How School Reform is Failing to Address Barriers to Learning

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School environments are being reshaped by reform and restructuring. A critical question is whether or not the new environments will benefit all students. If school environments are to ensure that all students succeed, they must be designed with the full range of learners in mind. Clearly this means ensuring the environment is designed for those who are motivationally ready and able to profit from “high standards” curriculum and instruction. But it also means designing the environment with due consideration for equity and diversity by paying particular attention to addressing external and internal barriers that interfere with students benefitting from improved instruction and living up to high standards. This is especially important for schools where large numbers of students encounter major barriers each day.

Although some youngsters have disabilities, it is well to remember that few start out with internal problems that interfere with development and learning. Even those who do usually have assets/strengths/protective factors that can counter deficits and contribute to success. The majority of learning, behavior, and emotional problems seen in schools stem from situations where (a) external barriers are not addressed and (b) learner differences that require some degree of personalization by instructional systems are not accounted for. And, the problems are exacerbated as youngsters internalize the frustrations of confronting barriers to development and learning and the debilitating effects of performing poorly at school (Adelman & Taylor, 1993; Dryfoos, 1990).

The litany of barriers is all too familiar to anyone who lives or works in communities where families struggle with low income. In such neighborhoods, school and community resources often are insufficient to the task of providing the type of basic (never mind enrichment) opportunities found in higher income communities. Furthermore, the resources are inadequate for dealing with such threats to well-being and learning as gangs, violence, and drugs. And, in many of these settings, inadequate attention to language and cultural considerations and to high rates of student mobility creates additional barriers not only to student learning but to efforts to involve families in youngsters’ schooling.

How many are affected? Estimates vary. With specific respect to mental health concerns, between 12% and 22% of all children are described as suffering from a diagnosable mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder -- with relatively few receiving mental health services (Costello, 1989; Hoagwood, 1995). If one adds the many others experiencing significant psychosocial problems, the numbers grow dramatically. Harold Hodgkinson (1989), director of the Center for Demographic Policy, estimates that 40% of young people are in “very bad
educational shape” and “at risk of failing to fulfill their physical and mental promise.” Many live in inner cities or impoverished rural areas or are recently arrived immigrants. The problems they bring to the school setting often stem from restricted opportunities associated with poverty, difficult and diverse family circumstances, lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, and inadequate health care (Dryfoos, 1990; Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990). The reality for many large urban and poor rural schools is that over 50% of their students manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

WHAT SCHOOLS TRY TO DO TO ADDRESS BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Looked at as a whole, one finds in school environs an extensive range of preventive and corrective activity oriented to students' needs and problems. Some programs are provided throughout a school district, others are carried out at or linked to targeted schools. The interventions may be offered to all students in a school, to those in specified grades, to those identified as "at risk," and/or to those in need of compensatory education. The activities may be implemented in regular or special education classrooms or as "pull out" programs and may be geared to an entire class, groups, or individuals. They include activities designed to reduce substance abuse, violence, teen pregnancy, school dropouts, delinquency, and so forth.

It is common knowledge, however, that few schools come close to having enough resources to respond when confronted with a large number of students who are experiencing a wide range of psychosocial barriers that interfere with their learning and performance. Most schools offer only bare essentials. Too many schools can't even meet basic needs. Primary prevention often is only a dream. The simple fact is that education support activity is marginalized at most schools, and thus the positive impact such activity could have on the school environment is sharply curtailed.

While schools can use a wide-range of persons to help students, most school-owned and operated services are offered as part of what are called pupil personnel services. Federal and state mandates tend to determine how many pupil services professionals are employed, and states regulate compliance with mandates. Governance of daily practice usually is centralized at the school district level. In large districts, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other specialists may be organized into separate units. Such units straddle regular, special, and compensatory education. Analyses of the situation find that the result is programs and services that are planned, implemented, and evaluated in a fragmented and piecemeal manner. This contributes to costly redundacy, weak approaches to intervention, and very limited effectiveness (Adelman, 1996a; Adelman & Taylor, 1997a, in pressa).

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in school-community collaborations as one way to provide more support for schools, students, and families. This interest is bolstered by the renewed policy concern about countering widespread fragmentation in the operation of community health and social services. In response to growing interest and concern, various forms of school-community collaborations are being tested, including state-wide initiatives in California, Florida, Kentucky, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, among others. This movement has fostered such concepts as school linked services, coordinated services, wrap-around services, one-stop shopping, full service schools, and community schools.

