

What is (and isn't) in Place to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching for the New School Year?

As the beginning of the school year approaches, there is widespread concern about student well-being and connectedness. Despite this, current planning generally appears too limited to address the anticipated increases in learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

We know that school planners are feeling overwhelmed just with the difficulties in preparing to provide basic instruction. At the same time, they are being bombarded with recommendations from advocates with various agenda. For the most part, the recommendations are for approaches that are too limited to address what lies ahead.

An example is seen in a report from California's Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) underscores the concerns raised. The July 2020 report entitled: *Responding to COVID-19: Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Schoolchildren* online at https://mhsoac.ca.gov/sites/default/files/Schools%20and%20Mental%20Health%20Draft%20Report_Cover%20Memo%20on%20COVID-19%20Response_0.pdf.

From an intervention perspective, the following is a key statement made in the document.

The System of Support for K-12 education could provide the infrastructure for developing models and professional skills. The new support structure is intended to help all schools close the achievement gap with levels of increasingly specialized support; including an emerging focus on social and emotional learning.

The MHSOAC focus is important, but because its emphasis is only on mental health concerns, it frames everything in terms of addressing such concerns. Thus, it is too limited to be considered *THE system of support for K-12 education*.

Districts and their schools need a system that embeds mental health as one set of concerns into the much broader range of factors that interfere with learning and teaching. Such a system must focus on both (1) addressing as many interfering factors as feasible AND (2) re-engaging disconnected students. And it must focus on *all* students, not just those with severe problems.

But before focusing on a major transformation of the support system, planners must prepare for the immediate needs of students, families, and staff as the school year gets underway.

Immediate Planning Priorities for Student/Learning Supports

Effective planning related to student/learning supports begins with establishing a team such as a *Learning Supports Leadership Team* (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>). Such a team naturally includes, but should not be limited to, district staff responsible for student and learning supports.

The team's charge at this critical point in time is to formulate a strategic plan for unifying and deploying student/learning supports to meet the immediate needs that will arise as the school year begins. Planning priorities include delineating what supports and resources are available for schools to

- (1) maintain the well-being and connection of engaged students
- (2) ensure special education IEPs are met
- (3) help teachers and families quickly when they identify students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- (4) help all staff address barriers to learning and teaching
- (5) outreach to disengaged students in ways designed to re-engage them in instruction

A guiding principle for planning is to revamp the deployment of available resources in ways that increase teaming of student/learning support staff with teachers. Teachers cannot and should not be expected to address the above matters alone; student/learning support staff need to collaborate (not just consult) with teachers to ensure that students are able to benefit from instruction. This is essential to minimizing a flood of referrals for specialized help.

Subsequent Planning to Transform Student/Learning Supports

It is clear that in the long-term schools cannot just go back to old thinking about student/learning supports. As the Council for Chief State School Officers is stressing: *Returning to business as usual is not an option.*

After immediate priorities are implemented to the degree feasible, the team needs to move on to delineate a strategic process plan for developing existing resources into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

In moving forward, the team must begin by adopting a multifaceted intervention framework for systemically and cohesively meeting the needs of students, their families, and school staff. For example, see the framework that expands MTSS and organizes supports into six domains presented in the Center's new online resource entitled: *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* (a free resource at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html).*

The next step for the team is to establish a workgroup that applies the intervention framework to map existing student/learning supports allocated throughout the district (including whatever the community brings to the table). See the Center's mapping tool at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf>

Mapping resources allows for analyses of gaps and redundancies and for decisions about priorities in developing the system. And since budgets are always tight, the analysis enables recommendations about redistributing resources.

With respect to implementing and sustaining the new system, some changes in operational infrastructure will be required. Prototypes for such changes are outline in *Key Leadership Mechanisms for Enhancing Student & Learning Supports* at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf

*For those thinking about developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help. We offer free remote TA and coaching – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf> . The Center's prototype frameworks can be used as blueprints for adapting current policy and practices to unify and weave together available resources and rework the operational infrastructure at schools and districts.

Also note that, two previous books prepared before the pandemic also are free and accessible online:

- > *Improving School Improvement* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html
- > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html