

2021-22: Addressing Learning, Behavior, and Emotional Problems Through Better Use of Student and Learning Support Staff

This report highlights following four matters that warrant particular attention as the 2021-2022 school year gets underway.

- *Outreaching and reengaging disconnected students*
- *Improving differentiated instruction*
- *Broadly embedding social emotional learning and development*
- *Reorganizing student/learning supports*

To address these concerns most productively, steps must be taken to rein in the tendency to proliferate school teams, work groups, and committees and, at the same time, enhance the roles and functions of student and learning support staff.

With these matters in mind, this report begins by underscoring the need to rework school and district operational infrastructures in ways that end the fragmentation and marginalization of school efforts to address barriers to teaching and learning. Then we explore the four matters listed above to illustrate that these and a range of other school improvements can benefit from the enhanced involvement of student and learning support staff.

During the COVID 19 crisis and the renewed protests about racial injustice, widespread statements have appeared anticipating the growing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems that schools will need to address this year. In particular, concern for mental health has grown exponentially.

In the past, many well intentioned initiatives and policy reports focused on how to best use student and learning support staff to address student problems. For the most part, however, such personnel continue to remain marginalized in school improvement plans. And advocates have argued mainly for just adding more bodies, as reflected currently in calls for how to use pandemic relief funds.

Increasing the numbers of student/learning support staff can help, but not if their primary use is only to provide services for a few more students. (Consider also the downside when funding for the added staff ends.)

Improving how schools address barriers to learning and teaching requires thinking about available student/learning support staff as much more than service providers. This is illustrated as this report explores the following matters that warrant particular attention this year.

- ***Outreaching and reengaging disconnected students*** – Student/learning support staff can help find and reengage missing students and, in the process, improve ways to address chronic absenteeism.
- ***Improving differentiated instruction*** – Student/learning support staff can team with teachers *in classrooms* to enable personalized instruction and offer more classroom-based special assistance.
- ***Broadly embedding social emotional learning and development*** – Many schools are planning to emphasize social and emotional learning. Student/learning support staff can help with classroom-based efforts and can work toward ensuring a focus on natural opportunities to foster positive social and emotional development schoolwide.
- ***Reorganizing student/learning supports*** – At the district and school levels, there is a need and an opportunity to revamp student/learning supports (including upgrading the MTSS framework) in order to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports that ensure that effectively addresses learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

As indicated, student and learning support staff can play a major role in addressing each of the above matters (as well as many other schooling matters). For them to do so most productively, (a) their roles and functions must be enhanced, (b) some rethinking is in order about how school teams, work groups, and committees are formed, and (c) steps must be taken to end the fragmentation and marginalization of student and learning support staff in school improvement planning and implementation.

With transformative changes in mind, we begin this report by underscoring the need to rein in the tendency to proliferate school teams, work groups, and committees by reworking school and district operational infrastructures. Teams and work groups clearly are essential to enhancing school improvement; however, they must be designed in a way that addresses barriers to learning and teaching effectively and efficiently. And this requires rethinking the roles and functions of student/learning support staff.

About Operational Infrastructure, Leadership Teams, and Workgroups for School Improvement

*School improvement agenda emphasizing enhanced participation and shared leadership seem to have accelerated the **ad hoc** creation of teams and work groups at all levels of the education system. Teams and work groups are essential mechanisms; problems arise, however, when “another team” is naively added to the operational infrastructure.*

Almost every other new initiative calls for schools to establish a team dedicated to making it happen. Recent examples include calls for teams related to guiding social and emotional learning, as well as specific concerns arising from the pandemic.

It should come as no surprise, then, that a common lament at schools is: “Not another team! We don’t have the time, there’s not enough of us, and many of us already are on the same teams.” This is particularly true of student and learning support staff who are assigned to school teams focused on crisis response, student study/assistance, the IEP team, and sometimes to teams to support student transitions and wellness and teams to enhance parent involvement and community engagement, etc.

A robust literature supports the idea that teams, workgroups, committees, and collaboratives can productively enhance organizational functioning (see references in Appendix A). Such mechanisms can meet objectives such as promoting teamwork, stakeholder engagement, and shared leadership; they can improve efforts to carry out a variety of functional tasks; and they can enhance outcomes. However, when these operational infrastructure mechanisms are established in ad hoc and piecemeal ways, they tend to further fragment and marginalize school improvement efforts, especially development of a comprehensive and systemic approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students.