The contemporary literature on school-community collaborations is heavy on advocacy and prescription and light on data. Each day brings more reports from projects such as New Jersey's School-Based Youth Services Program, the Healthy Start Initiative in California, the Beacons Schools in New York, Communities-in-Schools, and the New Futures Initiative. Not surprisingly, the reports primarily indicate how hard it is to establish collaborations. Still, a reasonable inference from available data is that school-community collaborations can be successful and cost effective over the long-run. By placing staff at schools, community agencies make access easier for students and families -- especially those who usually are underserved and hard to reach. Such efforts not only provide services, they seem to encourage schools to open their doors in ways that enhance recreational, enrichment, and remedial opportunities and greater family involvement. Analyses of these programs suggest better outcomes are associated with empowering children and families, as well as with having the capability to address diverse constituencies and contexts. Families using school-based centers are described as becoming interested in contributing to school and community by
MOVING FROM A TWO TO A THREE COMPONENT REFORM FRAMEWORK: ADDING AN ENABLING COMPONENT

Viewing school/community environments through the lens of addressing barriers to development, learning, and teaching suggests the need for a basic policy shift. Policy is needed to elevate efforts to address barriers (including social, emotional, and physical health problems) to the level of one of three fundamental and essential facets of education reform and school and community restructuring. With respect to schools, this perspective suggests that to enable teachers to teach effectively there must not only be effective instruction and well-managed schools, but that barriers must be handled in a comprehensive, integrated way.

The current situation is one where, despite awareness of the many barriers, school and community reformers continue to concentrate mainly on improving efforts to directly facilitate learning and development (e.g., instruction) and system management. In effect, current policy pursues school and community reforms using a two rather than a three component model. This ignores the need to fundamentally restructure school and community support programs and services and marginalizes efforts to design the type of environments that are essential to the success of school reforms (e.g., environments that are designed to effectively address barriers to teaching and learning).

To address gaps in current reform and restructuring initiatives, a basic policy shift must occur. To this end, we have introduced the concept of the Enabling Component as a policy-oriented notion around which to unify efforts to address barriers to development, learning, and teaching (Adelman, 1996a, 1996b; Adelman & Taylor, 1994, 1997a). The concept is intended to underscore that (a) current reforms are based on an inadequate two component model for restructuring school and community resources and (b) movement to a three component model is necessary if all young people are to benefit appropriately from their formal schooling.

A three component model calls for elevating efforts to address barriers to development, learning, and teaching to the level of one of three fundamental and essential facets of education reform and school and community agency restructuring (see Figure 1). That is, to enable teachers to teach effectively, we suggest there must not only be effective instruction and well-managed schools, but that barriers must be handled in a comprehensive way. All three components are seen as essential, complementary, and overlapping.

Figure 1. Moving to a three component model for reform and restructuring.

*The third component (an enabling component) is established in policy and practice as primary and essential and is developed into a comprehensive approach by weaving together school and community resources.
By calling for reforms that fully integrate a focus on addressing barriers, the concept of an Enabling Component provides a unifying concept for responding to a wide range of psychosocial factors interfering with young people's learning and performance and encompasses the type of models described as full-service schools -- and goes beyond them (Adelman, 1996b). Adoption of such an inclusive unifying concept is seen as pivotal in convincing policy makers to move to a position that recognizes the essential nature of activity to enable learning. More specifically, the Enabling Component concept calls on reformers to expand the current emphasis on improving instruction and school management to include a comprehensive component for addressing barriers to learning.

Emergence of a cohesive Enabling Component requires policy reform and operational restructuring that allow for weaving together what is available at a school, expanding this through integrating school, community, and home resources, and enhancing access to community resources by linking as many as feasible to programs at the school. This involves extensive restructuring of school-owned enabling activity, such as pupil services and special and compensatory education programs. In the process, mechanisms must be developed to coordinate and eventually integrate school-owned enabling activity and school and community-owned resources. And, restructuring also must ensure that the enabling component is well integrated with the other two components (i.e., the developmental/instructional and management components).

