adults and the systems in which those competencies are promoted. Poorly implemented SEL will be less beneficial and actually may harm kids when contexts are ignored. Authentic partnerships among schools, families and communities are critical to creating equitable learning environments, supportive relationships and coordinated practices to truly promote SEL across all the settings where students live and learn.

...

When SEL is woven into the daily life of school — from academic instruction to discipline practices — it is more likely to produce the many benefits that research has documented, including the promotion of students' skills and attitudes, improved school climate and long-term academic achievement."

Did you hear that the school has introduced a program for social emotional learning?

Great! Now I have another topic where I have to worry about not doing well.

Reorganizing Student/Learning Supports

The call for reorganizing student and learning supports stems from findings that the current approach is highly fragmented, marginalized in school improvement policy and practice, inequitable in meeting the needs of students, and contributes to counterproductive competition among staff for sparse resources. Improving the situation requires implementing transformative systemic changes related to efforts at schools designed to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

An Example of a Prototype for a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports

The prototype highlighted here is designed to unify student/learning supports and then develop the various interventions into a comprehensive and equitable system. As a primary facet of school improvement, it is not just a bunch of auxiliary services; it is an essential component of a school's efforts to accomplish its instructional mission.

The prototype has two facets:
  - (a) a full continuum of integrated intervention subsystems that interweave school–community–home resources and
  - (b) an organized and circumscribed set of classroom and schoolwide student and learning support domains.

The Continuum Conceptualized as a Set of Subsystems

Conceiving interventions along a continuum is a long-standing convention. In the field of education, the recent trend has been to depict the continuum as a tiered model – widely referred to as a *multitier system of supports* (MTSS). This framework is specified in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA).

The MTSS framework provides a starting point for framing the nature and scope of student and learning supports. However, the model needs expandsion to become a potent organizing framework for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

The continuum used in our work is illustrated in the Exhibit on the next page. The intervention continuum is conceived as intertwined sets of subsystems. The subsystems focus on

  - • promoting whole child development and preventing problems

  - • addressing problems as soon as they arise

  - • providing for students who have severe and chronic problems.

As illustrated, the intervention continuum consists of three overlapping subsystem levels. The intent at each level is to braid together a wide range of school and community (including home) resources. The subsystems are illustrated as tapering from top to bottom. This is meant to convey that if the top subsystem is designed and implemented well, the number of students needing intervention are reduced and fewer need "deep-end" interventions.

Exhibit

Framing a School-Community
Intervention *Continuum* of Interconnected *Subsystems*

***School* Resources**
(facilities, stakeholders,
programs, services)

***Community* Resources**
(facilities, stakeholders,
programs, services)

Examples:
• General health education
• Social and emotional
  learning programs
• Recreation programs
• Enrichment programs
• Support for transitions
• Conflict resolution
• Home involvement
• Drug and alcohol education

Examples:
• Recreation & Enrichment
• Public health &
  safety programs
• Prenatal care
• Home visiting programs
• Immunizations
• Child abuse education
• Internships & community
  service programs
• Economic development

Subsystem for Promoting
Healthy Development &
Preventing Problems
primary prevention – includes
universal interventions
(low end need/low cost
per individual programs)

• Drug counseling
• Pregnancy prevention
• Violence prevention
• Gang intervention
• Dropout prevention
• Suicide prevention
• Learning/behavior
  accommodations &
  response to intervention
• Work programs

• Early identification to treat
  health problems
• Monitoring health problems
• Short-term counseling
• Foster placem't/group homes
• Family support
• Shelter, food, clothing
• Job programs

Subsystem for Early Intervention
early-after-onset – includes
selective & indicated interventions
(moderate need, moderate
cost per individual)

• Special education for
  learning disabilities,
  emotional disturbance,
  and other health
  impairments

• Emergency/crisis treatment
• Family preservation
• Long-term therapy
• Probation/incarceration
• Disabilities programs
• Hospitalization
• Drug treatment