Toward
Rethinking
the Essential
Operational
Infrastructure
Mechanisms
for a School

The fundamental principle in designing an operational infrastructure is that *structure follows function*. Thus, before creating another team, decision makers and planners need to have a clear picture of the full set of functions that must be carried out at a school and priorities and strategies for pursuing them effectively.

As a guide for organizing major functions related to school improvement, we stress a three component functional framework (e.g., discussed from a policy perspective in the section of this report on *reorganizing student/learning supports*).

From the perspective of such a framework, three direct and overlapping functional components are essential to school improvement.

These components focus on:

Three direct and overlapping functional components are essential to school improvement

- *facilitating learning and development* (e.g., enhancing instruction and curriculum); in our work we designate this as the instructional component;
- *addressing barriers to learning and teaching* (e.g., enabling learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students); in our work we designate this as the learning supports component;
- *governing schools and managing resources*; in our work we designate this as the management/governance component.

To enable equity of opportunity, school improvement decision makers and planners must engage available personnel and other resources in ways that treat *each* of the three components as fundamental (i.e., primary and essential). This may seem obvious but the prevailing approach to school improvement marginalizes the component focused on addressing barriers to learning.

Given a three component framework for school improvement, specific sets of functions and major tasks can be delineated for each component and for overall system cohesion and continuous improvement. Then, essential mechanisms can be conceived to ensure leadership, including leadership teams, workgroups, committees, and collaboratives. Properly designed, such an operational infrastructure will be able to incorporate new initiatives without establishing another team.

A Leadership Team to Develop the Component for Addressing Barriers to Learning

As already noted, teams frequently associated with addressing barriers to learning and teaching are student study/assistance and IEP team. Such teams focus on individual students. For example, they triage, refer, formulate intervention objectives, monitor, manage, and conduct student progress reviews. *These teams are better viewed as workgroups.*

Clearly, an emphasis on specific students is warranted. However, as the primary focus associated with student and learning supports, this approach tends to sidetrack development of improvements at schools that can prevent many individual problems and help many more students. As stressed below, critically missing are mechanisms devoted to the functions and tasks necessary for unifying student and learning supports and then developing them into a comprehensive and equitable system.

Component Development Functions & Tasks

Examples of currently unattended key functions and tasks:

- aggregating data across students and from teachers to analyze school needs re. addressing barriers to learning
- mapping student and learning supports activity and resources (including personnel) at the school and those working with the school from the community
- analyzing resources and doing a gap analysis using a comprehensive intervention framework that covers prevention and amelioration of problems
- identifying the most pressing program development needs at the school
- coordinating and integrating school resources
- setting priorities and planning for system development (e.g., for strengthening existing efforts, including filling gaps through development and connecting with community resources)
- recommending how resources should be deployed and redeployed (e.g., clarifying which activities warrant continued support and suggesting better uses for nonproductive resources)
- reaching out to connect with and weave together additional resources in a feeder pattern (or family of schools), in the school district, and in the community
- developing strategies for increasing resources and social "marketing" for development of a *comprehensive system* of student and learning supports.

- enhancing processes for information and communication among school staff and with the home
- establishing standing and ad hoc work groups to carry out tasks involved in system development and individual student and family assistance
- performing formative and summative evaluation of system development, capacity building, maintenance, & outcomes (including expanding the school accountability framework to assess how well schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students)

Clearly, the above set of tasks expands from the current emphasis on a relatively few troubled and troubling individuals to encompass reworking resources to ensure attention is given to the needs of all students. Initially, a leader for an enabling or learning supports component, working with a leadership team, can reduce fragmentation and enhance cost-efficacy by ensuring existing programs and services are coordinated and increasingly integrated. Over time, the group can provide school improvement leadership to guide stakeholder work groups in evolving the school’s vision for student and learning supports. The aims are not only to prevent and correct learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems, but contribute to classroom and schoolwide efforts to foster academic, social, emotional, and physical functioning and promote an increasingly positive school climate.

Leadership Team
and Work Group
Composition and
Capacity Building

At a school, the leadership team and work groups focused on developing a comprehensive system of learning and student supports draw on a wide range of stakeholders. This might include, for example, guidance counselors, school psychologists, nurses, social workers, attendance and dropout counselors, health educators, special education staff, after school program staff, bilingual and Title I program coordinators, health educators, safe and drug free school staff, and union reps. They can also include representatives of any community agency that is significantly involved with schools. And, schools are well-advised to add the energies and expertise of regular classroom teachers, non-certificated staff, parents, and older students. Some individuals will end up on several work groups.

