

Policy Perspective

Transforming Learning Supports to Transform Schools

School reform continues to focus primarily on two arenas: improving curriculum and instruction and rethinking the way our schools are governed and managed. We have new curriculum, new tests, new evaluation schemes, new technology, and new governance for some schools. But little is substantively new about the ways in which schools address factors that interfere with students benefitting from improved instruction.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a policy perspective on what needs to be done about this matter as Congress moves forward to reauthorize the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*.

Over the next few years, the process of transforming public education must develop better ways to

- enable equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond
- improve achievement for all and closing the achievement gap
- prevent and ameliorate learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- reduce dropouts
- establish schools as centers in their neighborhood.

Crucial in all this will be fundamental changes in the ways in which schools and communities address the many factors interfering with productive learning at school and at home. Our school improvement research points toward changes that

- (1) broaden school improvement policy from a two to a three component framework
- (2) design the third component as a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports with a delineated set of common core standards and relevant quality indicators
- (3) rework staff roles and functions to enhance effective collaboration with each other and with community resources in addressing factors that interfere with learning and teaching
- (4) support effective system change, replication to scale, and sustainability.

This paper briefly shares our policy perspective on each of these matters.

Prepared by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor, Co-directors, national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. email: smhp@ucla.edu website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

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Broadening Policy to a Three Component Framework

If reformers are serious about improving outcomes for all students, major changes must be made to broaden education policy which currently focuses primarily on instructional and governance/management concerns.

Pioneering efforts already are underway in several states and districts to add a third component designed to enable schools to systemically and directly address barriers to learning and re-engage the many students who have become disconnected from school.*

A growing body of research indicates the need for schools to unify their existing fragmented student and learning supports into a comprehensive and systemic component. At the same time, research also indicates that school improvement policy and planning continues to marginalize development of such a component. Failure to do so is a significant impediment to transforming schools.

The pressing need for a third component is underscored by the Common Core State Standards movement's focus on curriculum reform. While the movement includes a brief "application to students with disabilities," it is silent about the many factors that interfere with the learning of non-special education students (see below).

Almost every student, at some time or another, bring problems with them that affect their learning and perhaps interfere with the teacher's efforts to teach. In some geographic areas, many youngsters bring a wide range of problems stemming from restricted opportunities associated with poverty and low income, difficult and diverse family circumstances, high rates of mobility, lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, problems related to substance abuse, inadequate health care, and lack of enrichment opportunities. Problems are exacerbated as youngsters internalize the frustrations of confronting barriers and the debilitating effects of performing poorly at school. In some locales, the reality often is that over 50% of students are not succeeding. And, in most schools in these locales, teachers are ill-prepared and poorly supported to address the problems in a potent manner. Students facing such problems struggle in school.

****Lessons learned from pioneering efforts to add a third component are online at:***
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/nind7.htm>

Designing the Third Component as a Unified and Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports

The third component, widely referred to as a *Learning Supports Component*, is operationalized as a primary and essential facet of school improvement and transformation. In this context, *learning supports* are defined as the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional and intellectual supports to enable all pupils to have an equal opportunity for success at school by addressing external and internal factors that interfere with students engaging effectively with instruction.

A *Learning Supports Component* is a systemic approach to enable the learning of all students and is fully integrated into the school's strategic improvement plan. The component is operationalized into a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive intervention framework. It coalesces and systematizes what is common in all student and learning supports and provides a base upon which the needs of specific student subgroups, the contributions of various professional specialties and specific programs, and the unique considerations of localities can build. A learning supports component is designed to (a) play out effectively in classrooms and schoolwide, (b) connect effectively with district programs, and (c) outreach to the surrounding community to fill intervention and resource gaps and collaborate in addressing overlapping concerns.

Framing the Intervention: Continuum and Content

At present, to address interfering factors, schools have instituted support programs designed to tackle a range of learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Across a district, there are efforts to mitigate and alleviate school adjustment, attendance, and mobility problems, substance abuse, emotional problems, relationship difficulties, violence, physical and sexual abuse, delinquency, and dropouts.

Some of these programs are provided throughout a school district, others are carried out at – or linked to – targeted schools. Some of the programs are owned and operated by districts; some are managed by community agencies. The interventions may be for all students in a school, for those in specified grades, for those identified as “at risk,” or for those in need of compensatory or special education.