Subsystem for Treatment of
severe and chronic problems
indicated interventions as part
of a "system of care"
(High need/high cost
per individual programs)

Domains of Student/Learning Supports

After analyzing typical "laundry lists" of district programs and services used to address barriers to learning and teaching, it became clear that framing a prototype for a system of student/learning supports requires more than conceiving a continuum of intervention. It is necessary in addition to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that reflect a school's daily efforts to provide student/learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide. Our analysis led us to group what we found into the following six domains:

• *Embedding student and learning supports into regular classroom strategies to enable learning and teaching* (e.g., working collaboratively with other teachers and student support staff to ensure instruction is personalized with an emphasis on enhancing intrinsic motivation and social-emotional development for all students, especially those experiencing mild to moderate learning and behavior problems; reengaging those who have become disengaged from instruction; providing learning accommodations and supports as necessary; using response to intervention in applying special assistance; addressing external barriers with a focus on prevention and early intervention);

• *Supporting transitions*, including assisting students and families as they negotiate the many hurdles related to reentry or initial entry into school, school and grade changes, daily transitions, program transitions, accessing special assistance, and so forth;

• *Increasing home and school connections and engagement*, such as addressing barriers to home involvement, helping those in the home enhance supports for their children, strengthening home and school communication, and increasing home support for the school;

- *Responding to—and, where feasible, preventing – school and personal crises* (e.g., by preparing for emergencies, implementing plans when an event occurs, countering the impact of traumatic events, providing follow-up assistance, implementing prevention strategies, and creating a caring and safe learning environment);
- *Increasing community involvement and collaborative engagement* (e.g., outreach to develop greater community connection and support from a wide range of resources – including enhanced use of volunteers and developing a school–community collaborative infrastructure);
- *Facilitating student and family access to special assistance*, first in the regular program and then, as needed, through referral for specialized services on and off campus.

Combining the Continuum and Domains

As illustrated in the following Exhibit, combining the continuum and the six domains of supports provides an intervention framework that can guide development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.

Exhibit

Intervention Framework for the Third Component

Categories of Classroom & Schoolwide Student and Learning Support Domains	Integrated Intervention Continuum (levels)		
	Subsystem for promoting healthy development & preventing problems	Subsystem for early intervention	Subsystem for treatment ("system of care")
Classroom-based learning supports	e.g., personalized instruction	e.g., special assistance in the classroom provided as soon as a problem arises	e.g., referral for specialist assistance
Supports for transitions	e.g., welcoming newcomers and providing social and/or academic supports	e.g., when problems arise, using them as teachable moments to enhance social-emotional development and learning	e.g., personalized supports for students returning to school from incarceration
Home involvement & engagement	e.g., outreach to attract and facilitate participation of hard-to-reach families	e.g., engaging families in problem-solving	e.g., support services to assist families with addressing basic survival needs
Community involvement & collaborative engagement	e.g., outreach to recruit volunteers	e.g., developing community links and connections to fill critical intervention gaps	e.g., outreach to reengage disconnected students and families
Crisis response & prevention	e.g., promoting positive relationships	e.g., immediate response with physical and psychological first aid	e.g., referral for follow-up counseling
Student & family special assistance	e.g., enhancing coping and problem-solving capability	e.g., providing consultation, triage, and referrals	e.g., ongoing management of care related to specialized services
	Accommodations for differences & disabilities		*Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., special education, school-based interventions)*

The matrix framework provides a guide for organizing and evaluating a system of student/learning supports and is a tool for (a) mapping existing interventions, (b) clarifying which are evidence-based, (c) identifying critical intervention gaps, and (d) analyzing resource use with a view to redeploying resources to strengthen the system. As the examples illustrate, the framework can guide efforts to embed supports for compensatory and special education, English learners, psychosocial and mental health problems, use of specialized instructional support personnel, adoption of evidence-based interventions, integration of funding sources, and braiding in of community resources. The specific examples in the matrix are illustrative of those that schools already may have in place. Using the framework to map and analyze resources provides a picture of system strengths and gaps. Priorities for filling gaps then can be included in strategic plans for system improvement; outreach to bring in community resources can be keyed to filling critical gaps and strengthening the system.