*Needed: an
administrative
lead, a leadership
team, and
work groups
focused on
functions
related to
component
development*

For the leadership team and its work groups to operate well, they must consist of a delimited nucleus of members who have or will acquire the ability to work together effectively in carrying out identified functions. Building group commitment and competence should be a major focus of school management policies and programs. Too often, teams and work groups are established with little investment in substantive capacity building. Despite the ample literature on forming and building the capacity and motivation of teams, time and deadline pressures often work against pursuing best practices (see references in Appendix A).

Formal leadership of the team belongs to the school’s administrative lead for the component. System development is a key facet of that individual’s job description and accountability. (For more on the leadership team for learning supports, see Appendix A.)

Some Research-Based Conclusions about Distributive Leadership and Teams

“At a time when schools are adopting reforms and new strategies to adapt to the constraints and needs of students in modern society, many have reached the conclusion that teamwork is necessary to ensure the achievement of school goals. It seems that outcomes that are best and most effective for students and communities can be achieved when experts work together, learn together, and suggest improvements and changes to ensure advancement of ... methods. Teams play a central role in identifying the needs of students, planning and developing policies at the class and school levels, and implementing innovation.... Teams seem more than merely a structure for individuals who work together. Teams have to learn how to exchange information, learn, negotiate with each other, and motivate each other so that they can utilize their heterogeneity properly and work innovatively.”¹

“Distributed leadership enhances opportunities for the organization to benefit from the capacities of more of its members; it permits members to capitalize on the range of their individual strengths; and it develops among organization members a fuller appreciation of interdependence and how one’s behavior effects the organization as a whole. Through increased participation in decision making, greater commitment to organizational goals and strategies may develop....The increased self-determination arising from distributed leadership may improve members’ experience of work.”²

“Leadership is consistently recognized as important for initiative and ongoing development of teams and is often included as an important determinant in models of team outcomes. ... [Our] findings call on leaders to invest in enhancing [staff] motivational mechanisms rather than focusing only on the bottom line of the outcomes. ... Leaders need to recognize that ... a sense of self-determination and self-efficacy may be translated into high levels of innovation.”³

“Team meetings are very difficult to institute because, when the workload, pressure, and other priorities (e.g., the teacher’s individual work in the class) increase, they are the first to be canceled because of time constraints.... It is important that the principals’ views of the importance of teamwork to improving school effectiveness are reflected in the allocation of time and personnel to implement teamwork.... Given the importance of team interaction processes, it is recommended that any organization into teams be accompanied by suitable training of the team members and coordinators. This type of training, which is very common in business and service organizations, should also be adopted in the education system.”⁴

“Team size was found to affect team effectiveness through its effects on team structures as well as on team processes.... studies typically quoted the numbers seven to ten as an optimal size for obtaining effectiveness. ... Concerning team’s frequency of meetings, the literature demonstrated close relationship between the frequency of meetings and the performance of the team... It seems that the more the team meets, the more team-mates are motivated and committed to the team’s mission, and hence contribute to the success of the team in achieving it goals.”⁵

Regular and productive meetings are key to group success. Meetings must be facilitated in ways that keep the group task-focused. Meetings also require someone assigned to record decisions and plan and remind members of planned activity and products. Where available, advanced technology can be used to facilitate communication, networking, program planning and implementation, linking activity, and a variety of budgeting, scheduling, and other management concerns. (See Appendix B for more on meeting process.)

Prototype of
an Integrated
School
Operational
Infrastructure

Properly constituted, trained, and supported, a leadership team and its work groups complement the work of the site's governance body through providing on-site overview, leadership, and advocacy for all activity aimed at addressing barriers to learning. Having the component's administrative lead at the school's administrative and governance "tables," as well as on the key planning bodies ensures the type of infrastructure connections that are essential if programs and services are to be maintained, improved, and increasingly integrated with classroom instruction.

As illustrated in the figure on the following page, each of the three primary and essential components for school improvement requires (1) administrative leadership, (2) a leadership team to work with the leader on system development, and (3) standing and occasionally ad hoc work groups to accomplish specific tasks. The leaders for the instructional and enabling components are part of the management/governance component to ensure all three components are integrated and that the enabling/learning component is not marginalized. If a special team is assigned to work on school improvement planning, implementation, and evaluation, the leaders for all three components must be on that team.