As is widely recognized, student support programs are too fragmented and marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. At some schools, it is commonplace for support staff to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with too much of the work oriented to addressing discrete problems and providing specialized services for relatively few students. In some schools, a student identified as at risk for grade retention, dropout, and substance abuse may be the focus of several professionals operating independently of each other.

Toward ending the fragmentation, the third component is operationalized using a framework designed to unify all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching. Such a framework joins together the long-standing concept of an *intervention continuum* with research designed to organize the *content* focus of the interventions.

Continuum of Interventions

Currently, the prevailing conceptualization of an *intervention continuum* in schools is the three tier intervention pyramid (or triangle) introduced into federal policy related to response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS). As originally presented, the pyramid highlights three levels of intervention and suggests the percent of students at each level.

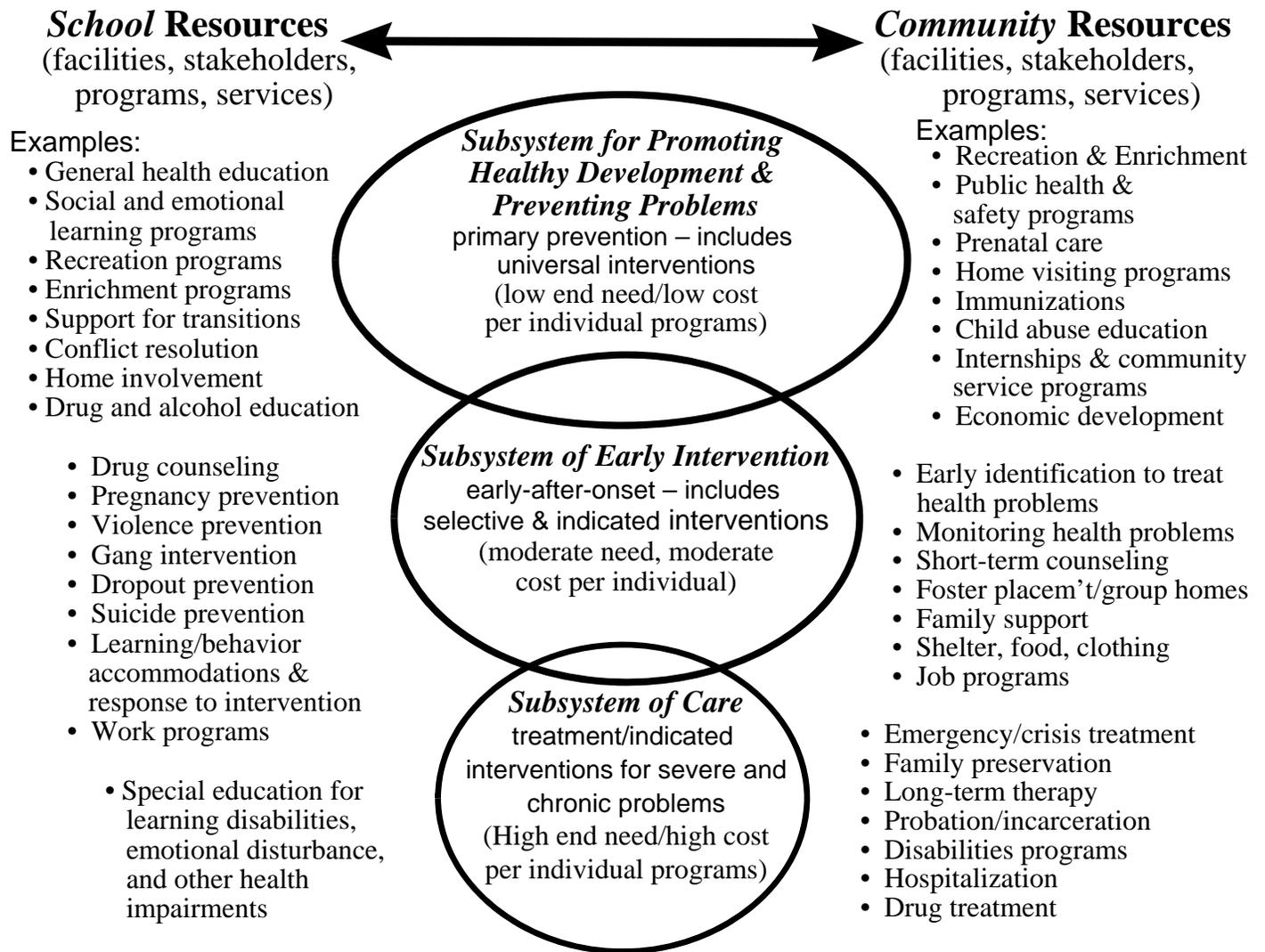
Over time, the levels have been described in terms of universal, selective, and indicated interventions or primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Graphically, some have turned the pyramid into a cone and differentiated academic and behavioral concerns.