> Detailed discussions and guides related to the practices outlined by the prototype framework are provided in
> >*Improving School Improvement*
> >*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
> > Accessible at (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

We know that our prototype is not the only way to conceive transforming student/learning supports. Given that the problems indicated by available research indicate the need for an approach that is multifaceted and transformative, we hope our efforts will stimulate others to move student andlearning supports in new and better directions.

***

Ensuring Policy Facilitates System Change/Transformation

Policy for introducing multifaceted and complex interventions into an organization must be translated into clear guidelines and properly supported for effective development and sustainability. This includes delineating the nature and scope of systemic changes, budgetary allocations, and accountability mandates. With scale-up and sustainability in mind, policy makers must ensure that sufficient resources are allocated for establishing and building the capacity of the transitional infrastructure for accomplishing systemic changes and for eventually subsuming the functions of the transitional infrastructure into daily operational infrastructures.

Our analysis of school improvement policy under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) indicates that the efforts are guided primarily by a two-component framework, namely (a) instruction and (b) governance/management. School improvement plans focus mainly on these two components; interventions for addressing learning and teaching barriers are given secondary consideration at best. As a result, districts and schools tend to marginalize student and learning supports. This marginalization is a fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports.

The intervention prototype described above is designed to end the marginalization and fragmentation of student/learning supports by transforming the way schools address barriers to learning and teaching. The degree of system change called for by the multifaceted intervention prototype requires broadening school improvement policy to fully integrate, as primary and essential, a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. The following Exhibit illustrates such an exapnded policy framework. The designated *learning supports component* elevates efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching to equal status with the other two components.

Exhibit

Expanding the Framework for School Improvement Policy and Practice

Prevailing State of Affairs ———————▶ Moving toward a Comprehensive System
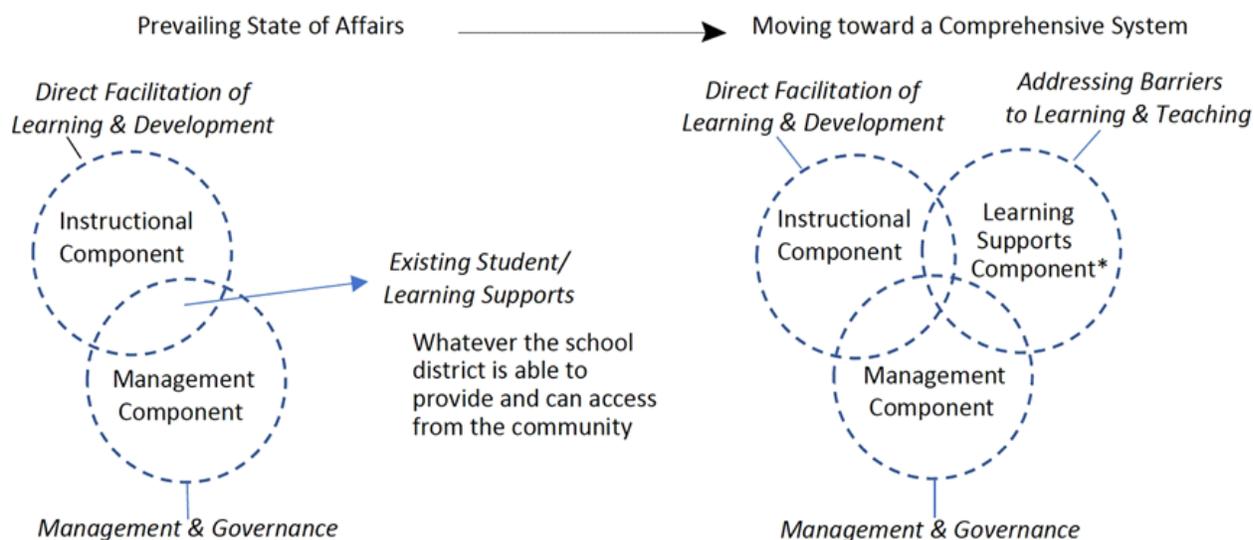
*The learning supports component is intended to enable learning by (a) addressing factors that affect learning, development, and teaching and (b) reengaging students in classroom instruction. The component includes programs, services, initiatives, and projects that provide compensatory and special assistance and promote and maintain safety, physical and mental health, school readiness, early school adjustment, and social and academic functioning.

