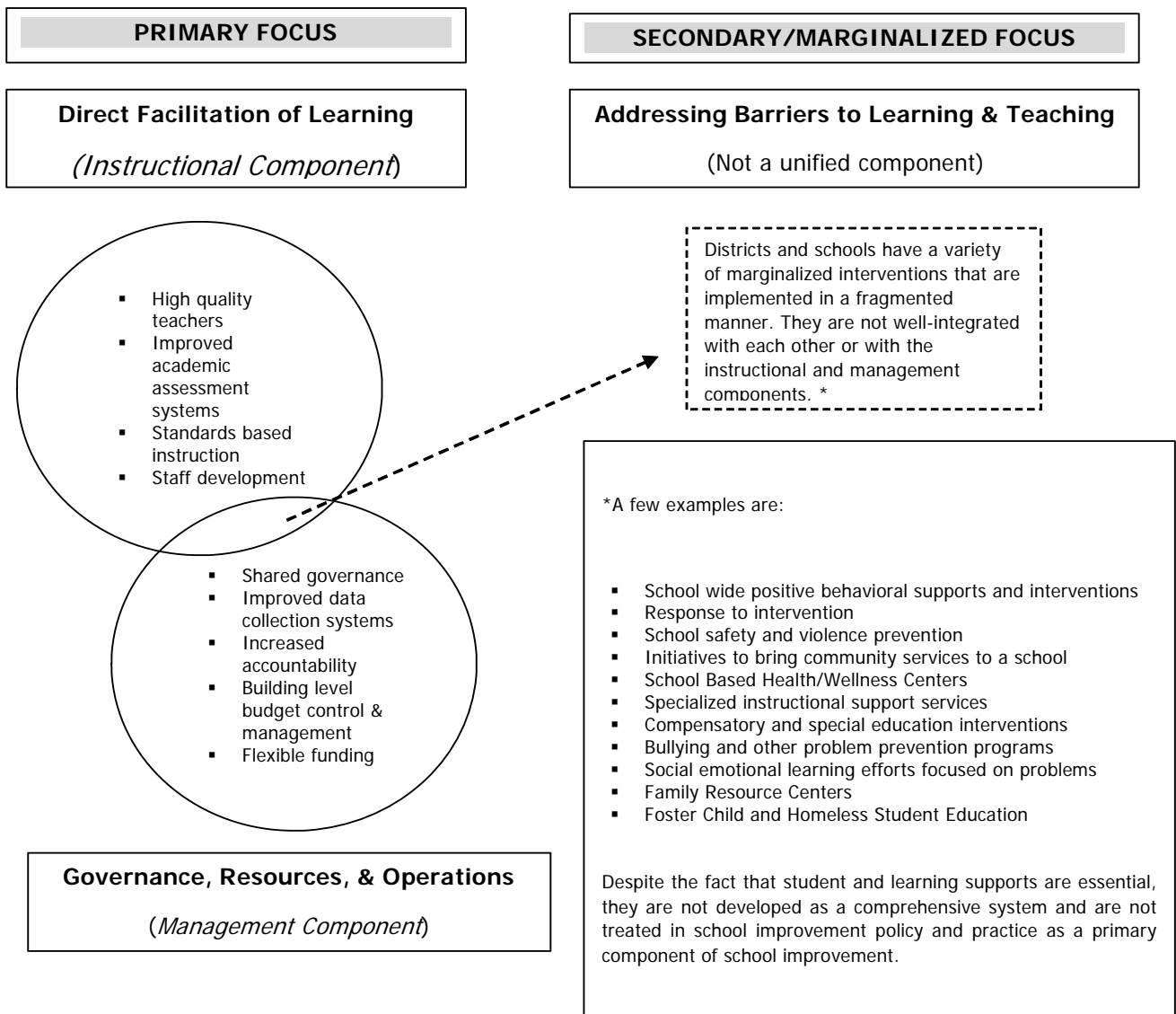# School Improvement Policy Needs to Move
from a Two- to a Three-Component Guiding Framework

As illustrated in Exhibit 1, current school improvement planning is guided primarily by a two component school improvement framework; that is, the focus primarily is on (1) instruction and (2) governance/management. Some plans also are made for ways to address concerns about safety and specific problems that can interfere with students learning and teachers teaching. However, the focus on such concerns has and continues to be marginalized, and this has and continues to produce ad hoc, piecemeal, and counterproductively fragmented and competitive initiatives, programs, and services.