The pyramid's appeal rests in its simplicity – so do its limitations. Its main contribution to policy and practice has been to underscore differences in levels of intervention, with special emphasis on a tiered delivery system for special education. The problem is that the pyramid is a one dimensional intervention framework. As such, it does not help address the problem of systematically connecting interventions that fall into and across each level and does not address the need to connect school and community interventions. Moreover, the stated percentages too often have been taken as factual data, when the reality is that some schools have many more students who need a range of student and learning supports. Rather than true data, the percentages only represent a recognition that an effective continuum of interventions can substantially reduce the number of students needing more than core instruction.

Few will argue against the notion that conceptualizing levels of intervention is a good starting point for framing the nature and scope of interventions needed to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. However, as the above concerns indicate, the pyramid is not an inadequate guide for developing a comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

An example of another way to conceive the continuum is illustrated in Exhibit 1. Note the emphasis on connecting school and community resources and on overlapping subsystems.

Exhibit 1. Intervention Continuum: Interconnected SubSystems



Note: Each subsystem is seen as needing to link school and community interventions in ways that integrate, coordinate, and weave resources together in developing a comprehensive continuum of programs and services designed to address barriers to development, learning, parenting, and teaching.

**Content Focus
of Interventions**

Moving beyond the pyramid also involves the pressing matter of *coalescing* the laundry list of fragmented programs and services. This requires a formulation to guide organizing programs and services into a circumscribed set of arenas reflecting the *content purpose* of the activity.

Schools need to deal with a conceptualization that organizes the “content” arenas for addressing barriers and hurdles to learning and teaching into a concise “curriculum” framework that categorizes and captures the essence of the multifaceted ways schools need to address factors that interfere with learning at school (see Exhibit 2). The number and labels for designated content arenas may differ; however, most places that have pioneered such a framework find 5-7 arenas to be effective.

Exhibit 2. Six Arenas of Intervention Activity

Analyses indicate that learning supports content can be unified into the following clusters of intervention activity, each of which is a focus for continuous program and system development:

- >***strategies for regular classrooms to enable learning*** (e.g., to ensure learning is personalized for all students and especially those manifesting mild-moderate learning and behavior problems and to re-engage those who have become disengaged from learning at school; providing special individual learning accommodations and supports as necessary; addressing external barriers and hurdles)
- >**a full range of *transition supports*** (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate hurdles to enrollment, school and grade changes, daily transitions, program transitions, accessing supports, etc.)
- >**interventions to increase and strengthen *home and school connections***
- >**interventions for responding to, and where feasible, preventing school and personal crises and trauma** (including creating a caring and safe learning environment and countering the impact of out-of-school traumatic events)
- >**interventions to increase and strengthen community involvement and support** (e.g., outreach to develop greater community involvement and support from a wide range of entities, including enhanced use of volunteers and agency collaborations)
- >**interventions to facilitate *student and family access to effective services and special assistance on campus and in the community as needed.***

Combining the continuum and content arenas provide a guiding framework for designing a unified and comprehensive learning supports component (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3. Framework for a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

		Levels of Intervention		
		Systems for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	Systems for Early Intervention (Early after problem onset)	Systems of Care
Intervention Content Arenas	Classroom-Focused Enabling			
	Crisis/Emergency Assistance & Prevention			
	Support for transitions			
	Home Involvement in Schooling			
	Community Outreach/Volunteers			
	Student and Family Assistance			
		Accommodations for differences & disabilities		Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., Special Education & School-Based Behavioral Health)

Note: Various venues, concepts, and initiatives will fit into several cells of the matrix. Examples include venues such as day care centers, preschools, family centers, and school-based health centers, aspects of concepts such as social and emotional learning and development, and initiatives such as positive behavior support, response to intervention, and the coordinated school health program. Most of the work of the considerable variety of personnel who provide student supports also fits into one or more cells.

