

A Policy And Practice Framework To Guide School-Community Connections

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Abstract

Meeting the needs of all students requires weaving together the resources of school and community into a comprehensive, multifaceted continuum of interventions. Schools can play a special role in developing essential school-community connections. This paper discusses concepts and mechanisms schools can adopt as a framework to guide their efforts and highlights special opportunities and challenges of developing such connections in rural areas.

The litany of barriers to learning is all too familiar to anyone who works with students in schools. While some barriers are intrinsic, many are the result of external factors. Too often, neighborhoods, school and community resources are insufficient to the task of providing basic developmental and learning opportunities. Thus, youngsters bring to school a variety of problems stemming from restricted opportunities associated with poverty, difficult and diverse family circumstances, poor language skills, inadequate health care, and more. How many are affected? Figures vary. 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 promise.

The Special Role Schools Can Play in Creating Community Connections

Ultimately, addressing barriers to learning must be approached from a societal perspective and requires fundamental systemic reforms designed to improve efforts to support and enable learning. This calls for developing a comprehensive, integrated continuum of community and school programs (Adelman, 1996a; Schoor, 1997)

School personnel long have understood that if schools are to function well and students are to learn effectively, factors that interfere with students' learning and performance must be addressed. And schools and communities have made some efforts to do so. These efforts, however, usually are fragmented and lack coordination within and be-

tween settings. This has worked against efficacy.

There is considerable interest in school-community collaborations as one way to provide more support for schools, students and families. This interest is bolstered by the renewed concern for countering widespread fragmentation of school and community interventions. The hope is that by integrating available resources, a significant impact can be made on "at risk" factors. Various levels and forms of collaboration are being tested, including state-wide initiatives in California, Florida, Kentucky, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, and Oregon, among others (First, Curico & Young, 1994). The aim of such initiatives is to improve coordination and eventually integrate many programs and enhance their linkages to school sites. To these ends, major demonstration projects across the country are incorporating as many health, mental health, and social services as feasible into "Centers" established at or near a school and are adopting terms such as school-linked services, coordinated services, wrap-around services, one-stop shopping, full service schools, and community schools (Adelman, 1996b; Dryfoos, 1994).

A reasonable inference from available data is that school-community collaborations can be successful and cost effective over the long-run. They not only improve access to services, they seem to encourage schools to open their doors in ways that enhance recreational, enrichment, and remedial opportunities and family involvement.

Collaboration, however, is not the norm. The majority of school and community programs and services function in relative isolation of each other. Most focus on discrete problems and specialized services for individuals and small groups. Moreover, because the primary emphasis is on restructuring community programs and co-locating some services on school sites, a new form of fragmentation is emerging as community and school professionals engage in a form of parallel play at school sites. Clearly, too little thought has been given to the importance of *connecting* community programs with existing school operated support programs.

The fragmentation is worsened by the failure of educational reform to recognize the need to restructure the work of school professionals who are in positions to address barriers to learning. The prevailing approach among school reformers is to concentrate almost exclusively on improving instruction and management of schools. This is not to say they are unaware of the many barriers to learning. They simply don't spend much time developing effective ways to deal with such matters. They mainly talk about "school-linked integrated services"—apparently in the belief that a few health and social services will do the trick. The reality is that prevailing approaches to reform continue to marginalize all efforts designed to address barriers to student learning (Center of Mental Health in Schools, 1997, 1998). As a result, little is known about effective processes and mechanisms for building school-community connections to prevent and ameliorate students' learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems. The situation is unlikely to improve as long as so little attention is paid to restructuring what schools already do to deal with psychosocial and health problems and the need to develop models to guide development of productive-school-community partnerships (Adelman & Taylor 1997).