In our work, given the sparse resources available to schools, the expanded policy involves deploying, redeploying, and weaving together all existing resources used for student and learning supports. The focus is on *braiding together all available school and community resources* to equitably strengthen interventions and fill critical gaps.

And because accountability and standards for guiding practice are two fundamental policy drivers for public education, we recommend (1) an expanded accountability framework that includes leading indicators of direct outcomes of a learning support system and (2) standards for a learning supports component (see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/account.pdf).*

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Some Lessons Learned

Frequent leadership changes can undermine recently implemented improvements. (In school systems, superintendents, principals, other key stakeholders commonly move on every few years.) Countering this problem requires early attention to *institutionalizing* policies and procedures so they can withstand such changes. It also calls for planning effective strategies to bring new arrivals on board and up to speed.

*For specific resources to aid in pursuing the changes described above, see the Center's *System Change Toolkit* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm). The toolkit provides guides for superintendents, principals, and other planners, tools for mapping and analyzing learning supports, details about establishing a learning supports leadership team, overviews of hows to phase in the system changes, and much more.

And don't forget the needs of staff!

Promoting Staff Well-being

A cost of ignoring staff well-being is that their work suffers, and there is considerable personnel turnover. And turnover incurs tremendous personal and financial costs. (A financial estimate from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) a few years ago suggested that the national cost of public school teacher turnover was over $7 billion a year.)

COVID aside, nobody needs to tell school staff how stressful it is to come to work each day. Stress is a commonplace phenomenon for almost everyone who works in school settings. Some of the stress comes from working with troubled and troubling youngsters. Some stems from difficult working conditions and staggering workloads. Some is the result of the frustration that arises when everyone works so hard and the results are not good enough. The many frustrations, large and small, affect staff (and student) morale and mental health. In the short run, this contributes to the high rate of teacher dropout in their first years on the job. Over time, such stressors can lead to widespread staff demoralization, exhaustion, and burnout.

It is easy to overlook the psychological needs of staff. That's a serious mistake because, when school staff don't feel good about themselves, it is unlikely they will be effective in making students feel good about themselves.

> *The person-environment fit model of job stress holds that two kinds of fit exist between the individual and the work environment. The first involves the extent to which the person's skills and abilities match the demands and requirements of the job. The second type of fit involves the extent to which the environment provides for individual's needs. If a mismatch occurs involving either kind, the individual's well-being is threatened, and various health strains may result.*
>
> Bruce & West

One way to understand promoting staff well-being and preventing burnout is in terms of the three psychological needs that Ed Deci and Richard Ryan have articulated as major intrinsic motivational determinants of behavior. These are the need to *feel competent*, the need to *feel self-determining*, and the need to *feel interpersonally connected*. From this perspective, well-being is engendered by conditions that foster such feelings, and burnout is among the negative outcomes that result when these needs are threatened and thwarted.

This fall promoting staff well-being and preventing burnout will call for ensuring a school climate that is experienced by staff and students as a caring environment in which there is a strong collegial and social support structure, personalized opportunities for growth, and meaningful ways to participate in decision making. Some workplace processes that contribute to such a climate are well-designed and implemented interventions for

- developing and institutionalizing a culture that welcomes and provides ongoing social support for staff, students, and families, with particular attention to inducting newcomers into the school

- transforming working conditions by ensuring a safe environment and opening classroom doors to enhance collaboration, caring, and nurturing support to facilitate staff and student learning each day

- transforming inservice training into personalized staff development and support from first induction into a school through ongoing capacity building

- restructuring school governance to enable shared decision-making.

