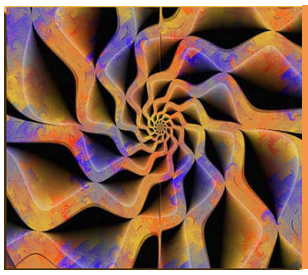
(Download at: http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/duffyreport.pdf)



The F. M. Duffy Reports

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Quarterly reports on the challenges of creating and sustaining whole-system change in school districts

CREATING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL SYSTEMS REQUIRES ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO LEARNING AND TEACHING [1]

By

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Like many of you, each week we are flooded with reports analyzing public education and recommending ways to improve schools. Most contain good ideas. But, usually the recommendations pay too little attention to the many well-known external and internal barriers to learning and teaching that contribute to active disengagement from classroom learning and lead to significant learning, behavior, and emotional problems. The barriers stem from a variety of widely discussed societal, neighborhood, familial, school, and personal conditions that interfere with success at school and beyond.

While most school planners are concerned about barriers to learning and teaching, a systemic disconnect exists between their concerns and what they do in planning school improvements. This disconnect contributes to the failure of so many districts to:

- reduce student dropout rates
- lower the number of teacher dropouts
- re-engage students in classroom learning
- narrow the achievement gap
- eliminate the plateau effect associated with achievement test performance
- decrease the number of schools designated as low performing
- minimize the degree to which high stakes testing is taking a toll on students.

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The Too-Limited Vision for Improving Schools

Most school improvement efforts *primarily* focus on enhancing instruction and school management/ governance. Improvements in these arenas certainly are necessary. However, as most policy makers and administrators know, good instruction delivered by highly qualified teachers alone cannot ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Therefore, most schools have some initiatives, programs, and services aimed at addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Analyses indicate, however, that these student "supports" are marginalized in policy and practice. As a result, they usually are organized and function in relative isolation of each other. This produces a fragmented laundry list of interventions. Furthermore, a great proportion of existing student support is oriented to discrete problems and over-relies on specialized services for individuals and small groups. Such an individual services-oriented approach can't provide for the many students who are not doing well at school. As currently pursued, the approach represents too limited and costly a vision for improving schools.

The Call for System Transformation

"School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge."

Carnegie Task Force on Education

Given the nature and scope of the challenge, the time is long overdue for escaping old ways of thinking about student supports. Increasingly, school policy makers and administrators are being called upon to enable *all* students to have an equal opportunity to learn at school. In particular, the call is for schools to develop a *Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*. The foundation for doing so involves transforming school improvement policy and practice from a two- to a three-component systemwide approach. This is illustrated in Exhibit A.

Learning supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual assistance to directly address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. A *comprehensive system* of learning supports provides interventions in classrooms and schoolwide and is fully integrated with efforts to improve instruction and management at a school. In keeping with public education and public health perspectives, the system is designed to enable holistic development while addressing behavior, learning, and emotional problems. As indicated in Exhibit A, we designate such a system as an *enabling* or *learning supports* component.

Unfortunately, most school improvement plans do not effectively focus on enhancing student outcomes by *comprehensively* addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The poignant irony is that in schools and communities where a large proportion of students encounter many conditions that directly interfere with classroom learning, test score averages are unlikely to increase adequately until these matters are effectively addressed. This is a straight forward psychometric reality.

In response to the call for system transformation, our work has long stressed the need for every school to develop and fully integrate, over time, a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive

system of learning supports. The intervention prototype we have developed integrates the recognized need for (a) a full *continuum* and (b) an innovative framework for organizing intervention *content*.

About a Full Continuum of Interventions

One facet of establishing the intervention prototype for a system of learning supports is to conceptualize a full intervention continuum. The range of interventions encompass:

- promoting healthy development and preventing problems
- intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible
- assisting with chronic and severe problems.

Exhibit B graphically illustrates the continuum as three levels of subsystems. The subsystems overlap, embrace school and community resources, and require processes to integrate the continuum into an cohesive system. Note that, unlike the popular trend in education to describe the range of interventions simply in terms of tiers, the emphasis in this conceptualization is on developing a subsystem at each level.

A full continuum requires weaving together the resources of school, home, and community. The intent is to interconnect all levels through effective collaboration. The collaboration involves horizontal and vertical restructuring of programs and services (a) within jurisdictions, school districts, and community agencies (e.g., among departments, divisions, units, schools, clusters of schools) and (b) between jurisdictions, school and community agencies, public and private sectors; among schools; among community agencies.