More than Health and Social Services

Some initiatives for school-linked services have meshed with the emerging movement to expand community strategies and enhance the infrastructure for youth development (Burt, 1998; Cahill, 1998; Catalano

& Hawkins, 1995; Dryfoos, 1998, Schoor, 1997). this growing youth development movement encompasses a range of concepts and practices aimed at promoting protective factors, asset-building, wellness, and empowerment. Included are (a) some of the full service school approaches, (b) efforts to establish "community schools," (c) programs for community and social capital mobilization, and (d) initiatives to build community policies and structures to enhance youth support, safety, recreation, work, service, and enrichment. This focus on community embraces a wide range of stakeholders, including families and community based and linked organizations such as public and private health and human service agencies, schools, businesses, youth and faith organizations, and so forth. In some cases, institutions for post secondary learning also are involved, but the nature and scope of participation varies greatly, as does the motivation for the involvement.

Youth development initiatives clearly expand intervention efforts beyond services and programs. They encourage a view of schools not only as community centers where families can easily access services, but also as hubs for community-wide learning and activity. Increased federal funding for after school programs at school sites is enhancing this view by expanding opportunities for recreation, enrichment, academic supports, and child care. Adult education and training at school sites also help change the old view that schools close when the youngsters leave. Indeed, the concept of a "second shift" at school sites is beginning to spread in response to community needs.

Special Opportunities and Challenges in Rural Communities

Rural communities continue to undergo radical transformations as a result of economic and technological forces and populations shifts. One dramatic change is the impact on local community life stemming from the dwindling number of family farms. Another is the degree to which everyone shares popular culture through intense marketing of music, movies, video games, and clothing trends. And the growing number of immigrant

groups in previously homogenous populations is increasing awareness of cultural variations (American Psychological Association, 1995).

Many professionals working in rural communities report a sense of professional isolation (Galbraith, 1992). Moreover, rural schools often report they do not have enough specialists to help address their students' problems. The few specialists working in rural areas must travel long distances to provide school staff, students, and families with support and consultation.

One facet of the problem is lack of ready access to rapidly expanding pools of information and opportunities for continuing professional education. Clearly, distance learning, teleconferencing, and the Internet are providing increased access to information, consultation, and life-long learning.

Another facet of the problem, however, is that of weaving together a network of support and advocacy within a school and community for students who need extra assistance and accommodation. One key in this respect is to enlarge the number of aides, paraprofessionals, and volunteers at rural schools. This not only provides additional support and advocacy, it can strengthen the fabric of the community as more adults become interested in the youngsters and work for the success of all students (Jacob-Timm, 1995).

The Enabling Component: A Framework for Creating Connections

To achieve their educational mission, schools need to address barriers to learning. This requires more than school-linked, integrated health and human services. It involves comprehensive, multifaceted strategies that can only be achieved through strong school-community connections. This is particularly true in poor areas where schools often are the largest piece of public real estate in the community and also may be the single largest employer.

All across the country, there are demonstrations of how schools and communities can connect and improve results for young-