Some Things to Consider

- *Welcoming and ongoing social support for staff, students, and families, especially newcomers*. This begins with first contact, personalized orientations, and frequent checks to be certain that initial adjustment is successful.

- *"Open up" classrooms to invite in help*. This is essential to ensuring use of effective mentoring, teaming, and other collegial supports. In general, the array of school and community people who can end the isolation of teachers in classrooms includes: (a) aides and volunteers (including students), (b) fellow teachers – regular and specialists, (c) family members, (d) student support staff, (e) professionals-in-training, (f) school and community librarians, and more..

- *Personalize staff development and ongoing supports.* Personalized staff development and support promotes feelings of competence. Enhanced feelings of competence promote feeling of self-determination. Personalized mentoring promotes feelings of relatedness between staff and mentors. All this promotes well-being and can productively counter alienation and burnout. Some staff, of course, require additional, specialized support, guidance, and accommodations.
    Regular mentoring is essential. However, learning from colleagues is not just a talking game. Good mentors model and then actively participate in making changes (e.g., demonstrating and discussing new approaches; guiding initial practice and implementation; and following-up to improve and refine). Specialist personnel (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, special education resource teachers, social workers, nurses) can become mentors and demonstrate rather than play traditional consultant roles. For example, instead of *telling* teachers how to address student learning, behavior, emotional, and physical health problems, specialists can learn how to go into classrooms to model and guide teachers in the use of practices for engaging and reengaging students in learning.
    For teachers, depending on practicalities, mentor modeling could take place in a teacher's own classroom or be carried out in colleagues' classrooms. Some of it may take the form of team teaching.)

- *About Shared governance.* Who is empowered to make decisions in an organization can be a contentious issue. Putting aside the politics of this for the moment, we stress the motivational impact of not feeling empowered. A potent and negative impact on motivation occurs when staff (and students and all other stakeholders) are not involved in making major decisions that affect the quality of their lives. This argues for ensuring that staff are provided with a variety of meaningful opportunities to shape such decisions. Participation on planning committees and teams that end up having little or no impact can contribute to burnout. Alternatively, feelings of self-determination that help counter burnout are more likely when governance structures share power across stakeholders and make room for their representatives around the decision-making table.

Advice from a Principal about Listening to Staff

What are they excited about? What strategies, innovations, and new ideas are they trying in their classrooms? What are they complaining about? Sometimes people just need to vent, so let them know you hear them. Seek out staff input on how to launch initiatives, address challenges, and resolve frustrations. Most important, follow through on their suggestions.

That said, don't ask if you don't really want feedback. This is key. A well-intentioned administrator once asked the staff at my school for input on a scheduling decision. It was later revealed that the district had already made a decision and asked as a gesture. The result was instant frustration and disillusionment.

https://www.edutopia.org/article/simple-ways-administrators-can-support-teachers

Concluding Comments

Wellness and health promotion programs and stress-reduction activities often are advocated and sometimes pursued in meaningful ways. However, these approaches are unlikely to be a sufficient remedy for the widespread draining of motivation. Reducing environmental stressors and enhancing job supports are more to the point, but again, alone these are insufficient strategies.

The solution requires reculturing schools in ways that minimize undermining and maximize enhancement of intrinsic motivation. This requires policies and practices that ensure a regular, often a daily, focus on school supports that (1) promote staff and student well-being and (2) enhance how barriers to teaching and learning are addressed.

For more, see *Promoting Staff Well-being and Preventing Burnout as Schools Re-open*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/staffwellbeing.pdf

School staff deserve a lot of credit.

Well, if we paid them more, they wouldn't need it!

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Or contact us – E-mail: Ltaylor@ucla.edu or Ph: (310) 825-3634

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Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange*?
Send requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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If you didn't make so many rules, there wouldn't be so many for me to break!

The Center for Mental Health in Schools operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

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. . . and a host of students