Exhibit 1

Prevailing two-component framework shaping school improvement policy.

PRIMARY FOCUS	SECONDARY/MARGINALIZED FOCUS

Direct Facilitation of Learning

(Instructional Component)

Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching

(Not a unified component)

- High quality teachers
- Improved academic assessment systems
- Standards based instruction
- Staff development

- Shared governance
- Improved data collection systems
- Increased accountability
- Building level budget control & management
- Flexible funding

Districts and schools have a variety of marginalized interventions that are implemented in a fragmented manner. They are not well-integrated with each other or with the instructional and management components. *

*A few examples are:

- School wide positive behavioral supports and interventions
- Response to intervention
- School safety and violence prevention
- Initiatives to bring community services to a school
- School Based Health/Wellness Centers
- Specialized instructional support services
- Compensatory and special education interventions
- Bullying and other problem prevention programs
- Social emotional learning efforts focused on problems
- Family Resource Centers
- Foster Child and Homeless Student Education

Despite the fact that student and learning supports are essential, they are not developed as a comprehensive system and are not treated in school improvement policy and practice as a primary component of school improvement.

Governance, Resources, & Operations
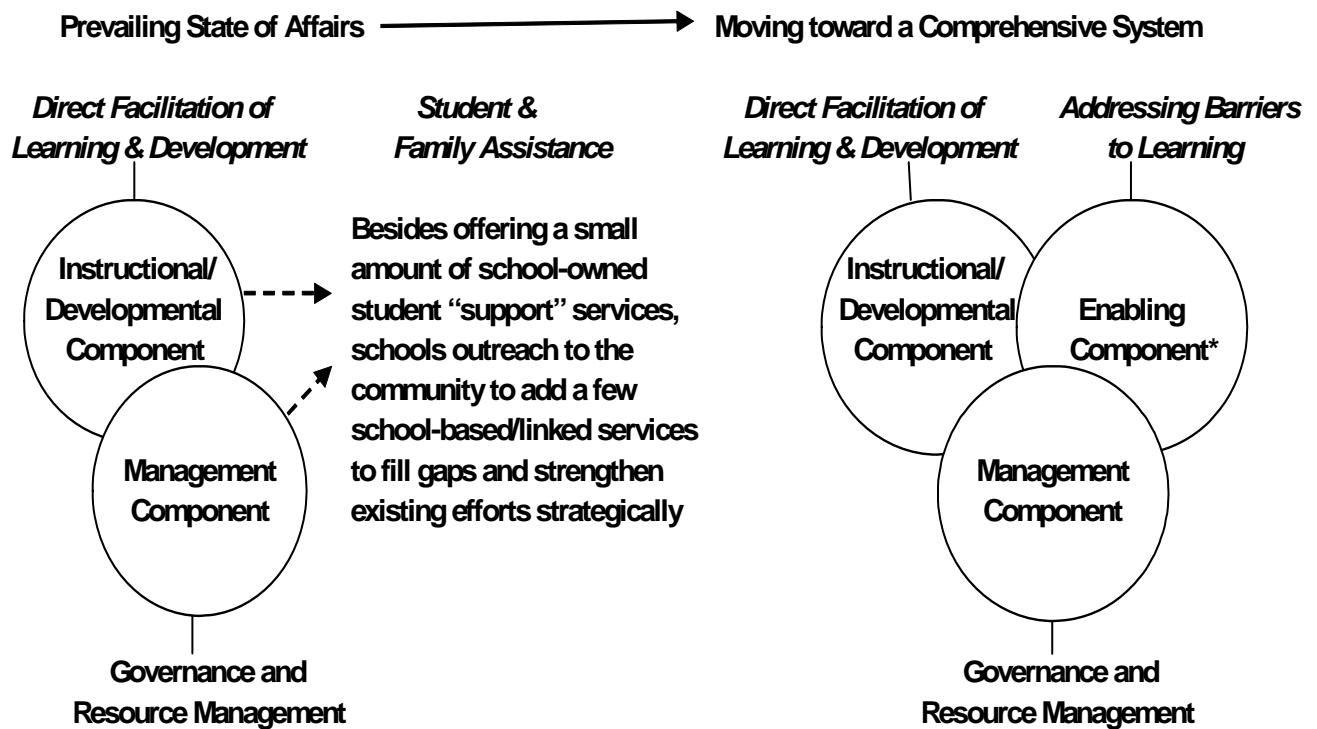
(Management Component)

