

# THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

JUNE 2009 • NUMBER 6 VOL. 66

*The School Administrator* (ISSN 0036-6439) is a benefit of membership in the American Association of School Administrators.

## GUEST COLUMN

### Comprehensive Support for Remediating a Disconnect

BY HOWARD S. ADELMAN AND LINDA TAYLOR

**T**he national economy is in serious trouble, but new leadership brings with it significant opportunities for transforming schools.

President Obama and his education advisers are calling for fresh thinking. But don't count on *long-term* new money. Rather, schools must innovate to ensure equity of opportunity for students. This requires braiding existing resources into new and more cost-effective ways of working together.

Prevailing school improvement efforts point to high-quality teaching, improved instruction aligned with testing and col-

laborative staff development; all are necessary but insufficient. A broader agenda is needed, one that produces designs comprehensive enough to counter a range of factors that interfere with effective student learning and teaching.

To date, a remarkable disconnect exists between what is planned and what is needed in K-12 education. For more students to profit from quality instruction, there must be a high-level commitment to develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports at every school. Implementation begins by redeploying existing school resources allocated for student and learning supports, followed by outreach to community resources to fill high-priority gaps.

#### Coordination Limits

We often hear this when working with

school leaders: "We coordinate what we have and connect with some community services. Isn't that a comprehensive approach?"

That's a good start, but focusing only on what is doesn't get schools to what needs to be. Analysis will point to major intervention gaps. And coordination stops short of establishing the type of expanded policy and practice needed for integrating and fully developing student/learning supports as a primary component of school improvement.

One administrator we work with recently described the analysis as "viewing the work from the balcony." When she moved from implementing programs at a school and responding to the daily crises and took a job at the district office, she saw the range of separate programs, people and

initiatives and concluded, "We couldn't be effective if we kept working this way."

Coordination was just a first step. Her team found a significant mismatch between the data on what the school district needed and what was currently being done. Major systemic gaps became evident, and new priorities were set. Such a shift in thinking is what leads to a long-term strategy for building a comprehensive system that can ensure *all* students have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Most districts and schools have resources that can be used to develop a system of learning supports for all students. Most of these resources now are expended on interventions that address discrete, categorical problems, often with specialized services for a relatively small number of students. Furthermore, student supports are so highly fragmented and marginalized in policy and practice that many districts have chronic difficulty stemming the tides of low achievement, delinquency, student and teacher dropouts, and a host of other serious issues.

### Pioneering Efforts

Iowa provides a statewide example of a comprehensive approach ([www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_download&gid=2588](http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=2588)).

As Judy Jeffrey, chief state school officer for Iowa, says in introducing the Iowa design: "Through our collective efforts, we must meet the learning needs of all students. Not every student comes to school motivationally ready and able to learn. Some experience barriers that interfere with their ability to profit from classroom instruction. Supports are needed to remove, or at least to alleviate, the effects of these barriers. Each student is entitled to receive the supports needed to ensure that he or she has an equal opportunity to learn and to succeed in school. This [design] provides guidance for a new direction for student support that brings together the efforts of schools, families and communities.

"If every student in every school and community in Iowa is to achieve at high levels, we must rethink how student supports are organized and delivered to address barriers to learning. This will require that schools and school districts, in collaboration with their community partners, develop a comprehensive, cohesive approach to delivery of learning supports that is an integral part of their school improvement efforts."

## "Most districts and schools have resources that can be used to develop a system of learning supports for all students."

The innovative work in Iowa (Learning Supports Initiative, [www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=498&Itemid=1296](http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=498&Itemid=1296)) and elsewhere underscores that moving student supports in new directions involves more than coordinating services, co-locating and integrating community resources, and applying a three-tier approach. The necessary systemic transformation encompasses these matters, but goes much further.

Schools and districts need to redeploy existing funds to address barriers to learning and weave these together in collaboration with students, family members and community stakeholders. School improvement plans should develop the type of comprehensive

system that can ensure every student has an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

Based on involvement in pioneering efforts across the country (Where's It Happening? <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/submit2002/wheresithappening.htm>), our center has produced prototype frameworks and various resources. We've also entered into a collaborative initiative with Scholastic's community affairs unit to help administrators move forward in developing comprehensive systems of learning supports. System development is the next evolutionary stage for closing the achievement gap, reducing school violence, stemming the tide of dropouts, shutting down the pipeline from schools to prison and promoting well-being and social justice.

**Howard Adelman is professor and co-director of the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. E-mail: [Adelman@psych.ucla.edu](mailto:Adelman@psych.ucla.edu). Linda Taylor is co-director of the center. They are the co-authors of *The School Leader's Guide to Student Learning Supports* (Corwin).**

### 38 Comprehensive Support for Remediating a Disconnect

BY HOWARD S. ADELMAN  
AND LINDA TAYLOR

When working with school leaders, the authors often hear: "We coordinate what we have and connect with some community services. Isn't that a comprehensive approach?" Focusing only on what is doesn't get schools to what is needed in K-12 education.