

Piecemeal Policy Advocacy for Improving Schools Amounts to Tinkering and Works Against Fundamental System Transformation

Abstract

When groups of advocates effectively lobby for a program or special initiative, the trend is for policy makers to respond in an ad hoc, piecemeal manner. This approach to improving schools generates program after program and special initiative upon special initiative. And, despite good intentions, such activity works against the type of fundamental system transformation needed to enhance equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond, as well as generating other pernicious effects. This is of particular concern in districts that predominantly serve economically disadvantaged families where most special initiatives end up helping relatively few students.

This set of policy notes discusses

- (1) the problem of tinkering with school improvement – highlighting (a) lessons learned from the Gates Foundation’s reform initiatives and (b) concerns about current lobbying for SEL, connecting community services to schools, and adopting school climate as an accountability measure,
- (2) the need to reframe and broaden thinking about transforming schools,
- (3) the importance of overcoming the tendency to wait for guidelines and politics related to the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) before planning ways to *transform* schools.

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Good ideas and missionary zeal are sometimes enough to change the thinking of individuals; they are rarely, if ever, effective in changing complicated organizations ...with traditions, dynamics, and goals of their own.

Seymour Sarason¹

The politics of both enactment and implementation are salient influences on whether policy produces its intended effects....

McDonnell & Weatherford, 2016²

Advocacy indicates what is wanted; *the politics of policy enactment* prioritizes what is to be implemented; *the politics of implementation* determines what actually is done in pursuing priorities. In education, major issues surround what advocates want and what is enacted and implemented. A constant concern is whether what schools are asked to do can *significantly* enhance equity of opportunity.

With passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), advocates for specific concerns already are positioning themselves to elicit policy and financial support for special initiatives and programs. Expect to see increased lobbying to address many special interests. The focus will be on all the old standards and some new ones (e.g., directly improving regular and special education instruction; closing the opportunity gap; enhancing safety; dealing with bullying; using restorative justice practices; facilitating prosocial education, social and emotional learning, moral and character education and development, civic responsibility and engagement; addressing substance abuse and mental health problems; working with the community to expand learning ecosystems and connect with community services; broadening outcome accountability).

All, of course, are important school concerns. And dedicated advocates continue to offer compelling cases for pursuing each with discrete strategies they and their constituents favor.

When groups of advocates effectively lobby for a program or special initiative, the trend is for policy makers to respond in an ad hoc, piecemeal manner. Such a policy approach to school improvement generates program after program and initiative upon initiative and produces a fragmented approach to whole school improvement and whole child well-being. Moreover, given sparse resources, it has engendered “projectitis” (pilots that are not sustainable; demonstrations that are not scalable), siloing and related counterproductive competition for resources, cosmetic rather substantive changes, playing fast and loose with data, and other problems.³ But worse yet, despite good intentions, the ad hoc and piecemeal approach to so many interrelated concerns works against pursuing the type of fundamental transformation of the educational system that is needed to enhance equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond.

Heed the Lessons Learned by the Gates Foundation

Most schools are stretched thin by the many programs already underway. A common reaction of administrators is: *Enough - we can't take on another thing!* Nevertheless, when extramural funds are offered, budget-starved schools generally find special initiatives irresistible. This is especially so in districts that predominantly serve economically disadvantaged families. Unfortunately, the results often aren't beneficial and can be counterproductive to transforming public education.

A recent editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* underscores the matter. It highlights excerpts from a 2016 letter from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation about “lessons learned” from their efforts to improve schools (<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-gates-education-20160601-snap-story.html>).

As the *Times* notes, the Gates Foundation has spent more than \$3 billion on education concerns since 1999. In doing so, the foundation has had “an unhealthy amount of power in the setting of education policy.” Commenting on one example, the *Times* notes that “The foundation funded the creation of smaller schools, until its own study found that the size of the school didn’t make much difference in student performance. When the foundation moved on, school districts were left with costlier-to-run small schools.” The editorial quotes the foundation’s CEO, Sue Desmond-Hellman as stating: “We’re facing the fact that it is a real struggle to make systemwide change.” ... “It is really tough to create more great public schools.” ... “This has been a challenging lesson for us to absorb, but we take it to heart. The mission of improving education in America is both vast and complicated, and the Gates Foundation doesn’t have all the answers.”