The school and community examples listed in the exhibit highlight programs involving individuals, families, and the contexts in which they live, work, and play. There is a focus on mental and physical health, education, and social services. Some of the examples, however, reflect the type of categorical thinking about problems that contributes to fragmentation, redundancy, and counterproductive competition for sparse resources. Many problems are not discrete and must be addressed holistically and developmentally and with attention to root causes. An appreciation of these matters helps minimize tendencies to develop separate programs for each observed problem. In turn, this enables moving away from "silo" approaches and improves coordination and integration of resources, all of which can increase impact and cost-effectiveness.

Note that moving away from fragmented approaches requires more than just improving coordination. It involves integrating school and community, including home, efforts at each level of the continuum in ways consistent with various institutional missions and sparse resources. And, system building requires concurrent intra- and inter-program integration over extended periods of time.

A full continuum reduces the number of students who require specialized supports. As graphically illustrated by the tapering of the three levels of intervention in the exhibit, development of fully integrated subsystems of intervention is meant to prevent the majority of problems, deal with another significant segment as soon after problem onset as is feasible, and end up with relatively few students needing specialized assistance and other intensive and costly interventions.

For individual students, this means preventing and minimizing as many problems as feasible and doing so in ways that maximize engagement in productive learning. This includes a commitment to appropriately using the least restrictive and nonintrusive forms of intervention in responding to problems and accommodating diversity. For the school and community as a whole, the intent is to produce a safe, healthy, nurturing environment/culture characterized by respect for differences, trust, caring, support, and expectations for a bright future.

Each Level Has Content

As can be seen in Exhibit C, focusing only on a continuum of intervention is insufficient. For example, "mapping" done with respect to three levels of intervention does not do enough to escape the trend to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level. By combining the three system levels with a framework for organizing intervention *content*, we generate a matrix that constitutes an intervention prototype for a *comprehensive system of learning supports*.

The matrix can be used to map what is in place and analyze gaps. Overtime, such mapping and analyses are needed at the school level, for a family of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern of schools), at the district level, community-wide, and at regional, state, and national levels. The mapping is an essential tool in guiding and unifying school improvement planning for system development.

Continuum + Content = an Enabling Component.

In our work, we operationalize a comprehensive system of learning supports as an enabling or learning supports component (see Exhibit D). By *enabling*, we mean to stress that the intent is to enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school by addressing barriers and reengaging students. Critical in all this is delineating what the entire school must do to enable *all* students to learn and *all* teachers to teach effectively. School-wide approaches are especially important where large numbers of students are affected and at any school that is not yet paying adequate attention to equity and diversity concerns.

As indicated in the Exhibit, an enabling component involves first addressing interfering factors and then (re-engaging students in classroom instruction. The reality is that interventions that do not include an emphasis on ensuring students are engaged meaningfully in classroom learning generally are insufficient in sustaining, over time, student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.
In essence, beginning in the classroom with differentiated classroom practices and by ensuring school-wide learning supports, an enabling or learning supports component

- addresses barriers through a broader view of "basics" and through effective accommodation of individual differences and disabilities
- enhances the focus on motivational considerations with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation as it relates to individual readiness and ongoing involvement and with the intent of fostering intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome
- adds remediation, treatment, and rehabilitation as necessary, but only as necessary.

Moving Forward in New Directions

"What the best and wisest parent wants for his [or her] own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy."

John Dewey, The School and Society, 1907

Given the data on how many students are not doing well, it is imperative and urgent for schools to place a high priority on *directly* addressing as many barriers to learning and teaching as feasible. Continued limited efficacy and cost effectiveness seem inevitable in the absence of significant systemic transformation.

The problems are complex, and complex problems require comprehensive solutions. School improvement and capacity building efforts (including pre and in service staff development) have yet to deal effectively with these matters.