Reworking Operational Infrastructure

Developing and institutionalizing a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports requires mechanisms within a school, among families of schools, at the district level, and between school and community. All mechanisms must be integrated with each other and fully integrated into school improvement efforts and school-community collaborations.

The need at all levels is to rework operational infrastructure in ways that support efforts to address barriers to learning in a cohesive manner and to integrate the work with instruction and with the management/governance mechanisms. This requires dedicated administrative and staff leadership for the learning supports component (with such leadership fully involved in overall governance, planning and implementation).

Ongoing development and implementation of the third component also calls for work groups. These pursue functions such as resource mapping and analysis, priority setting for resource allocation, system development, communication and information management, capacity building, and quality improvement and accountability.

Standards for the Component

School improvement is standards- and accountability-based. With the onset of the Common Core Standards movement, the majority of states are preparing a dramatic overhaul of curriculum and assessments. If pursued in the absence of comparable efforts to develop common core standards for learning supports, the movement is likely to widen the gap between educational haves and have-nots.

To focus attention on this matter, an initiative for developing common core learning supports standards has produced a set of *Common Core Standards for a Learning Supports Component*. As highlighted in Exhibit 4, these standards (a) coalesce and systematize what is common in all student and learning supports and (b) provide a base upon which the needs of specific student subgroups, the contributions of various professional specialties and specific programs, and the unique considerations of localities can be built.

Exhibit 4. Common Core Standards for a Learning Supports Component*

Framing and Delineating Intervention Functions

Standard 1. Establishment of an overall unifying intervention framework for a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, including re-engaging disconnected students.

Specific standards for the content arenas of a learning supports component stress continuous program and system development of

- (a) **strategies for regular classrooms to enable learning**
- (b) a full range of **Transition Supports**
- (c) interventions to increase and strengthen **Home and School Connections**
- (d) interventions for responding to, and where feasible, preventing school and personal **Crises And Trauma**
- (e) interventions to increase and Strengthen **Community Involvement and Support**
- (f) interventions to facilitate student and family access to effective services and **Special Assistance** on campus and in the community as needed

Reworking Operational Infrastructure

Standard 2. Establishment of an integrated operational infrastructure for the ongoing planning and development of the learning supports component.

Enhancing Resource Use

Standard 3. Appropriate resource use and allocation for developing, maintaining, and evolving the component.

Continuous Capacity Building

Standard 4. Capacity building for developing, maintaining, and evolving the component.

Continuous Evaluation And Appropriate Accountability

Standard 5. Formative and summative evaluation and accountability are fully integrated into all planning and implementation of the component.

* The complete formulation of the above brief outline of standards, along with the rationale and quality indicators, is online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/comcorannounce.pdf>

The work stems from available research and pioneering efforts in several states and districts and input from a critical mass of superintendents, principals, teachers, support staff, associations of educators, community agency staff, professors, and more. The intent is to ensure that the nature and scope of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports is understood, to guide adoption of such a system, and to provide indicators that can be used to expand accountability related to school improvement.

Redesigning Staff Roles and Functions for Effective Collaboration in Addressing Interfering Factors

School improvement requires transformation in how school personnel collaborate with each other and with other school stakeholders. Authentic and effective collaboration is key to generally empowering effective learning and teaching and address interfering factors.

Collaboration can enhance personalized and holistic learning and counter learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Collaboration facilitates movement toward the ideal of a classroom and schoolwide environment where students and staff feel positively stimulated, well-supported, and engaged in pursuing the learning objectives of the day.

Effective Collaboration

All school staff need support from each other in enhancing outcomes for students. And, given overlapping agenda, it seems evident that school personnel not only should work closely with each other, but also with parents, volunteers and other community stakeholders, professionals-in-training, and so forth.

From a learning supports perspective, collaboration can substantially enhance how schools prevent and correct problems, enhance intrinsic motivation for academic and social emotional learning, and encourage a climate and culture of cooperative learning, problem solving, shared responsibility, and mutual caring and respect. For teachers, especially new teachers, collaboration is the route to much needed in-classroom support and personalized on-the-job education focused on *enabling* student learning, especially among those with problems. For student and learning support staff, regular collaboration with teachers in their classrooms transcends the limitations of “consultation” and is strategically important in reducing unnecessary referrals for special services and special education evaluation.