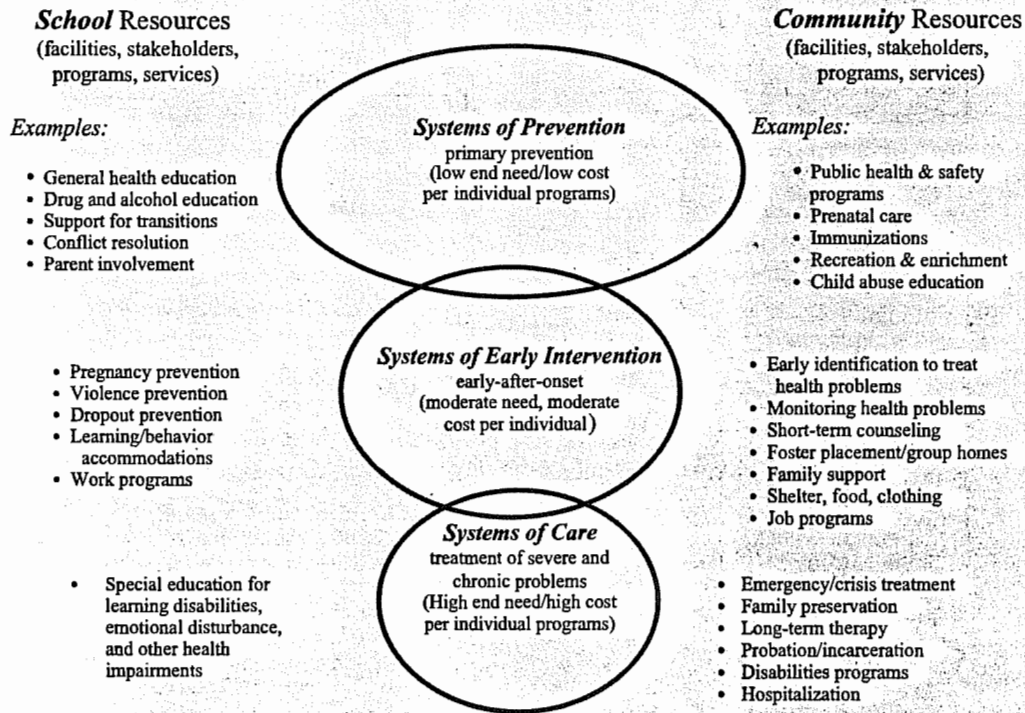
sters, families, and neighborhoods (Dryfoos, 1998; Schoor, 1997). One sees projects focused on (a) improving access to health (e.g., immunizations, substance abuse programs, asthma care, pregnancy prevention) and social services (e.g., foster care, family preservation, child care), (b) expanding after school academic, recreation, and enrichment programs (e.g., tutoring, youth sports and clubs, art, music, museum and library programs), (c) building wrap around services and systems of care for special populations (e.g., case management and specialized assistance), (d) reducing delinquency (truancy prevention, conflict mediation, violence prevention), (e) transition to work/career/postsecondary education (mentoring, internships, career academies, job placement), and (f) school and community improvement (e.g., adopt-a-school, volunteers and peer programs, neighborhood coalitions). Such "experiments" have been prompted by diverse initiatives. There is much to learn from them. Our focus here, however, is on providing a framework to guide creation of ore cohesive school-community connections.

Moving from School-Linked Services to Comprehensive School- Community Interventions

As communities bring a perspective of youth development to school sites, intervention efforts are expanding from services for at risk students to include a comprehensive, multifaceted focus on early intervention and prevention programs. What is emerging reflects the type of ad hoc development that is inevitable when diverse missions, models, and initiatives are at work.

An integrative framework is needed to provide a cohesive picture to guide policy and practice. One commonality among many of the efforts to connect school and community is the desire to enable all students to profit from schooling. Thus, the emphasis on health and social services, parenting, peer relationships, safety, and so forth. Implicit in all this is the realization that for students to succeed there often must be a major focus on addressing barriers to learning and on promoting healthy development. We use the term *enabling learning* to describe this focus. En-

- Providing a *COMPREHENSIVE, MULTIFACETED, INTEGRATED CONTINUUM OF SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES*
- Ensuring use of the *LEAST INTERVENTION NEEDED*



Systemic collaboration* is essential to establish interprogram connections on a daily basis and over time to ensure seamless intervention within each system and among *systems of prevention, systems of early intervention, and systems of care.*

- *Such collaboration involves horizontal and vertical restructuring of programs and services
- within jurisdictions, school districts, and community agencies (e.g., among departments, divisions, units, schools, clusters of schools)
 - between jurisdictions, school and community agencies, public and private sectors; among schools; among community agencies

Figure 1. Interconnected systems for meeting the needs of all students.

abling is defined as “providing with the means or opportunity; making possible, practical, or easy.” We see the concept of an enabling component as providing unifying notion upon which a framework can be built to foster integrated school-community partnerships (Adelman & Taylor, 1997). This concept is formulated around the proposition that a comprehensive, multifaceted, integrated continuum of enabling activity is essential in addressing the needs of youngsters who encounter barriers that interfere with their ben-

efiting satisfactorily from instruction.