While adopting a three component school improvement policy framework will benefit any school, the predominantly two component approach has worked in schools where most students perform up to expectations. However, it is grossly insufficient in schools where large numbers of students are not doing well. Substantial improvement in "low performing" schools requires a unified and comprehensive third component that is pursued as a primary and essential system.

Exhibit 2 graphically illustrates a shift from a two- to a three-component framework. The third component becomes the umbrella under which all efforts and resources to address barriers to learning and teaching are woven together develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

Exhibit 2

Moving to a three-component policy framework for school improvement.

Prevailing State of Affairs ⟶ Moving toward a Comprehensive System

Direct Facilitation of Learning & Development — *Student & Family Assistance* — *Direct Facilitation of Learning & Development* — *Addressing Barriers to Learning*

Instructional/ Developmental Component

Besides offering a small amount of school-owned student "support" services, schools outreach to the community to add a few school-based/linked services to fill gaps and strengthen existing efforts strategically

Management Component

Governance and Resource Management

Instructional/ Developmental Component

Enabling Component*

Management Component

Governance and Resource Management

*The Enabling Component is designed to enable learning by (1) addressing factors that interfere with learning, development, and teaching and (2) re-engaging students in classroom instruction. The component is established in policy and practice as *primary and essential* and is developed into a unified, comprehensive system by weaving together school and community resources. Some venues where this comprehensive approach is adopted refer to the third component as a Learning Supports Component

About the Three Components

When the three components are fully interconnected with each other and well integrated into school improvement policy and practice, they provide the essential foundation for promoting whole student development, enabling equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school, and enhancing school climate. Here is a brief sketch of each.

Instructional Component. Society's interest in public education remains that of having schools play a role in (1) socializing the young, (2) ensuring the economic viability of the country, and (3) preserving the prevailing political system. These aims shape school curricula, with special initiatives introduced when policy makers become convinced of specific needs and benefits. One example of a current special initiative is the focus on enhancing curricula related to STEM – science, technology, engineering, and math (with some advocacy for increasing this initiative to include the arts -- turning the acronym into STEAM). Another example is the increasing emphasis on developing the whole child, with a particular focus on social and emotional learning and character education.

The process of facilitating learning at school takes place throughout the school day in the classroom and in other school venues. It involves broadband teaching practices, classroom management, and strategies for accounting for individual differences, often referred to as differentiated instruction. Currently, concerns for differentiated instruction are stressing the term personalized learning.

Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching Component. Even the best instruction is insufficient to ensure all students succeed at school. Providing every student with equity of opportunity to succeed certainly requires higher standards and greater accountability for instruction, better teaching and classroom management, reduced school violence, etc. And it also requires an effective system for *directly* addressing barriers to development, learning, and teaching.

A transactional view of the causes of human behavior emphasizes that both *external* and *internal* factors can interfere with learning and teaching at school. Addressing all such factors requires not only good teaching but a system of supports that directly addresses interfering factors. This system encompasses a range of specific supports in the classroom and schoolwide and sometimes in a student's home and/or through community agencies. So, while teachers are a core focus, they can't and shouldn't be expected to act alone in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. This component involves all school staff and collaboration with family members and community resources focused on preventing problems, implementing personal assistance, and, as necessary, providing specialized interventions.