With specific reference to the component to address barriers to learning, the administrative leader has responsibility and accountability for continuous development of a comprehensive and cohesive system of student and learning supports. In regular meetings with a leadership team, the agenda includes guiding and monitoring daily implementation and development of all programs, services, initiatives, and systems intended to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

Standing work groups are established to pursue tasks related to developing and implementing the component's schoolwide and classroom programs. In our work, we organize them around six major intervention domains (often with a work group focused on two at a time).⁶ The six domains cover:

*Teams and
work groups
focus on
schoolwide &
classroom efforts
designed to
enable equity
of opportunity*

- (1) *Embedding student/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 and especially those manifesting mild-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 intervening)*
- (2) *Supporting transitions (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate the many hurdles encountered related to reentry or initial entry into school, school and grade changes, daily transitions, program transitions, accessing special assistance, and so forth)*

- (3) *Increasing home and school connections and engagement* (e.g., addressing barriers to home involvement, helping those in the home enhance supports for their children, strengthening home and school communication, increasing home support of the school)
- (4) *Responding to, and where feasible, preventing school and personal crises* (e.g., preparing for emergencies, implementing plans when an event occurs, countering the impact of traumatic events, providing follow-up assistance, implementing prevention strategies; creating a caring and safe learning environment)
- (5) *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, developing a school-community collaborative infrastructure)
- (6) *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

Additional, ad hoc work groups/committees are formed by the leadership team only when absolutely needed to deal with exceptional matters (e.g., formulating a set of guidelines, developing a specific resource aid). Tasks for ad hoc groups always are clearly defined and the work is time limited.

The added challenge in a small school is how to do it with so few personnel

Small schools, obviously, have less staff and other resources than most larger schools. Thus, in a small school, leadership teams and work groups will consist of fewer members. Nevertheless, the three major components necessary for school improvement remain the same in all schools. The challenge in any school is to pursue all three components in an integrated and effective manner. The added challenge in a small school is how to do it with so few personnel.

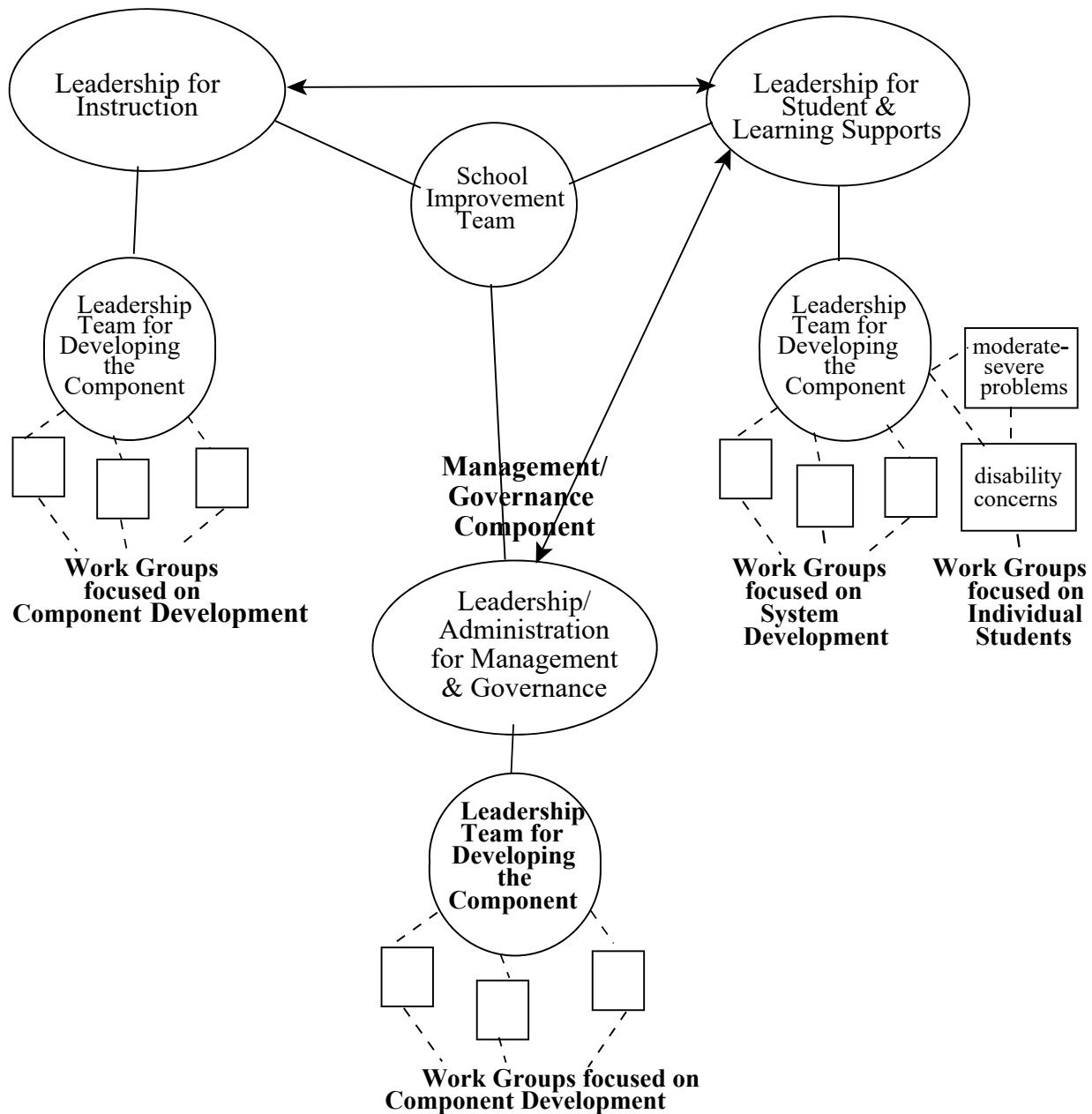
In a small school, the principal (and whoever else is part of the governance leadership team) will need to ensure that someone is assigned leadership for each of the three components. For the enabling/learning supports component, this may be someone already on the leadership team or someone in the school who has major involvement with student supports (e.g. a pupil services professional, a Title I coordinator, a special education resource specialist). If not already in an administrator's role, the newly designated component leader needs to become part of the administrative team, assigned responsibility and accountability for ensuring the vision for the component is not lost, and provided additional training for the tasks involved in the new leadership assignment.