As the editorial observes, this is “a remarkable admission for a foundation that had often acted as though it did have all the answers. Today, the Gates Foundation is clearly rethinking its bust-the-walls-down strategy on education - as it should. And so should the politicians and policymakers, from the federal level to the local, who have given the educational wishes of Bill and Melinda Gates and other well-meaning philanthropists and foundations too much sway in recent years over how schools are run.”

Three Examples of Current Lobbying for Special Initiatives

Now, let’s take a brief look at three prominent examples being advocated to improve schools.

(1) *Social Emotional Learning.* As education increases its emphasis on the whole child, so does lobbying for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).⁴ Much of the advocacy stresses enhancing curriculum and instruction to promote healthy social-emotional development. However, some discussions also stress preventing and addressing problems related to social-emotional development and learning.

Schools vary in their emphasis on SEL. For most, the focus remains marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. So advocates are pushing for a strong policy to integrate SEL into school improvement as a prosocial, whole child goal (along with efforts to promote moral and character education/development, civic responsibility and engagement, etc.).

SEL has yet to come to grips with its role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching

In general, the campaign has not come to grips with its potential impact on efforts to transform public education. This is seen, for example, in the inadequate emphasis on how SEL can enhance equity of opportunity by playing a role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Without strong advocacy related to such concerns, the odds are that policy makers will focus mainly on a narrow, curricular approach to promoting SEL. And given sparse resources, one impact of this will be to draw additional resources away from the type of transformative changes needed to effectively address learning, behavior, and emotional problems and close the equity gap.

(2) *Connecting Community Services to Schools.* Special initiatives to connect community services to schools are not the same as transformative efforts to establish a comprehensive and equitable system for school-community collaboration. The latter involves efforts to transform how schools and communities work together and braid their resources in ways that enrich schools, neighborhoods, students, and families. In contrast, initiatives for connecting community services to schools have much more limited objectives. The main interest of the well-intentioned community-based advocates promoting such initiatives stresses co-locating a few services (e.g., health and social services,

after-school programs) on one or more of a district's campuses. This limited agenda rarely succeeds in establishing the kind of school-community collaboration that can transform a school district.

when a few schools draw heavily on sparse community resources, less is available to other schools

Clearly, specific schools benefit from connecting with community resources. Unfortunately, because of the sparsity of available community services, especially in low-income neighborhoods, when an initiative results in a few schools drawing heavily on meager resources, fewer are available to other schools in the community. This increases inequities among schools. Moreover, while such initiatives often are proposed as efforts to integrate or at least coordinate services, effective connections often are not made with school and district-based student and learning support staff (e.g., psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, dropout/graduation support staff, special educators, among others). This is reflected in how frequently community and school personnel work at a school with the same students and families with little shared planning or ongoing communication.

Thus, as practiced, many special initiatives for connecting community services to schools increase fragmentation and marginalization and engender counterproductive competition for sparse resources, especially related to student and learning supports.⁵ Part of the problem is that community agencies and schools have major differences in institutional mission and accountabilities, and all have insufficient budgets. In this respect, it should be noted that some policy makers have developed the false impression that community resources are ready and able to meet the multifaceted needs of students and their families. In the struggle to balance tight school budgets, this view contributes to serious cuts related to school student support staff (e.g., lay-offs, budget cuts). And, such cuts further reduce the pool of resources available for improving equity of opportunity.

(3) *Enhancing School Climate and Using it for Accountability.* Everyone agrees that schools should have a positive school climate.⁶ There is less agreement, however, about *what this means and how to accomplish it*. This is especially the case when the call is for developing a safe and supportive environment that also is nurturing and caring and that provides all students with conditions for learning that enhance equal opportunity for success at school and beyond.

school climate is an emergent phenomenon

School and classroom climate sometimes are referred to as the learning environment or the supportive learning environment, as well as by terms such as atmosphere, ambience, ecology, milieu, conditions for learning. It is essential to realize that school climate is an *emergent* phenomenon. That is, it *emerges* from the complex transactions that characterize daily classroom and school-wide life. School and classroom climate are temporal, and somewhat fluid, perceived qualities of the immediate setting. In practice, school and classroom climates range from hostile or toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year.