Now is the time for schools to plan and develop more effective and comprehensive systems for directly dealing with factors that keep too many students from doing well at school. Such efforts can draw on pioneering work from across the country that is moving learning supports from the margins to a prominent place in improving schools and enhancing student outcomes.
Moving in new directions means fully integrating into school improvement a systematic focus on how to:

- reframe current student support programs and services and redeploy the resources to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive component to enable learning
- develop both in-classroom and school-wide approaches – including interventions to support transitions, increase home and community connections, enhance teachers' ability to respond to common learning and behavior problems, and respond to and prevent crises
- revamp district, school, and school-community infrastructures to weave resources together to enhance and evolve the learning supports system
- pursue school improvement and systemic change from the perspective of learning supports and the need to engage and re-engage students in classroom learning

Addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students is a school improvement imperative. Developing and implementing a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of learning supports is the next evolutionary stage in meeting this imperative. It is the missing component in efforts to close the achievement gap, enhance school safety, reduce dropout rates, shut down the pipeline from schools to prisons, and promote well-being and social justice.

Note: Our Center has compiled a variety of resources, including a *toolkit,* to provide ready access to a set of resources for developing a comprehensive system of student/learning supports. See http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm. One document in the toolkit is: *Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports at* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf

For in-depth discussion of the matters highlighted in this essay, see:

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006). *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006). *The implementation guide to student learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide: New directions for addressing barriers to learning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Thank you for your interest in these Reports.

Francis M. Duffy

The F.M. Duffy GROUP

Please feel free to share copies of these Reports with your colleagues. All that I ask is that the information you find in these Reports be attributed to the author(s).

For references to this article, please use the following:

Adleman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2010). Creating Successful School Systems Requires Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching. *The F. M. Duffy Reports, 15* (3), 1-11.

The Rowman & Littlefield Education ***Leading Systemic School Improvement Series*** is a collection of books about "why" systemic change in school districts is needed, "what" some of the desirable outcomes of systemic change should be, and "how" to create and sustain systemic change. You can visit the website for the series by going to http://www.rowmaneducation.com/bookseries/LSI.

In the past, these reports often contained articles written by readers. If you would like to write an article for these reports on a topic related to whole-system change in school districts, please send a copy of it to me as an E-mail attachment to duffy@thefmduffygroup.com.

The *FutureMinds: Transforming American School Systems* initiative seeks to create a shift in the teaching-learning paradigm in school systems. You may visit the FutureMinds website by going to www.futureminds.us

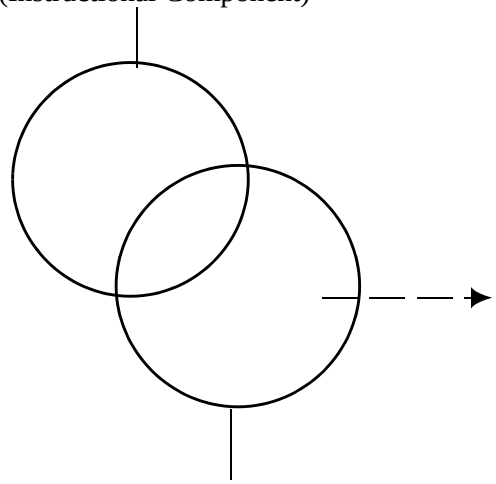
Exhibit A. **Expanding the Framework for Improving Schools**

A. Current School Improvement Framework

Primary Focus *Marginalized Focus*

Direct Facilitation of Learning
(Instructional Component)

Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching*
(not treated as a primary component so initiatives, programs, services are *marginalized*)



Examples of Initiatives, Programs, and Services

>positive behavioral supports
>programs for safe and drug free schools
>response to trauma
>full service community schools and Family Resource Centers
>Safe Schools/Healthy Students
>*School Based Health Center* movement
>*Coordinated School Health Program*
>bi-lingual, cultural, and other diversity programs
>compensatory education programs
>special education programs
>mandates stemming from the No Child Left Behind Act
>And many more

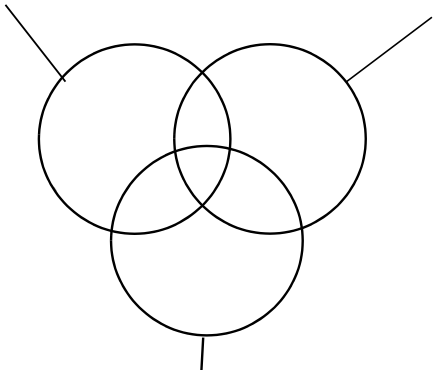
Governance and Resource Management
(Management Component)

*While not treated as a primary and essential component, schools generally offer some amount of school-owned student "support services" – some of which links with community-owned resources. Many types of student support personnel staff the interventions (e.g., school counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, etc.). Schools have been reaching out to community agencies to add a few more services. All of this, however, remains marginalized and fragmented in policy and practice.