Management/Governance Component. The emphasis in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on devolving the federal role in education is the latest shift in governance and management of resources. The devolution is increasing state and district exploration of how to improve policy, allocate and redeploy resources, enhance whole school improvement and accountability, support implementation-to-scale, and sustain innovations.

In appreciating each of the three components, it is essential not to lose sight of the whole. The aims are whole school and whole student development. To these ends:

- the three components must be fully interconnected and well integrated into school improvement policy and practice;

- concerns about whole student development, equity, and school climate all must be understood and pursued as qualities that *emerge* from the effective implementation, over time, of all three components at a school;

- effective implementation must be pursued through major reorganization of school infrastructure to operationalize each of the three components as primary and essential;

- supports from district, regional, state, and federal levels must be redesigned to ensure schools have the capacity to make the substantive systemic changes involved in moving to a sustainable three component school improvement approach.

Comprehensive School Improvement Requires Adopting
a Component to Address Barriers to Learning

To be clear about why moving to a three component school improvement framework is imperative, one need only consider the nature and scope of factors that regularly interfere with learning and teaching and the fragmented and marginalized way such factors are addressed at schools.

Major Barriers to Learning and Teaching. Implicit in democratic ideals (and ratified in ESSA) is the intent of ensuring that *every student* will succeed at school. If all students came ready and able to profit from "high standards" curricula, then there would be little problem. But *all* encompasses those who are experiencing external and/or internal barriers. As Exhibit 3 highlights, such barriers interfere with many of these students benefitting from what the teacher is offering. Providing equity of opportunity to succeed at school requires more than better teaching, increased discipline, and safer schools. It also requires addressing barriers to development, learning, and teaching.

Exhibit 3

Many Students Experience Barriers to Learning

Range of Learners
(based on their response to academic instruction at any given point in time)

On Track
Motivationally ready & able

Moderate Needs
Not very motivated/ lacking prerequisite knowledge & skills/ different learning rates & styles/minor vulnerabilities

High Needs
Avoidant/very deficient in current capabilities/ has a disability/major health problems

No Barriers →

Barriers*
to learning, development, & teaching

Instructional Component

(1) Classroom teaching

(2) Enrichment activity

High Standards

Desired Outcomes
for
All Students

(1) Academic achievement

(2) Social-emotional well-being

(3) Successful transition to post-secondary life

High Expectations
& Accountability

*Barriers can include neighborhood, family, school, peer, and personal factors.

Exhibit 11-2

External and Internal Barriers to Learning and Teaching

External Factors*	*Internal Factors (biological and psychological)*
Community 　　Availability of drugs 　　Availability of firearms 　　Community laws and norms favorable 　　　toward drug use, firearms, and crime 　　Media portrayals of violence 　　Transitions and mobility 　　Low neighborhood attachment and 　　　community disorganization 　　Extreme economic deprivation *Family* 　　Family history of the problem behavior 　　Family management problems 　　Family conflict 　　Favorable parental attitudes and 　　　involvement in the problem behavior *School* 　　Academic failure beginning in 　　　late elementary school *Peer* 　　Friends who engage in the problem behavior 　　Favorable attitudes toward problem behavior	*Differences* (e.g., being further along toward one 　end or the other of a normal developmental 　curve; not fitting local "norms" in terms of 　looks and behavior; etc.) *Vulnerabilities* (e.g., minor health/vision/hearing 　problems and other deficiencies/deficits that 　result in school absences and other needs for 　special accommodations; being the focus of 　racial, ethnic, or gender bias; economical 　disadvantage; youngster and or parent lacks 　interest in youngster's schooling, is alienated, or 　rebellious; early manifestation of severe and 　pervasive problem/antisocial behavior) *Disabilities* (e.g., true learning, behavior, and 　emotional disorders)