Turning the concept into practice calls for weaving together school and community resources to address problems experienced by students and their families. Two frameworks guide development of such a cohesive, integrated approach. One outlines a multifaceted continuum of intervention systems focused on individual, family, and environmental barriers. The continuum includes *systems of prevention, systems of early intervention, and systems of care* (see Figure 1). A policy em-

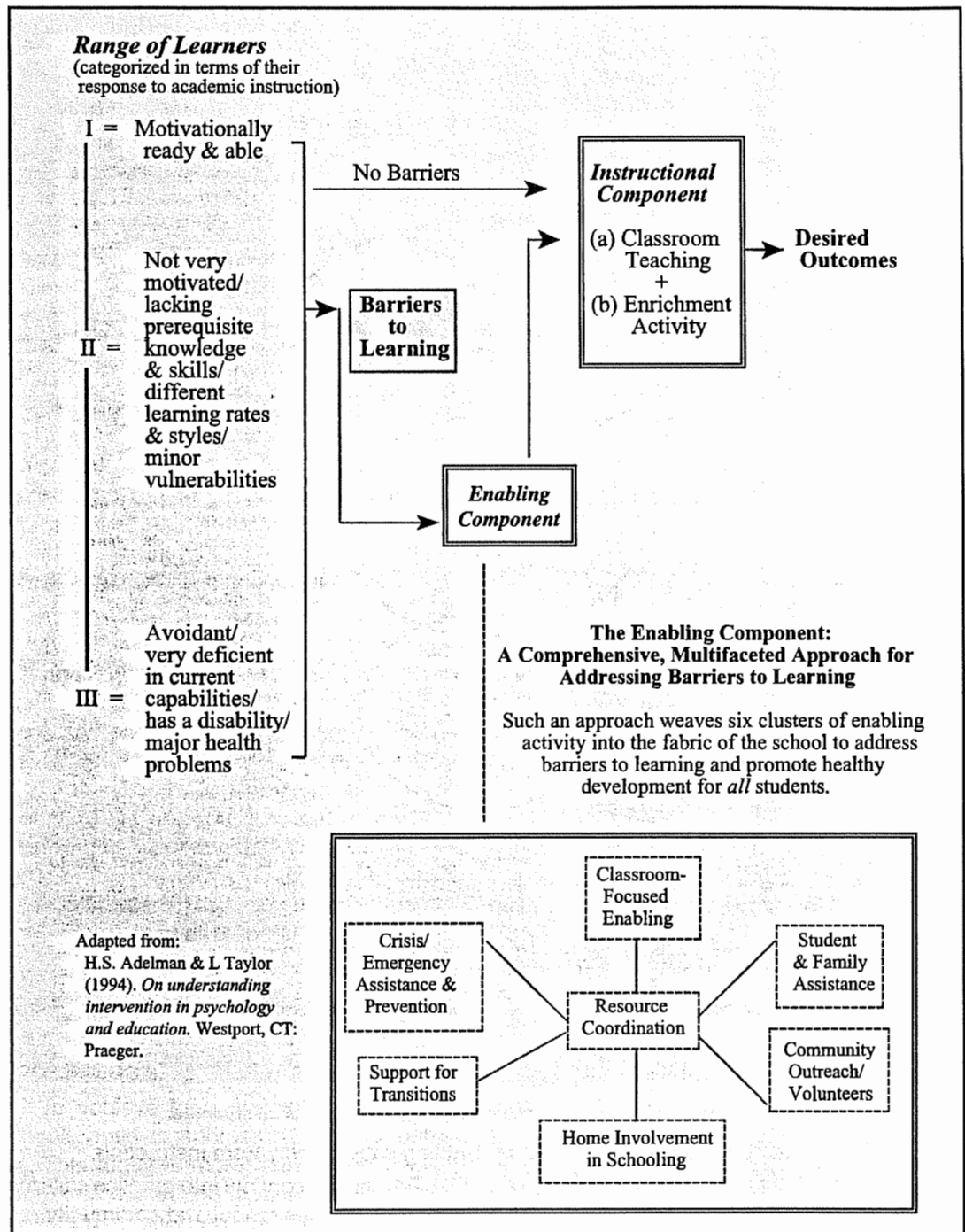


Figure 2. An enabling component to address barriers to learning and enhance healthy development at a school site.

phasis on developing such systems and implementing them seamlessly is an important key not only to unifying fragmented activity, but to using all available resources in the most productive manner.

