### Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, & Equitable System of Learning Supports: First Steps for Superintendents Who Want to Get Started

**A**s increasing numbers of districts express interest in developing a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports, obviously superintendents are key to establishing this essential facet of school improvement policy and practice. Below we highlight a few strategic first steps as aids to superintendents initiating the process. These steps are drawn from experiences in working with districts across the country. These are formulated at the district level but can readily be adapted by an SEA.

(1) The work begins with building readiness. This includes clarifying why a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports is essential, sharing frameworks delineating such a system, and making it a policy priority.

    (a) The following is the type of message that a superintendent might circulate as part of a formal kick-off for the work; it can be accompanied with an invitation for input immediately and at specific intervals as the work proceeds.

"Available data on student achievement, the achievement gap, absences, dropouts - all indicate why learning supports are imperative and need to be a high priority; data on service and program fragmentation and lack of cost effectiveness – all provide evidence about why student and learning supports need to be redeveloped into a unified and comprehensive system. If every student in every school and community is to achieve at high levels, we must rethink how student supports are organized and delivered to address barriers to learning. This will require that schools and school districts, in collaboration with their community partners, develop a comprehensive, cohesive approach to delivery of learning supports that is an integral part of their school improvement efforts."

    (b) Circulate a brief introductory document to the district leadership team – see for example,

***Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*** – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf  )

(Note: if this document doesn't seem to fit the local situation, there are others to choose from in Section A of the Center's System Change Toolkit – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm  )

(2) Follow-up with by providing information about a few of the other places that have pursued development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. Specifically, refer to the following:

    >***Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Trailblazing Initiatives!***
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/summer14.pdf

    >**Brochures from Districts and State Departments**
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita1a.htm

    >**Examples of State and District Design Documents**
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb1a.htm

    >**2015 National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports**
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html

(3) For answers to typical questions raised in the process, see and share as needed material from the

>**Q & A Talking Points** (in Section A of the Center's System Change Toolkit)
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita2.htm

(4) Review the document:

>***Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports at a School: Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff***
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf

(5) Convene the leadership team to:

    (a)  watch the 15 minute introductory power point
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/powerpoint/briefintroslides.ppt
(If you would like, you can contact Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and arrange to have a phone hook up with them to talk through the power point presentation with the team – contact Ltaylor@ucla.edu )

    (b) discuss moving forward.

(6) Establish a cabinet level administrative leader (e.g., an assistant superintendent) who is responsible and accountable for development of the unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

(7) Establish a leadership workgroup to develop a design document. Besides leaders directly responsible for learning supports, the group should include representatives of instruction, professional development, and evaluation/accountability. The group's charge is to create a strong and sustainable design for a system of learning supports that is fully integrated into guidance for school improvement.

(See the following page for details related to this workgroup's tasks.)

Have the group watch the 15 minute introductory power point
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/powerpoint/briefintroslides.ppt
(Again, if you would like, you can contact Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and arrange to have a phone hook up with them to talk through the power point presentation with the team – contact Ltaylor@ucla.edu )

For those who want an in-depth look, see  *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf

(8) When the design is ready, establish a leadership workgroup to develop a strategic plan.

This group should consist of some members of the design team and others who generally prepare the district's strategic plan.

(See the following page for details related to this workgroup's tasks.)

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Note: At any point in the process, feel free to ask for a phone conference with the UCLA Center Co-directors (Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor) to discuss ways we can help; just email Ltaylor@ucla.edu

**Tasks for Leadership Workgroups in Developing a Design Document and Strategic Plan for a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports**

**(1) Developing an Operational Design**

See the Center's System Change Toolkit, Section B, (2) *Preparing a Design Document*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm

(a) The design team should be charged with producing a product in a period of about two months and in a form that can be shared widely. The group must keep in mind that this is not another project or isolated "initiative," but a fundamental school improvement transformation. Such a transformation requires a well-crafted design.

(b) As background for the work, the team should make certain members are appropriately informed about matters such as

> what is working well with respect to what schools do to support student learning and what's still needed to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage students who have become disengaged from classroom instruction -- with particular attention to reducing the achievement gap and dropout rates

> existing learning support policies, resources, and programs to appraise strengths, weaknesses, and gaps (e.g., What policies are in place? What needs revision in order to develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports that is fully integrated into school improvement planning?)

> current organizational and operational infrastructures related to learning supports (e.g., How are schools currently working to unify interventions and work cohesively? Is there adequate high level leadership for learning supports? Are there workgroups for system development? mechanisms for collaboration across divisions and programs and between school and community?)

> available data for evaluation and accountability.

(c) In preparing the design document,

>subgroups can draft specific sections

>share them for feedback with the other subgroups and incorporate appropriate feedback

>a draft writing team cab compile a complete draft which can be shared with a representative group of stakeholders for final feedback

>the writing team can finalize the design document for approval by the district leadership.

**(2) Formulating a Strategic Plan** (remember that this group should consist of some members of the design team and others who generally prepare the district's strategic plan.) The plan details the a strategic approach for unifying student and learning supports at the district level and developing them into a comprehensive system and the strategic approach for working with schools.

See *Prototype Strategic Plan for Guiding SEAs and LEAs in Developing a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports –* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/stratplan.pdf

Note that strategic planning should include a focus on:

>disseminating the design

>ensuring district policy statements and school improvement guidance

>>specify development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports along the lines presented in the design document (i.e., a framework that encompasses a full continuum of interventions and a well conceptualized set of content arenas)

>>reframe the organizational and operational infrastructure at district and school levels

>>redefine and reframe roles and functions for school-site leadership related to development and implementation of the new system.

>>specify ways to weave school and community resources to fill critical gaps and generally enhance the system of supports.

>>delineate a capacity building process and support with particular emphasis on leadership and staff professional development and regular access to coaching and technical assistance.

>phasing in implementation at schools (again see *Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports at a School: Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf

With the focus on low performing schools and districts, the temptation is to layer another mandate on these sites. While this is inevitable, our experiences suggests the value of selecting and phasing in the work at a range of schools, some of which have expressed interest in developing a learning supports system.