Redesigning Staff Roles, Functions, and Professional Development

Moving to a three component approach for school improvement and transformation involves major systemic changes and new forms of collaboration. Developing a unified and comprehensive component to address interfering factors involves modifying roles and functions and enhancing professional development to ensure staff are equipped to facilitate systemic changes and collaborate effectively.

Staff must learn, for example, how to establish a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports and how to function effectively in a redesigned operational infrastructure. This encompasses learning how to develop and implement learning

supports in classrooms and schoolwide; how to incorporate district programs flexibly (e.g., federally funded programs); how to connect families of schools to enhance effectiveness and achieve economies of scale; how to outreach to and link with the surrounding community to fill gaps and collaborate in addressing overlapping concerns; and more. Teachers will have to learn how to work more collaboratively. Support staff and others coming to collaborate with teachers in the classroom will have to learn much more about classroom life and teaching. And, everyone needs to learn how to move from an overemphasis on behavior modification to an understanding and application of intrinsic motivation as a basis for enhancing engagement and re-engagement of students in instruction and school and commitment of personnel to systemic change.

**Fundamental
New Directions
for Student
Support Staff**

Framing new directions is an essential facet of enhancing educational results for all students. For student support staff (e.g., counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, etc.) in particular, the third component provides opportunities to move in fundamentally new directions.

As much as the work of student support staff has changed over the years, their roles and functions have not substantially evolved, and their work has remained marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. This is counterproductive for school improvement and transformation and for substantially enhancing student and school success. And given that the investment in providing student and learning supports is substantial, maintaining the status quo is unacceptable.

It is important to emphasize that new directions won't result in pupil service personnel abandoning concerns about youngsters who manifest learning, behavioral, emotional, and health problems. The current reality, of course, is that staff-student ratios have long made it impossible to directly serve more than a small percentage of such students. The aim of moving in new directions is to use the talents and expertise of student support staff to establish a unified, comprehensive, and systemic learning supports component designed to benefit all students.

Clearly, all this has major implications for changing personnel preparation, credentialing, and continuing education.

Formulating and Implementing Strategies to Ensure Effective System Change to Scale

Policy makers need to support a research and training agenda to advance understanding of and capability for designing, implementing, and sustaining prototypes and taking them to scale.

Those who set out to improve schools and schooling across a district are confronted with two enormous tasks. The first is to develop prototypes; the second involves large-scale replication. One without the other is insufficient. Yet considerably more attention is paid to developing and validating prototypes than to delineating and testing the systemic change processes required for sustainability, replication, and scale-up. Clearly, it is time to correct this deficiency.

Research

It is increasingly common for education agencies to include an emphasis on the importance of sustainability of innovations when issuing “Requests for Application” (RFAs). However, it is unclear how seriously the matter is taken in preparing proposals and effectively carrying out what has been proposed.

Congress needs to elevate the priority status of federal research related to understanding systemic change concerns involved in school improvement. Currently, the nation’s research agenda does not include major initiatives to delineate and test models for widespread replication of education reforms. Relatedly, too little attention is paid to the complexities of implementation and large scale diffusion of empirically supported practices. (Indeed, the emphasis is mainly on studying implementation of such practices in terms of the problem of replication with fidelity, rather than viewing it as a particular instance of effecting systemic change.)

Pre- and In-Service Training

Much of the leadership training for education policy makers and administrators still gives short shrift to systemic change processes and problems. Thus, it is not surprising to find that most school improvement planning guides do not include a focus on how the improvements will be accomplished, and personnel who are expected to act as change agents in districts and schools have relatively little specific training in facilitating major systemic changes.

Policy must ensure that school improvement planning guides are expanded to include a section on how proposed major systemic changes will be accomplished. Moreover, a portion of funds currently allocated for school improvement needs to be redeployed to underwrite the costs of developing staff for systemic change, including training for change leadership and change agent staff. And, school accountability and certification reviews should be expanded

to prominently include concerns related to leadership and staff development for implementing and evaluating systemic changes.

**Operational
Supports and
Evaluation
Safeguards**

Finally, reforms and major school improvements obviously require ensuring that those responsible for system change not only have adequate training, but also have essential resources and support, initially and over time. Moreover, there must be appropriate incentives and safeguards for such personnel. These matters require that:

- Allocations for every major school improvement initiative include a separate, albeit temporary, budget to underwrite the costs of effective systemic change and should reflect a commitment to sustainability.
- Special personnel evaluation and accountability procedures should be formulated for use during periods of major systemic change to make allowances for dips in performance as schools cope with the extra-ordinarily complex problems that inevitably arise in pursuing comprehensive systemic change in schools.