Climate reflects the influence of the underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, traditions, and practices that constitute the school *culture*. (Note: Sometimes the terms climate and culture are used interchangeably, but the concepts are not the same.) And, of course, the climate and culture at a school are affected by surrounding political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

The construct of climate often is used as a marker for judging the quality of school life. While research indicates that enhanced school climate is *correlated* with many positive student and schooling outcomes, findings also suggest that discrete strategies for enhancing school climate often are insufficient for changing student and staff perceptions of the climate and ultimately the culture at their school.

All this underscores concerns about proposals to adopt school climate as a nonacademic accountability indicator under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). Measuring school climate and culture are complex. What a measure does or doesn't focus on depends on theories of what leads to a sustainable, positive school climate and culture.

The critical *accountability* question is whether a school's climate has improved and resulted in better student outcomes. This is a *summative evaluation* concern, and it fails to recognize that school climate is an emergent quality. And a climate measure adopted mainly as an accountability indicator can be counterproductive.

a climate measure that enables formative evaluation generates information for improving conditions for learning

As conditions for learning at a school improve, so should school climate. A climate measure that enables *formative evaluation* generates information about conditions for learning that require improvement and provides short-term school improvement accountability data and eventually contributes to outcome accountability. Such a measure, of course, is particularly important for schools with a poor climate. For formative evaluation, what a measure specifically does and doesn't assess becomes critical.

An analogy may help here. Under "No Child Left Behind," a critical problem with using student achievement as the main accountability indicator has been that it assumed accountability would be sufficient to drive scores up at all schools. Differences in conditions for learning were downplayed.

Similarly, if a measure of school climate is used mainly as an accountability driver, many schools are likely to use simple measures and focus only on ways to get higher scores, rather than adopting a measure that provides information to improve conditions for learning.

Planning Beyond Tinkering

As the above three examples suggest, no matter how appealing and well-intentioned an initiative may be, every proposal for school improvement requires careful analysis. The question is not: Will it do some good? – the big picture question is: *How much* will it help improve conditions for learning? And in this respect, a fundamental concern involves what is and isn't being done about the many conditions interfering with students learning and teachers teaching the whole child effectively.

Schools cannot afford to continue adding programs and initiatives in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner. Schools cannot continue to focus primarily just on improving instruction and management. Such efforts are insufficient for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, increasing equity of opportunity, promoting whole child well-being, and generating a positive school climate. So, as decision makers and planners move forward with the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), they should weigh the costs and benefits of every proposal in light of the need to transform schools.

The move to bring education planning back to states and districts is an opportunity and a challenge to end the tinkering. While it is important to see what guidelines and politics emerge related to ESSA, taking advantage of the new opportunities and meeting the challenge calls for starting to plan new directions *now*.¹

Good Intentions are Not Enough

Campaigns for new initiatives often reduce attention to other important concerns, and new initiatives generate counterproductive competition for sparse resources. Many such initiatives are keyed to relatively few students, and this is extremely problematic in districts that predominantly enroll economically disadvantaged families. Piecemeal policies and practices further fragment the already too scattered approaches intended to facilitate whole child development and ameliorate problems. Extramurally funded projects tend to have a short-life. Of greatest consequence, however, is that policy tinkering undercuts efforts to fundamentally transform public education.

*good decisions
require a cost-
benefit analysis*

Given all this, when asked to consider any discrete initiative/project for schools, it is essential that policy makers appreciate but not be swayed by good intentions. Good decisions require a cost-benefit analysis that clarifies how much the proposed efforts will improve schools for all students and for whole child well-being, as well as identifying unintentional consequences that may arise. And, proposals need to be viewed through the lens of an expanded school improvement framework.

Our analyses indicate that the thinking of reformers and policy makers currently is guided primarily by a two component framework for school improvement. One component emphasizes improving and broadening instruction (e.g., science-based instruction, use of technology, strengthening the focus on prosocial education in the form of social-emotional learning, moral and character education and development, civic engagement). The other component focuses on bettering school management/governance (e.g., improving resource use, moving from centralized to decentralized governance, expanding stakeholder involvement in decision making). Some attention, of course, also is given to interventions for student and schooling problems. (Many schools refer to this facet as a multi-tiered system for student and learning supports. Some places designate it a learning supports component.) However, the reality is that reliance on the two-component framework has relegated student and learning supports to a low priority status in school improvement discussions.