All this involves reframing the work of personnel responsible for student and learning supports, establishing new collaborative arrangements, and redistributing authority (power). With this in mind, those involved in such restructuring must have appropriate incentives, safeguards, and adequate resources and support for making major systemic changes.

Example of an Integrated Infrastructure at the School Level*

Facilitating Learning/Development
Instructional Component

Addressing Barriers to Learning
Enabling or Learning Supports Component



*The infrastructure for a comprehensive system of learning supports should be designed from the school outward. That is, conceptually, the first emphasis is on what an integrated infrastructure should look like at the school level. Then, the focus expands to include the mechanisms needed to connect a family or complex (e.g., feeder pattern) of schools and establish collaborations with surrounding community resources. Ultimately, central district units need to be restructured in ways that best support the work at the school and school complex levels.

For more resources on Reworking Infrastructure, see Section B of the Center's *System Change Toolkit* at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

Well-designed, compatible, and interconnected infrastructures at schools, for school complexes, at the district level, and for school-community collaboratives are essential for developing a comprehensive system of learning supports. Each level plays a key role in weaving together existing school and community resources, developing a full continuum of interventions over time, and ensuring that the system operates in an increasingly cohesive, cost-efficient, and equitable way.

Expanding the Infrastructure to Connect with Community Resources

To enhance resource availability and use, schools need to mobilize and weave together school and community resources. This requires connecting the school infrastructure with the community using a collaborative infrastructure. Additional resource enhancement and economies of scale can be garnered by an infrastructure linkage that connects clusters or families of schools, such as feeder patterns.⁷

In sum, the ongoing dilemma for those expected to improve schools is how to meet our society's basic aims for public education in ways that level the playing field. The dilemma is exacerbated by the need to do more with less and to use sparse resources in the most cost-effective ways.

A new team for every new initiative is not cost-effective.

Teams and work groups are an essential facet of a productive operational infrastructure for school improvement. They must be formed to ensure that schools are able to carry out basic functions and tasks related to three fundamental components of school improvement: (1) facilitation of learning and development, (2) addressing barriers to learning and teaching, and (3) managing resources and school governance. An effective operational infrastructure at a school requires that each of these components has a strong leader and leadership team and productive work groups, and each is integrated with the other and fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice.

A properly designed and implemented operational infrastructure enables leaders to steer together and to empower and work effectively with staff. And, it enables them to avoid the problem of naive team proliferation by readily integrating new initiatives into existing teams and work groups.

With a Learning Supports Leadership Team established as an integral part of school infrastructure and planning, student and learning support staff can effectively evolve. Although some current roles and functions will continue, many will disappear, and others will emerge. Opportunities will arise for student/learning support personnel not only to provide direct assistance, but to play increasing roles as advocates, catalysts, brokers, and facilitators of school improvements. They can move beyond consulting with teachers to teaming with them as collaborators for part of each day. Improving student and learning supports in classrooms and schoolwide requires such collaboration and is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

The need for and power of enhancing ways for student and learning support staff to address barriers to learning and teaching is illustrated as we discuss addressing the matters covered in the following sections of this report.