*Other examples of external factors include exposure to crisis events in the community, home, and school; lack of availability and access to good school readiness programs; lack of home involvement in schooling; lack of peer support, positive role models, and mentoring; lack of access and availability of good recreational opportunities; lack of access and availability to good community housing, health and social services, transportation, law enforcement, sanitation; lack of access and availability to good school support programs; sparsity of high quality schools.
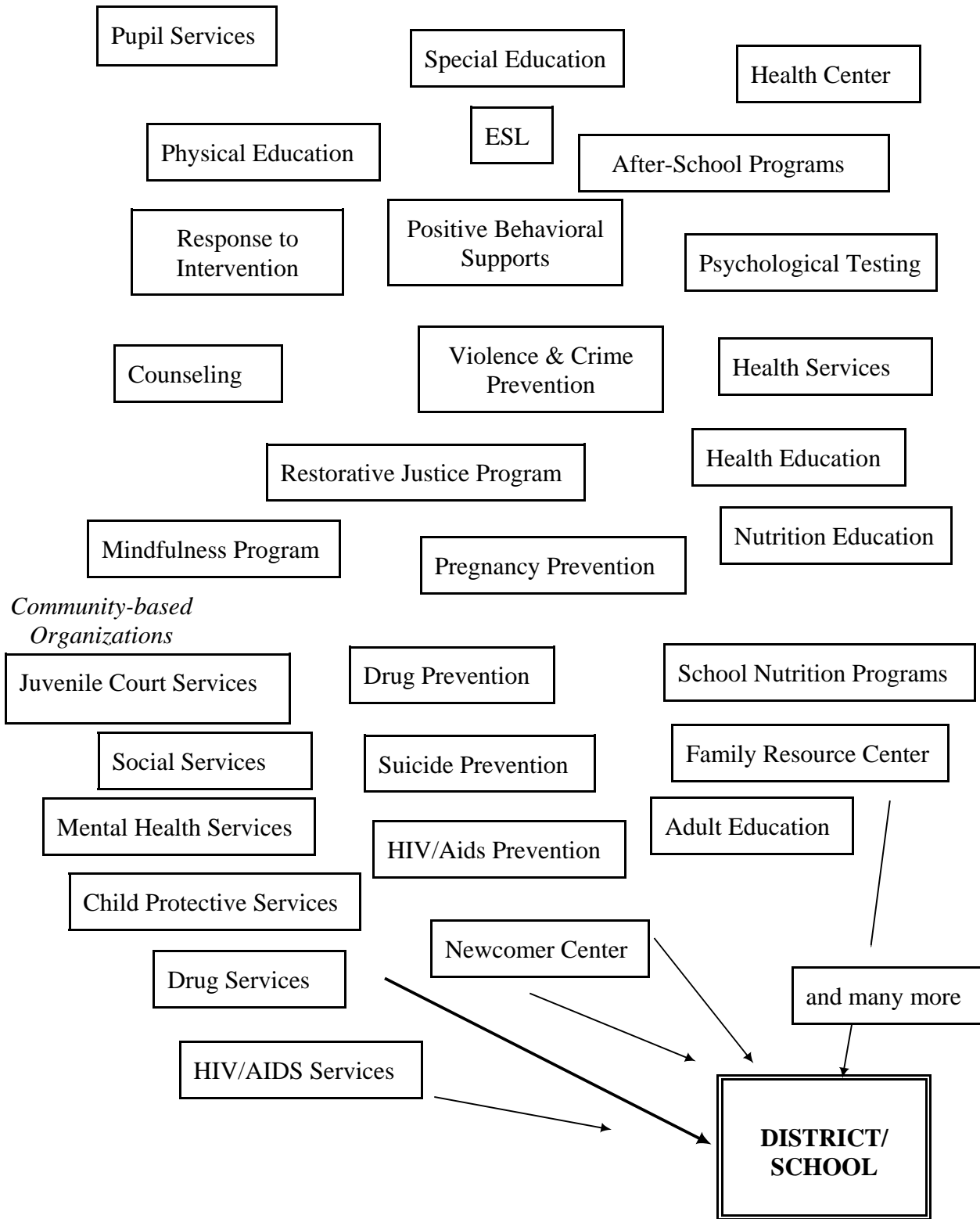
Current Efforts to Address Barriers: Fragmented and Marginalized. While the causes and numbers vary, every school has students who are not doing well. All schools devote resources to address this reality (see Exhibit 5).