Concluding Comments

We are at a turning point for deciding how schools and communities should address the problems of children and youth. The bottom line is that, if schools are to ensure that all students succeed, designs for reform must reflect the full implications of the word *all*. Clearly, all includes more than students who are motivationally ready and able to profit from demands and expectations for “high standards.” After years of promising to leave no child behind, it is painfully evident that this promise requires addressing the problems of the many who aren’t benefitting from instructional reforms because of a host of external and internal factors interfering with their development and learning.

For schools, equity, fairness, and justice start with designing instruction in ways that account for a wide range of individual differences and circumstances. But, the work can’t stop there if *all* students are to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Teachers and student support staff must work together to ensure that classrooms and what goes on schoolwide address a wide range of interfering factors.

A Sample of Relevant References

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Sample Related to Student-Learning Supports & School Climate Standards

ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (3rd ed)
<http://ascamodel.timberlakepublishing.com/files/Executive%20Summary%203.0.pdf>

American School Counselor Association National Standards for Students
http://static.pdesas.org/content/documents/ASCA_National_Standards_for_Students.pdf

Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards; Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs (3rd ed)
<http://nrckids.org/CFOC3/>

National Association of School Psychologists 2010 Standards – consists of four separate documents:

- (a) Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists (formerly Training and Field Placement Programs in School Psychology),
- (b) Standards for the Credentialing of School Psychologists,
- (c) Principles for Professional Ethics, and the

(d) Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services (formerly Guidelines for the Provision of School Psychological Services)
<http://www.nasponline.org/standards/2010standards.aspx>

NASW Standards for School Social Work Services

<http://www.naswdc.org/practice/standards/NASWSchoolSocialWorkStandards.pdf>

Restraint and Seclusion: Resource Document. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education (2012). www.ed.gov/policy/restraintseclusion

School Climate Standards

<http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php>

School Climate Implementation Road Map. National School Climate Center (2012).

<http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/roadmap.php>

Sample of Relevant State Standards and Guidelines

California Standards of Quality and Effectiveness For Pupil Personnel Services Credentials: School Counseling, School Psychology, School Social Work, Child Welfare and Attendance

<http://www.hhs.csus.edu/SWRK/document/PDF/PPSStand.pdf#search='Standards%20of%20Quality%20and%20Effectiveness%20For%20Pupil%20Personnel%20Services%20Credentials:%20School%20Counseling,%20School%20Psychology,%20School%20Social%20Work,%20Child%20Welfare%20and%20Attendance>

Connecticut's Comprehensive School Counseling: A Guide to Comprehensive School Counseling Program Development

<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Special/counseling.pdf>

Hawaii's Standards Database

http://wetserver.net/hcpsv3_staging/cc/index.jsp

Illinois Learning Standards: Social/Emotional Learning

http://www.isbe.net/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm

Illinois Standards for School Psychologists

http://www.isbe.state.il.us/profprep/CASCDvr/pdfs/23130_schoolpsy.pdf

Illinois Standards for the School Social Worker

http://www.isbe.state.il.us/profprep/CASCDvr/pdfs/23140_schoolsocwork.pdf

Iowa Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance Program Development Guide

<http://www.schoolcounselor.org/files/iowa.pdf>

Indiana Standards for School Social Work Professionals

http://www.insswa.org/Standards-Indiana_School_Social_Work.pdf

New York's Educating the Whole Child, Engaging the Whole School: Guidelines and Resources for Social and Emotional Development and Learning (SEDL)
<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/sedl/>

North Carolina Professional School Social Work Standards
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/studentsupport/socialwork/standards/>

North Carolina Professional School Psychology Standards
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/studentsupport/psychology/standards/>

North Carolina Professional School Counseling Standards
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/studentsupport/counseling/standards/>

Ohio State Department of Education: Comprehensive System of Learning Supports Guidelines
<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=5&ContentID=29853&Content=119551>

Pennsylvania School Counselors Association
<http://www.pasca-web.org/PA%20Companion%20Guide.shtml>

Texas Collaborative for Emotional Development in Schools www.txceds.org

Texas's School Guidance and Counseling Program for Texas Public Schools (4th ed)
<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=4207>

Washington State School Social Work Standards
<http://www.wassw.org/washington-state-school-social-work-standards.html>