Although some calls for comprehensive, integrated approaches are attracting attention, they do not convey the perspective that interventions addressing barriers to development, learning, and teaching are essential to the success of school reform. The next step in moving toward a comprehensive approach is for school and community reformers to expand their vision beyond refining processes to facilitate instruction/development and improve system management. To this end, the following message must be brought home to policy makers at all levels: current reforms cannot produce desired outcomes as long as the third primary and essential set of functions related to enabling development, learning, and teaching is so marginalized.

Evidence of the value of rallying around a broad unifying concept, such as an enabling component, is seen in the fact that in 1995 the state legislature in California considered including the concept as part of a major urban education bill (AB 784). And in 1997, California's Department of Education included a version of the concept (calling it Learning Support) in their school program quality review guidelines (California Department of Education, 1996, 1997).

A MODEL FOR AN ENABLING COMPONENT AT A SCHOOL SITE

Operationalizing an enabling component requires formulating a delimited framework of basic programmatic areas and creating an infrastructure to restructure enabling activity. Based on an extensive analysis of activity used to address barriers to learning, we cluster enabling activity into the following six interrelated clusters of activity (see Figure 2).

A brief description of the six areas is provided below. For detailed discussion of how the enabling component is developed at a school site, see Adelman (1996a) and the Learning Center Model (1995).²

(1) Classroom Focused Enabling. When a teacher has difficulty working with a youngster, the first step is to address the problem within the regular classroom and perhaps with added home involvement. The emphasis is on enhancing classroom-based efforts that enable learning by increasing teacher effectiveness for preventing and handling problems. Personalized help is provided to increase a teacher's array of strategies for working with a wider range of individual differences. For example, teachers learn to use volunteers and peer tutoring to enhance social and academic support and to increase their range of accommodative strategies and their ability to teach students compensatory strategies. As appropriate, support in the classroom is provided by resource and itinerant teachers and counselors. Work in this area requires (a) programs for personalized professional development, (b) systems to expand resources, (c) programs for temporary out of class help, and (d) programs to develop aides, volunteers, and any others who help in classrooms or who work with teachers to enable learning. Through classroom-focused enabling programs, teachers are better prepared to address similar problems when they arise in the future. (The classroom curriculum already should encompass a focus on fostering socio-emotional and physical development; such a focus is seen as an essential element in preventing learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems.) Besides enabling learning, two aims of all this work are to increase regular class efficacy and reduce the need for special services.

(2) Student and Family Assistance. Student and family assistance should be reserved for the relatively few problems that cannot be handled without adding special interventions. The emphasis is on providing special services in a personalized way to assist with a broad-range of needs. To begin with, available social,
Figure 2. A model for an enabling component at a school site.

**Range of Learners**
(categorized in terms of their response to academic instruction)

I = Motivationally ready & able

No Barriers → **Instructional Component**
(a) Classroom Teaching +
(b) Enrichment Activity

Desired Outcomes

II = Not very motivated/ lacking prerequisite knowledge & skills/ different learning rates & styles/
minor vulnerabilities

Barriers to Learning

**Enabling Component**

The Enabling Component: A Comprehensive, Integrated Approach for Addressing Barriers to Learning

Such an approach weaves six clusters of enabling activity into the fabric of the school to address barriers to learning and promote healthy development for all students.

(3) **Crisis Assistance and Prevention.** Schools must respond to, minimize the impact of, and prevent crises. This requires (a) systems and programs for emergency/crisis response at a site, throughout a school complex, and community-wide (including a program to ensure follow-up care) and (b) prevention programs for school and community to address school safety and violence reduction, suicide prevention, child abuse prevention and so forth. Desired outcomes of crisis assistance include ensuring immediate emergency and follow-up care is provided so students are able to resume learning without undue delay. Prevention activity outcomes are reflected in indices showing there is a safe and productive environment and that students and their families have the type of attitudes and capacities needed to deal with violence and other threats to safety.

(4) **Support for Transitions.** A variety of transitions concerns confront students and their families. A comprehensive focus on transitions requires planning, developing, and maintaining (a) programs to establish a welcoming and socially supportive school community, especially for new arrivals, (b) counseling and articulation programs to support grade-to-grade and
school-to-school transitions, moving to and from special education, going to college, moving to post school living and work, and (e) programs for before and after-school and intersession to enrich learning and provide recreation in a safe environment. Anticipated outcomes are reduced alienation and increased positive attitudes and involvement related to school and various learning activities.