In general, resources are allocated for interventions that address discrete, categorical problems. Some are designed to reach the entire student body. A few are specialized services that can only be provided to a relatively small number of students.

For a variety of reasons, schools differ with respect to the student/learning supports they have in place. Common, however, is the fragmented and disorganized way the supports are developed and implemented. The status quo is maintained because school improvement policy and practice continue to marginalize student/learning supports. Ending the marginalization is essential.

Exhibit 5

Much may be happening, but it all tends to be fragmented!

Pupil Services

Special Education

Health Center

Physical Education

ESL

After-School Programs

Response to Intervention

Positive Behavioral Supports

Psychological Testing

Counseling

Violence & Crime Prevention

Health Services

Restorative Justice Program

Health Education

Mindfulness Program

Pregnancy Prevention

Nutrition Education

Community-based Organizations

Juvenile Court Services

Drug Prevention

School Nutrition Programs

Social Services

Suicide Prevention

Family Resource Center

Mental Health Services

HIV/Aids Prevention

Adult Education

Child Protective Services

Drug Services

Newcomer Center

and many more

HIV/AIDS Services

DISTRICT/ SCHOOL

The problems encountered by students and schools are complex and overlapping. The number of students not doing well at a school can be staggering. Student/learning supports as they currently operate can't meet the need, especially in schools serving low wealth families.

School budgets always are tight; cost-effectiveness is a constant concern. In some schools, principals report that up to 25% of their budget is consumed in efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching. Analyses indicate extremely limited results and redundancy in resource use.

Rivalry for sparse resources also has produced counterproductive competition among support staff and with community-based professionals who link with schools. Each new initiative compounds matters.

All this works against schools playing a significant role in stemming the tide with respect to low achievement, delinquent behavior, student and teacher dropouts, and a host of other serious problems. School improvement and related capacity building efforts (including pre- and in-service staff development) have yet to deal effectively with these concerns.

Adopting Concerns for Addressing Barriers to Learning as a Primary Component of School Improvement is Essential.
Expanding school improvement policy into a three component framework provides a path to ending the marginalization and improving outcomes. Establishing learning supports as a fundamental and primary school improvement component can help focus schools on the need to (a) unify all student/ learning supports and (b) develop the component over time into a comprehensive and equitable system.
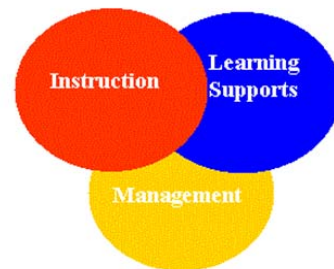
Critical concerns for school improvement are enhancing school readiness when children start school and ensuring everyday readiness from then on. At one time or another, most students bring problems with them to school that affect their learning and that often interfere with the teacher's efforts to teach.