The second framework outlines six ar-

reas of enabling activity encompassing programs to (1) enhance classroom-based efforts to enable learning, (2) support transitions, (3) increase home involvement in schooling, (4) respond to and prevent crises, (5) provide prescribed student and family

assistance, and (6) outreach to develop greater community involvement and support (see Figure 2). Each of these is described briefly below. (For a fuller description, see Adelman, 1996a.)

(1) *Classroom Focused Enabling.* Programmatic activity to enhance classroom-based efforts to enable learning is accomplished by increasing teachers' effectiveness in accommodating a wider range of individual differences, fostering a caring context for learning, and preventing and handling a wider range of problems when they arise. Such efforts are essential to increasing the effectiveness of classroom instruction, supporting inclusionary policies, and reducing the need for specialized services. Work in this area requires systematic programs to (a) personalize professional development of staff, (b) develop the capabilities of paraeducators, assistants and volunteers, (c) provide temporary out-of-class assistance for students, and (d) enhance resources in the classroom.

(2) *Support for Transitions.* Students and their families are regularly confronted with a variety of transitions (e.g., changing schools, changing grades, inclusion from special education, before and after school transitions, school-to-work or postsecondary education). Examples of transition programs include (a) school-wide activities for welcoming new arrivals and ensuring on-going social supports, (b) articulation strategies to support grade transitions and special education transitions, (c) before and after school and vacation activities to enrich learning and provide recreation in a safe environment, and so forth.

(3) *Home Involvement in Schooling.* Among the programs included here are activities to (a) address the learning and support needs of adults in the home, (b) help families learn how to support students with schoolwork, (c) improve communication and connections between home and school, (d) elicit collaborations and partnerships from those at home to meet school and community needs.

(4) *Crisis Assistance and Prevention.* Schools must respond to, minimize the impact of, and prevent crises. This requires systematic programs for (a) emergency re-

sponse at a school and community wide and (b) minimizing risk factors to prevent crises related to violence, suicide, child abuse. A key mechanism in this area is development of a crisis team trained in emergency response procedures. The team can take the lead in planning ways to prevent crisis by developing programs for conflict mediation and enhancing a caring school culture.

(5) *Student and Family Assistance.* This one area encompasses most of the services that are the focus of integrated service models. Social, physical, and mental health assistance available in the school and community are integrated to provide personalized services. Systems for triage, case, and resource management increase consistency and effectiveness. Ongoing efforts are made to expand and enhance resources. A valuable context for providing such services in a family or community resource center.

(6) *Community Outreach for Involvement and Support.* Most schools do their job better when they are in integral and positive part of the community. For this to happen, steps must be taken to create and maintain collaborative connections. Outreach to the community can build linkages to enhance support for efforts to enable learning. Outreach is made to (a) public and private agencies, (b) higher education, (c) business and professional organizations, (d) churches, and (e) volunteer service organizations. One facet of all this is the establishment of programs designed to recruit, train, and maintain volunteers to assist students in school programs.

From a psychological perspective, the impact of developing sound programs related to each area is establishment of an atmosphere that encourages mutual support and caring and creates a sense of community. Such an atmosphere can play a key role in preventing learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems. Caring begins when students and families feel they are truly welcomed at schools and have a range of social supports. Efforts to create a caring climate benefit from programs that promote cooperative learning, peer tutoring, mentoring, human relations, and conflict resolution. Clearly, a myriad of strategies can contribute to stu-

dents and families feeling positively connected to their schools and community. And, at the same time, such strategies can produce the same sense of belonging among school and community staff. As the above approach evolves, it is providing local, state, and national policy makers with an invaluable framework and concrete practices for enabling students to learn and teachers to teach. Key to achieving these educational imperatives in a comprehensive and ongoing process by which school and community resources are restructured and woven together to address barriers to learning and development. The approach already has contributed to adoption of major new directions by the California State Department of Education, the LAUSD Board of Education, the Memphis City Schools, and the Central Oahu District. It has also been incorporated into the New American School's *Urban Learning Center Model* (1998) as a "break-the-mold" school reform initiative that was set in motion as a partnership of the Los Angeles Unified School District's administration, the teacher's union and a variety of community resources. The U. S. Department of Education recognizes the *Urban Learning Center Model* as an important evolving demonstration of *comprehensive* school reform and has included the design in federal legislation as one of 22 outstanding models that schools are encouraged to adopt.

