



A Center Policy and Practice Brief

What Every Leader for School Improvement Needs to Know About Student and Learning Supports

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Every school is confronted with many concerns about improving students' achievement and well-being and enhancing school climate. While the emphasis shifts, there is constant pressure to do more about learning problems; bullying, harassment, and other forms of violence and acting out behavior at school; substance abuse; disconnected students; nonattendance; dropouts; teen pregnancy; suicide prevention; and on and on. Clearly, schools and districts that have many students who manifest problems such as these are especially challenged when it comes to increasing achievement test score averages.

Prevailing efforts to address such problems are not well conceived in school improvement policy and practice. Based on previous Center policy and practice analyses, this brief report provides a synthesis of (1) some key challenges for school improvement related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (2) implications for improving how schools deal with such challenges. Also included are (a) references to the Center analyses from which this synthesis was derived and (b) guides for leadership development.

The Challenge of Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching and Re-engaging Disconnected Students

The following statement from the Carnegie Task Force on Education stresses the imperative for student and learning supports:

School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.

So the question for every leader for school improvement is: *How well do current plans meet the challenge?*

A clear answer to this question arises when school improvement proposals and existing plans are analyzed with respect to how they (a) directly address barriers to learning and teaching and (b) re-engage students who have become disconnected from classroom instruction. Findings indicate that

- (1) planning and implementation related to these matters often are done in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner
- (2) the functions of different student and learning supports staff are delineated in relative isolation from each other
- (3) a great deal of the work is oriented to discrete problems and with overreliance on specialized services for individuals and small groups (e.g., identified as at risk for specific problems such as grade retention, dropout, substance abuse, etc.) at the expense of supporting the many in need

- (4) a significant proportion of the budget at schools (and at district, regional, state, and federal levels) is expended on these matters with too little impact and accountability
- (5) most school improvement plans present inadequate ideas for improving student and learning supports (e.g., focus only on increasing coordination, enhancing what is available by linking with community health and human *services* and co-locating some of these services at school sites)
- (6) school-owned student supports are marginalized in school improvement policy and practice and marginalization, fragmentation, undesirable redundancy, and counterproductive competition often are compounded when community *services* are not integrated with the ongoing intervention efforts of school staff
- (7) involvement at schools of community resources *beyond* health and social services remains a token and marginal concern
- (8) the operational infrastructure at schools and at all other levels reflects the policy marginalization of student and learning supports and maintains the limited impact of such supports with respect to helping improve student achievement and well-being and enhance school climate.

Implications for Strengthening School Improvement

“It is not enough to say that all children can learn or that no child will be left behind; the work involves achieving the vision of an American education system that *enables* all children to succeed in school, work, and life.”

(From the 2002 mission statement of CCSSO –
the Council for Chief State School Officers – italics added)

Meeting the challenge of *enabling* all children to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school requires that leaders for school improvement take steps to (1) end the marginalization of student and learning supports and (2) move toward development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system for directly addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging students who have become disconnected from classroom instruction.

This means fully integrating into school improvement a focus on:

- reframing the currently fragmented and piecemeal set of student support programs and services into a design for a *comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system* to enable learning
- ensuring the design encompasses both in-classroom and school-wide approaches – including interventions to enhance teachers’ ability to respond to common learning and behavior problems, support transitions, increase home and community connections, and respond to and prevent crises

- using the resources already allocated for student and learning supports to develop the system over a period of time (i.e., redeploying what has been budgeted from general funds, compensatory and special education, special projects and initiatives)
- revamping district, school, and school-community operational infrastructures to weave local resources together strategically with the aim of enhancing and evolving a student and learning supports system
- pursuing school improvement and systemic change with a high degree of policy commitment for developing and sustaining an enabling component (e.g., a learning supports component) that comprehensively addresses barriers to learning and teaching and re-engages students in classroom learning
- ensuring that the enabling/learning supports component is established as a primary and essential component in school improvement policy and practice – on a par with the instructional and management/governance component (i.e., shift the policy framework for school improvement from a two- to a three-component framework).

It is from such transformative efforts that one can expect an enhanced school climate to emerge.

References to Examples of the Center’s Analyses from Which this Synthesis Was Derived

Our Center has produced policy and practice analyses and prototype frameworks that can be helpful in articulating the need and guides for such systemic change. This body of work represents a new ingredient in addressing long-standing problems that have been marginalized in education policy at all levels. It has particular relevance for moving forward in closing the achievement gap, reducing school violence, addressing psychosocial and mental and physical health concerns, stemming the tide of dropouts, shutting down the pipeline from schools to prison, and promoting well being and social justice.

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Center for Mental Health in Schools (2011). *Where's it Happening? Examples of new directions for student support & lessons learned.* Los Angeles, CA: Author.
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/wheresithappening.htm>

Guides for Leadership Development

To meet the demand for some initial guidance, a set of resources that are free and easily accessible have been developed and put online.

(1) **Introductory Webinar:** We suggest starting with the online webinar our Center developed in collaboration with the American Association of School Administrators and Scholastic. It is entitled:

Strengthening School Improvement: Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning

Supports to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching
<https://scholastic.webex.com/scholastic/lsr.php?AT=pb&SP=TC&rID=48915112&rKey=09f14db0881f5159&act=pb>

(2) **Online Leadership Institute:** If the presentation whets your appetite, you and your colleagues can go into greater depth on the various topics by accessing the online Leadership Institute modules we developed in collaboration with Scholastic's Rebuilding for Learning initiative as aids in planning and system building for better addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. These webinar sessions are online at – <http://rebuildingforlearning.scholastic.com/>

The six module online institute currently includes discussion of:

- Why new directions for student and learning supports is *an imperative for school improvement*.
- Framing *a comprehensive intervention system* to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.
- Reworking school and district *operational infrastructure and policy* to effectively build such a system.
- Expanding professional development related to engagement and re-engagement to include an enhanced understanding of intrinsic motivation.
- School transformation in terms of *systemic change* phases and tasks.
- Planning and strategically pursuing *implementation* of a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports as an integrated part of school improvement.

(3) **Examples of New Directions Trailblazers.** Learn from the experiences of those who have moved in new directions. We are continuously updating examples and lessons learning from state department and districts who are designing Comprehensive Systems of Learning Supports and embedding them in school improvement plans. See

>Where's it Happening? Trailblazing and Pioneer Initiatives –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>

(4) **Toolkit of Resources.** Includes many resources for making it happen.

>Toolkit – Rebuilding Student Supports into a Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

(5) **Need More?** Feel free to contact us if you need more information. Contact Ltaylor@ucla.edu or adelman@psych.ucla.edu or smhp@ucla.edu