About Transforming School Improvement Policy

As John Maynard Keynes stressed: *The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones.* That certainly is the case with respect to policy for improving schools.

Education policy currently reflects a primary commitment to finding ways to improve (1) instruction and (2) management/governance. This two component framework works fine for schools where few students encounter barriers to success. And some significant strides have been made with respect to both components. However, the framework is grossly insufficient for addressing the complex array of factors interfering with equity of opportunity for student success at schools, especially schools enrolling large numbers from economically disadvantaged homes. Reformers need to escape the idea that the two component emphasis is sufficient to the challenge of addressing the many factors interfering with school improvement and student progress.

In response to the number of schools and students in trouble, the need is for fundamental system transformation. Critical in this respect is expanding the policy framework for school improvement to add a third primary and essential component. This component is devoted to unifying and developing a comprehensive and equitable intervention system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. That is, in place of ad hoc and piecemeal policies and practices, this third component provides a foundation for transforming student and learning supports. The transformation involves first unifying and weaving together all school

resources currently expended for student and learning supports. *And then*, the focus is on discriminatively braiding school and relevant community resources together to fill gaps. The intent over time is to replace the current laundry-list of fragmented practices by developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that can serve all students.

Systemic change of this magnitude involves social, political, and cultural commitment to:

(1) *Expanding the policy framework for school improvement* from a two- to a three-component framework so that all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching are unified (e.g., as a Learning Support Component), with the third component prioritized and developed as primary and essential, and fully entwined with the Instructional and Management/governance Components.⁸



(2) *Operationalizing the third component* by reframing student and learning support interventions to create a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports in-classrooms and school-wide. As illustrated below, a prototype intervention framework has been developed that encompasses

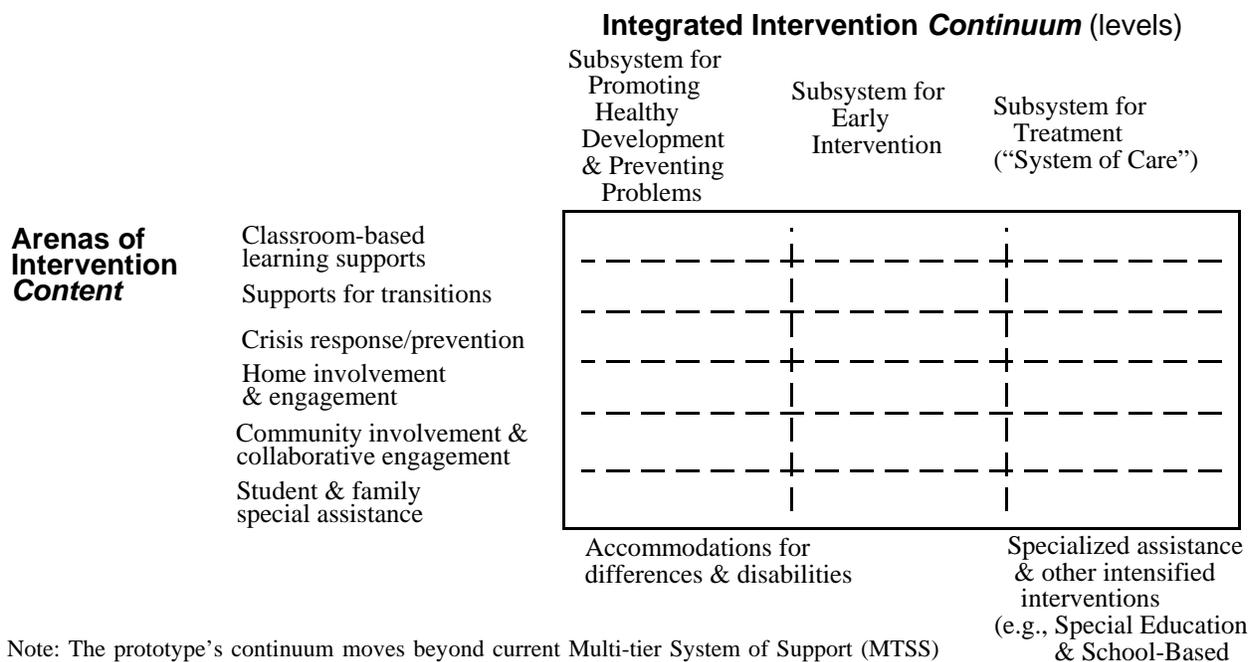
>a continuum of school-community interventions consisting of subsystems for

