Commentary

EDUCATION REFORM:
Broadening the Focus

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David Johnson's explication of President Clinton's approach to educational reform (in the May 1994 issue) is excellent as far as it goes. It is important to recognize, however, that prevailing views of essential system components have restricted the scope of education reform to a primary emphasis on restructuring the instructional and management components of schooling. Thus, attention is paid mostly to concerns such as curriculum and pedagogical reform, professionalization of teaching, standard setting, decentralization, shared decision making, and stakeholder partnerships. Attention to such concerns is necessary but grossly insufficient given the nature and scope of barriers that interfere with school learning and performance for a large segment of students. One reason for the narrow focus of reform is the conceptual void surrounding restructuring of interventions to address such barriers.

ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO LEARNING

As reflected in Johnson's column, reformers do recognize that programs and services are needed to help students overcome barriers to learning so they can reach the standards society values. For example, one of the eight national education goals codified into law this year seeks schools that are free of drugs, alcohol, and violence; another aspires to ensure all children are ready to learn; a third calls for promoting partnerships that will increase parent involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children. Recognition of such concerns is welcome. However, in the absence of a comprehensive model for restructuring programs and services that support education, efforts to meet such goals are likely to produce additional piecemeal approaches, thereby exacerbating what already is an overly fragmented enterprise.

Another example of the inadequate way in which current reform agendas attend to barriers to learning is reflected in guidelines for how states should develop plans for educational improvement. Representatives of services supportive of the educational process, such as health-care and social services, are to be included in planning, and plans are to indicate how the services will contribute to educational reform. These guidelines are based on current initiatives (already under way in New Jersey, California, and various other states) designed to foster integration of community health and human services and linkages with school sites. The problem is that the underlying rationale and resultant practices tend to ignore existing school resources and perpetuate an orientation that overemphasizes use of prescribed services. Even in focusing on school linkages, the tendency is to link with sites rather than integrate with school programs. All this can work against developing comprehensive, integrated, programmatic approaches for addressing barriers to learning.

In general, current activity supportive of the educational process has not been based on the type of in-depth analyses associated with reform of the instructional and management components of schooling. This is not surprising given that analyses relevant to comprehensive restructuring of programs to enable learning are almost nonexistent in the research and applied literature discussing school efforts to foster health and socio-emotional development and ameliorate health, learning, behavior, and emotional problems. (Here I include such psychosocial problems as physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, home and community violence, gangs, student pregnancy, dropouts, reactions to trauma, migrant and highly mobile families, and homeless children.)

The inattention to comprehensive restructuring of programs that support the educational process is unfortunate because it perpetuates use of weak models in deploying the array of resources (including many psychologists) devoted to support programs in schools and communities. As long as this remains the case, the majority of students in too many schools are unlikely to reap many benefits from the contemporary wave of education reform.

For the situation to change, descriptions of current reforms (such as Johnson's) need to be analyzed with a view to identifying significant gaps in prevailing thinking. Then the gaps must be filled with ideas that can stimulate additional research, practice, and policy directions for restructuring education.

A COMPONENT TO ENABLE LEARNING

An illustration of this last point can be found in a new—and I hope unifying—concept called the enabling component, which has been proposed to fill related gaps found in the restructuring movement in education and in
initiatives to integrate community health and human services (Adelman & Taylor, in press). The component is conceived as one of three primary, essential, and complementary components that must be addressed in restructuring education. (As already noted, the other two are the instructional and management components.) The enabling component represents a fundamental reconception of programs and services to promote healthy development and address barriers that interfere with teaching and learning.

The intent is to move (a) from fragmented and disciplinary-oriented services toward a comprehensive and cohesive programmatic approach and (b) from activity that is viewed as supplementary ("added on") toward a full-fledged integrated component that is understood to be primary and essential in enabling learning. To these ends, the concept encompasses six interrelated school-based programmatic areas: enhancing classroom-based efforts to enable learning, providing special services to assist students and families in need, responding to and preventing crises, providing support for transitions, enhancing home involvement in schooling, and reaching out to the community (including recruiting volunteers) to develop greater involvement in schooling and support for efforts to enable learning. Through integration with the instructional component, a strong emphasis is given to promoting healthy development and facilitating positive functioning as the best way to prevent many problems and as an essential adjunct to corrective interventions.

The enabling component emerges from what is available at a school site, expands what is available by working to integrate school and community resources, and enhances access to community programs and services by linking as many as feasible to programs at the site. Planning and coordination for the six programmatic areas are accomplished by teams that bring together school staff (e.g., teachers, pupil services personnel, resource specialists, administrators), parents, and representatives of agencies linking services to the school.

In sum, the concept highlights a major gap in current thinking about educational reform, and its operationalization is providing new avenues for intervention research.

REFERENCE

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