While some youngsters are hindered by personal factors that make learning and performing difficult, many are growing up in situations that not only fail to promote school readiness, but are antithetical to the process. As a result, there are students at every grade level who come to school unready to meet the setting's demands effectively. As long as the status quo related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching is maintained, the achievement and opportunity gaps will endure.
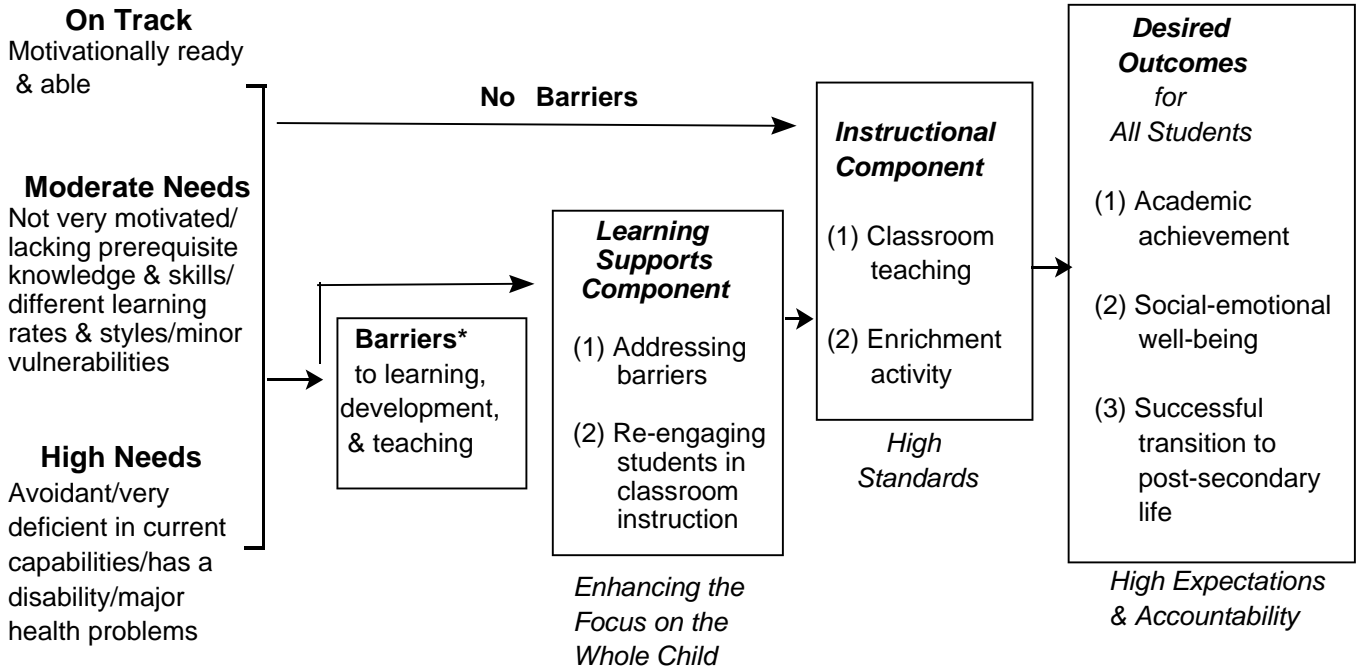
Most school improvement plans do not prioritize efforts to enhance student outcomes by *directly* and *comprehensively* addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Exhibit 6 graphically emphasizes that ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school necessitates a component dedicated directly to both (1) addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (2) re-engaging disconnected students. Some student/learning supports focus only on factors interfering with learning. Interventions that do not ensure students are engaged meaningfully in classroom learning usually are insufficient in sustaining, over time, student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.

Exhibit 6

A Learning Supports Component to Address Barriers and Re-engage Students

Range of Learners
(based on their response to academic instruction at any given point in time)

On Track
Motivationally ready & able

No Barriers

Moderate Needs
Not very motivated/ lacking prerequisite knowledge & skills/ different learning rates & styles/minor vulnerabilities

Barriers*
to learning, development, & teaching

High Needs
Avoidant/very deficient in current capabilities/has a disability/major health problems

Learning Supports Component

(1) Addressing barriers

(2) Re-engaging students in classroom instruction

Enhancing the Focus on the Whole Child

Instructional Component

(1) Classroom teaching

(2) Enrichment activity

High Standards

Desired Outcomes for All Students

(1) Academic achievement

(2) Social-emotional well-being

(3) Successful transition to post-secondary life

High Expectations & Accountability

***Examples of Barriers to Learning and Development**

E N V I R O N M E N T A L   C O N D I T I O N S   PERSON FACTORS

Barriers to Development and Learning (Risk producing conditions)

Neighborhood	*Family*	*School & Peers*	*Individual*
>extreme economic deprivation	>chronic poverty	>poor quality school	>medical problems
>community disorganization, including high levels of mobility	>conflict/disruptions/violence	>negative encounters with teachers	>low birth weight/ neurodevelopmental delay
>violence, drugs, etc.	>substance abuse	>negative encounters with peers &/or inappropriate peer models	>psychophysiological problems
>minority and/or immigrant status	>models problem behavior		>difficult temperament & adjustment problems
	>abusive caretaking		
	>inadequate provision for quality child care		

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