(5) **Home Involvement in Schooling.** This area includes (a) programs for specific learning and support needs of adults in the home, such as offering them ESL classes and mutual support groups, (b) programs to help those in the home meet basic obligations to a student, such as providing parents instruction for parenting and for helping with schoolwork, (c) systems to improve communication that is essential to the student and family, (d) programs to enhance the home-school connection and sense of community, (e) interventions to enhance participation in making decisions essential to a student's well-being, (f) programs to enhance home support of a student's basic learning and development, (g) interventions to mobilize those at home to problem solve related to student needs, and (h) intervention to elicit help (support, collaborations, and partnerships) from those at home with respect to meeting classroom, school, and community needs. The context for some of this activity may be a parent center (which may be part of a Family Service Center facility if one has been established at the site). Outcomes include indices of parent learning, student progress, and community enhancement specifically related to home involvement.

(6) **Community Outreach for Involvement and Support (including a focus on volunteers).** Outreach to the community to build linkages and collaborations, develop greater involvement in schooling, and enhance support for efforts to enable learning. Outreach is made to (1) public and private agencies, organizations, universities, colleges, and facilities, (2) businesses and professional organizations and groups, and (3) volunteer service programs, organizations, and clubs. Activity includes (a) programs to recruit community involvement and support (e.g., linkages and integration with community health and social services; cadres of volunteers, mentors, and individuals with special expertise and resources; local businesses to adopt-a-school and provide resources, awards, incentives, and jobs; formal partnership arrangements), (b) systems and programs specifically designed to train, screen, and maintain volunteers (e.g., parents, college students, senior citizens, peer-cross-age tutors and counselors, and professionals-in-training to provide direct help for staff and students -- especially targeted students), (c) programs outreach to hard to involve students and families (those who don't come to school regularly -- including truants and dropouts), and (d) programs to enhance community-school connections and sense of community (e.g., orientations, open houses, performances and cultural and sports events, festivals and celebrations, workshops and fairs). Outcomes include indices of community participation, student progress, and community enhancement.

A well-designed and supported infrastructure is needed to establish, maintain, and evolve this type of a comprehensive, programmatic approach. Such an infrastructure includes mechanisms for coordinating among enabling activity, for enhancing resources by developing direct linkages between school and community programs, for moving toward increased integration of school and community resources, and for integrating the developmental/instructional, enabling, and management components (see Adelman, 1993; Rosenblum, DiCecco, Taylor, & Adelman, 1995; Adelman & Taylor, 1997b).

**GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE**

A policy shift and programmatic focus are necessary but insufficient. For significant systemic change to occur, policy and program commitments must be demonstrated through allocation/redeployment of resources (e.g., finances, personnel, time, space, equipment) that can adequately operationalize policy and promising practices. In particular, there must be sufficient resources to develop an effective structural foundation for system change. Existing infrastructure mechanisms must be modified in ways that guarantee new policy directions are translated into appropriate daily practices. Well-designed infrastructure mechanisms ensure there is local ownership, a critical mass of committed stakeholders, processes that can overcome barriers to stakeholders working together effectively, and strategies that can mobilize and maintain proactive effort so that changes are implemented and renewed over time.

Institutionalization of a multifaceted, integrated approach requires redesigning mechanisms related to at least five basic infrastructure concerns. These encompass daily (1) governance, (2) planning-implementation for specific organizational and program objectives, (3) coordination/integration for cohesion, (4) leadership and capacity building, and (5) management of communication and information. In reforming mechanisms to address these matters, new collaborative arrangements must be established, and authority (power) must be redistributed -- all of which is easy to say and extremely hard to accomplish. Reform obviously requires providing adequate support (time, space, materials, equipment) -- not just initially but over time -- to those who operate the mechanisms. And, there must be appropriate incentives and safeguards for those undertaking the tasks.
In terms of task focus, infrastructure changes must attend to (a) interweaving school and community resources for addressing barriers (a component to enable learning), direct facilitation of learning (instruction), and system governance and resource use (management), (b) reframing inservice programs -- including cross-training, and (c) establishing appropriate forms of quality improvement, accountability, and self-renewal. Clearly, all this requires greater involvement of professionals providing health and human service and other programs addressing barriers to learning. And this means involvement in every facet, especially governance.