Mechanisms for Coordinating and Integrating School and Community Resources

Operationalizing an enabling component requires more than formulating a framework of basic program areas. A well-designed infrastructure is needed to establish, maintain, and evolve a comprehensive approach. Such an infrastructure includes mechanisms for coordinating, for enhancing resources by developing direct connections between school and community program, for moving toward increased integration of school and community resources, and for integrating these activities into the instruction and management reforms at schools.

No matter how well intentioned and motivated participants may be, creating school

community connections takes careful planning and the development of mechanisms to ensure success. We find that this requires designated leadership at the school and a resource-oriented team consisting of school and community partners. We call such a group a Resource Coordinating Team (Adelman, 1993; Adelman & Taylor, 1993, 1998; Rosenblu, DiCecco, Taylor & Adelman, 1995).

Creation of a school-based Resource Coordinating Team provides a starting place to enhance school and community connections. The focus of the team is not on individual students. Rather, its role is to map and analyze resources and recommend how they can best be used. It is a mechanism for enhancing systems of coordination and developing and evolving programs. Major examples of the team's activity are (a) mapping and circulating a list of available resources at the school and in the community, (b) clarifying how to access the services, (c) refining referral, triage, and case management processes for most effective use, and (d) exploring ways to augment existing resources to address unmet needs.

Policy Support for School-Community Connections

Collaboration is not about integrated services. Collaboration is about using resources in better ways to evolve the type of comprehensive, integrated approaches that are essential for addressing the complex needs of all youngsters and families in the most cost-effective manner. Ironically, policy simply calling for interagency collaboration to reduce fragmentation and redundancy with a view to greater efficiency may, in the long run, be counterproductive to improving school community connections. In too many instances, school-linked services result only in co-locating community agencies on school campuses. As these activities proceed, a small number of students receive services, but little connection is made with school staff and programs.

The concept of an enabling component provides a broad unifying notion around which those concerned with restructuring

education support programs and services and connecting with community resources can rally. Development of a comprehensive, integrated approach that effectively addresses barriers to learning requires cohesive policy that facilitates blending of many resources. In schools, this includes restructuring to combine parallel efforts supported by general funds, compensatory and special education entitlement, safe and drug free school grants, and specially funded projects. In communities, the need is for better ways of connecting agency resources to each other and to schools. The end product should be cohesive and potent school-community partnerships. With proper policy support, a comprehensive approach can be woven into the fabric of every school. Neighboring schools can be linked to share limited resources and achieve powerful school community connections.

Based on our work, we suggest that the above forms of collaboration require linked policy that

- delineates high level leadership assignments and underwrites essential leadership training related to both the vision for change and how to effect such changes;
- provides adequate funds for capacity building to accomplish desired system changes;
- creates change teams and change agents to do the daily activities that build essential support and redesign processes as system changes are established and maintained; and

- guarantees roles and training for the effective involvement of line staff, families, students, and other community members in shared decision making.

Such policy would allow personnel to build the continuum of interventions needed to make a significant impact in addressing the health, learning, and well being of all students.

Concluding Comments

Most schools do their job better when they are an integral and positive part of the community. Increasingly, it is becoming evident that schools need to work closely with parents, professionals in training, volunteers, and community organizations and agencies to meet their goals. For schools to be seen as an integral part of the community, steps must be taken to create and maintain collaboration. Greater volunteerism on the part of parents and others from the community can break down barriers and help increase home and community involvement in schools. Appropriate and effective collaboration and teaming are key facets of addressing barriers to learning. They allow schools to broaden resources and strategies to enhance the caring community to support all students to succeed.

School-community connections represent a promising direction for efforts to generate essential interventions. This leads to new roles for professionals who work in schools and communities. Theirs must be a multifaceted role—providing vision and leadership that transforms how schools and communities address barriers to learning and enhance health development.

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