- promoting effective schooling and whole child development
- preventing problems experienced by teachers and students
- addressing such problems as soon as feasible after they arise
- providing for students who have severe and chronic problems.

and

>a cohesively organized and delimited set of “content” arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students in the classroom and school-wide. These arenas encompass the range of concerns a school copes with each day.⁹

Prototype Intervention Framework for the Third Component



Note: The prototype’s continuum moves beyond current Multi-tier System of Support (MTSS) thinking by being one facet of an intervention framework that guides development of a total system designed to unify the resources a school devotes to student and learning supports and blending in community resources to fill critical gaps.

(3) *Implementing the Third Component* involves

- *reworking the operational infrastructure* to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching;¹⁰
- *enhancing mechanisms and strategic approaches for systemic change* in ways that ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability;¹¹
- *developing standards and expanding the accountability framework* to account for the third component and to do so in ways that encompass both formative and summative evaluation.¹²

As noted at the outset, successful transformation requires effective coping with the politics of enactment and implementation and building on lessons learned from previous and ongoing endeavors.¹³ None of this is easy, but given the degree to which public education is under attack, all of it is essential.

Concluding Comments

As leaders for fundamental school changes such as Warren Simmons have stressed, it's not about specific programs and initiatives, it's about fundamental changes at social, political, and cultural levels. Given how many powerful economic and political forces are in pursuit of conflicting agenda for public schools, addressing these matters in policy and practice is an enormous challenge.

Of particular concern is how schools and communities focus on reducing factors that produce inequities. This includes the many barriers to learning and teaching that confront young people, families, and staff.

In doing so, however, public education is not well-served by advocates proposing discrete initiatives and competing for meager resources. Such competition will not transform the unsatisfactory status quo. Given sparse resources, if schools and communities do not work collaboratively and strategically to transform public education, we will continue the slide into a three-tiered set of K-12 institutions – one tier for the poor, one for the wealthy, and another for everyone else.

Working together to transform public education, of course, is an enormous challenge. To do less, however, is to maintain and worsen the extremely unsatisfactory state of affairs and exacerbate the growing threat to public education.

Notes

¹ Seymour Sarason (1971). *The Culture of School and the Problem of Change* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

² Lorraine M. McDonnell & Stephen Weatherford (2016). Recognizing the political in implementation research. *Educational Researcher*, 45, 233–242. <http://edr.sagepub.com/content/45/4/233.full.pdf+html>

³ See *Impediments to enhancing availability of mental health services in schools: Fragmentation, overspecialization, counterproductive competition, and marginalization*. (2002). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Paper commissioned by the National Association of School Psychologists and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services (ERIC/CASS). http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/31_impediments_to_enhancing_availability_of_mental_health_in_schools.pdf

⁴ See the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) – <http://www.casel.org/>

⁵ See *Integrated Student Supports and Equity: What's Not Being Discussed?* (2015). Center at UCLA. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/integpolicy.pdf>

See Community Outreach and Collaborative Engagement Chapter 7. In *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf>

- ⁶ See National School Climate Center – <http://www.schoolclimate.org/> and AIR’s *Quick Guide on Making School Climate Improvements* – <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/quick-guide>
- ⁷ See *ESSA, Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning* (2016). Center at UCLA. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essaanal.pdf>
- ⁸ See Chapter 2 in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf>
- ⁹ A brief discussion of and examples related to each of the six content arenas is offered in Part II of *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf>
- ¹⁰ See *Key Leadership Infrastructure Mechanisms for Enhancing Student & Learning Supports* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf
- ¹¹ See *Bringing New Prototypes into Practice: Dissemination, Implementation, and Facilitating Transformation* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/implrep3.pdf>
- ¹² For an accountability prototype that focuses not only on achievement, but on personal and social development and on improvements that directly address barriers to learning and teaching, see “Expanding the Accountability Framework for Schools” Appendix A in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf>
For a prototype of standards and indicators for a learning supports component, see *Standards & Quality Indicators for an Enabling or Learning Supports Component* (2014). Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/qualityindicators.pdf> .
- ¹³ See examples and lessons learned in *Where’s it Happening?* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/nind7.htm>
- Other relevant references can be accessed through links provided in the Center’s Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm> .