Furthermore, the institutional changes for moving toward comprehensive, integrated approaches cannot be achieved without sophisticated and appropriately financed systemic change processes. Restructuring on a large scale involves substantive organizational and programmatic transformation at multiple jurisdictional levels. Although this seems self-evident, its profound implications are widely ignored (e.g., see Adelman, 1993; Adelman & Taylor, 1997b; Argyris, 1993; Elias, 1997; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Knoff, 1995; Replication and Program Services, 1993; Sarason, 1996; Schorr, 1997).

Elsewhere (Adelman & Taylor, 1997b), we present the model we are evolving for the wide-spread diffusion of new approaches such as an enabling component. It must suffice to highlight a few points here. At school and district levels, key stakeholders and their leadership must understand and commit to restructuring. Commitment must be reflected in policy statements and creation of an organizational structure that ensures effective leadership and resources. The process begins with activity designed to create readiness for the necessary changes by enhancing a climate/culture for change. Steps involved include: (1) building interest and consensus for developing a comprehensive approach to addressing barriers to learning and enhancing healthy development, (2) introducing basic concepts to relevant groups of stakeholders, (3) establishing a policy framework that recognizes the approach is a primary and essential facet of the institution's activity, and (4) appointment of leaders (of equivalent status to the leaders for the instructional and management facets) at school and district levels who can ensure policy commitments are carried out.

Overlapping the efforts to create readiness are processes to develop an organizational structure for starting-up and phasing-in the new approach. This involves (a) establishing mechanisms and procedures to guide reforms, such as a steering group and leadership training, (b) formulation of specific start-up and phase-in plans, (c) establishment and training of a team that analyzes, restructures, and enhances resources with the aim of evolving a comprehensive, integrated approach, (d) phased-in reorganization of all enabling activity, (e) outreach to establish collaborative linkages among schools and district and community resources, and (f) establishment of systems to ensure quality improvement, momentum for reforms, and ongoing renewal.

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Addressing barriers to learning should not be viewed as a separate agenda from a school's instructional mission. In terms of policy, practice, and research, it is more fruitful to conceive all categorical programs as embedded in the continuum of interventions that comprise a comprehensive, integrated component for addressing barriers and enhancing healthy development and learning. Once policy makers recognize the essential nature of such a component, it will be easier to weave together all efforts to address barriers and, in the process, elevate the status of programs to enhance healthy development.

With policy in place, work can begin to restructure, transform, and enhance school-owned programs and services and community resources, and include mechanisms to coordinate and eventually integrate it all. To these ends, the focus needs to be on all school resources (e.g., compensatory and special education, activity supported by general funds, support services, adult education, recreation and enrichment programs, extended use of facilities) and all community resources (e.g., public and private agencies, families, businesses; services, programs, facilities; volunteers, professionals-in-training). The aim is to weave all these resources together into the fabric of every school and evolve a comprehensive, integrated approach that effectively addresses barriers to development, learning, and teaching.

And let's not forget about linking schools to maximize use of limited resources. When a "family of schools" in a geographic area works together to address barriers, they can share programs and personnel in many cost-effective ways. This includes streamlined processes to coordinate and integrate assistance to a family that has children at several of the schools. For example, the same
family may have youngsters in the elementary and middle schools and both students may need special counseling. This might be accomplished by assigning one counselor and/or case manager to work with the family. Also, in connecting with community resources, a group of schools can maximize distribution of such limited resources in ways that are efficient, effective, and equitable.

When resources are combined properly, the end product can be cohesive and potent school-community partnerships. Such partnerships seem essential if we are to strengthen neighborhoods and communities and create caring and supportive environments that maximize learning and well-being.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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**ABOUT THE CENTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS at UCLA**

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**REFERENCES**


Note:

1. Some of the material in this paper is drawn from previously published or in press articles by the authors (see cited references).

2. A set of surveys covering the six areas is available from the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (see contact information at the end of the text). These surveys can be used as part of a school's self-study or quality review processes to map what a school has and what it needs to address barriers to learning in a multifaceted and comprehensive manner.