B. Needed: Revised Policy to Establish an Umbrella for School Improvement Planning Related to Addressing Barriers to Learning and Promoting Healthy Development

Direct Facilitation of Learning
(*Instructional Component*)

Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching
(Enabling or Learning Supports Component –
an umbrella for ending marginalization by unifying the many fragmented efforts and evolving a comprehensive approach)

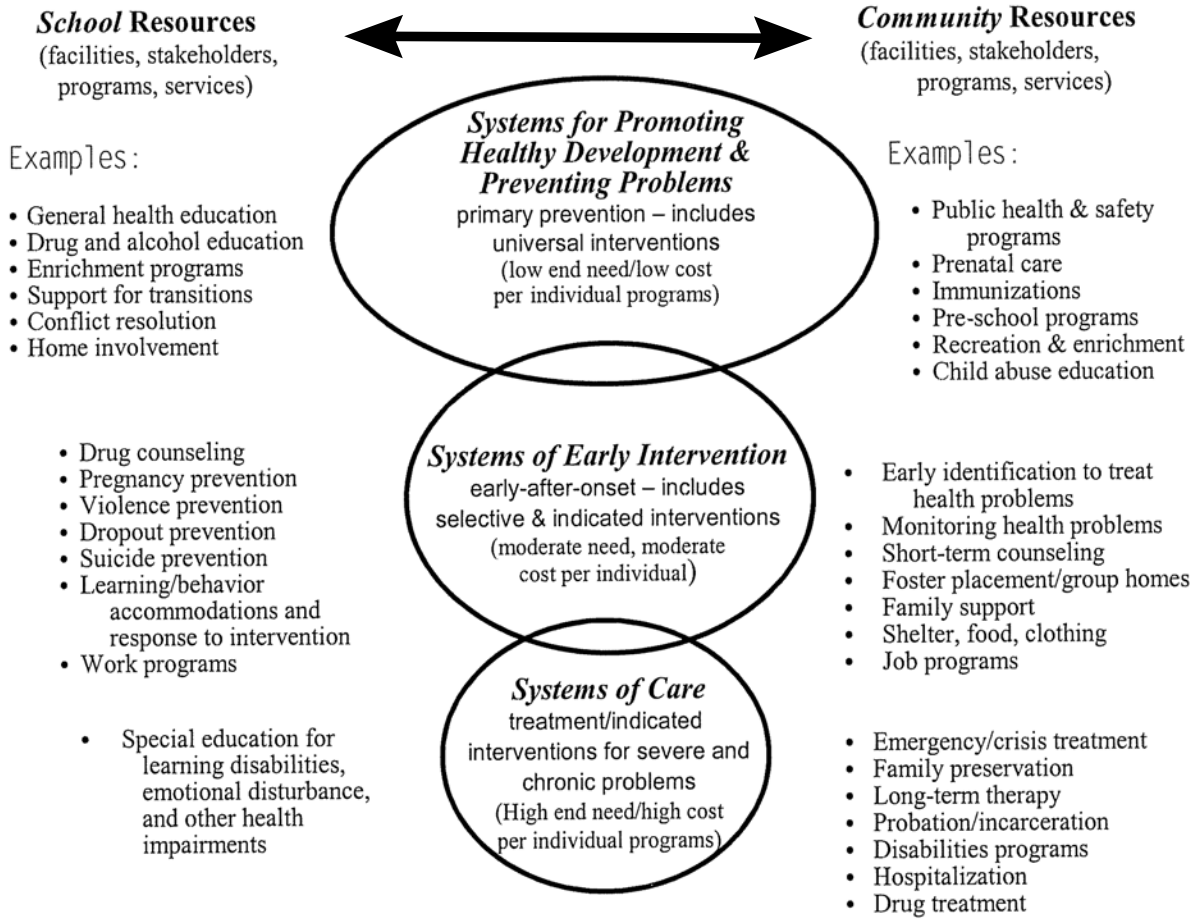


Governance and Resource Management
(Management Component)

Exhibit B. **Interconnected Systems for Meeting the Needs of All Students.**

Providing a *CONTINUUM OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PROGRAMS & 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*.

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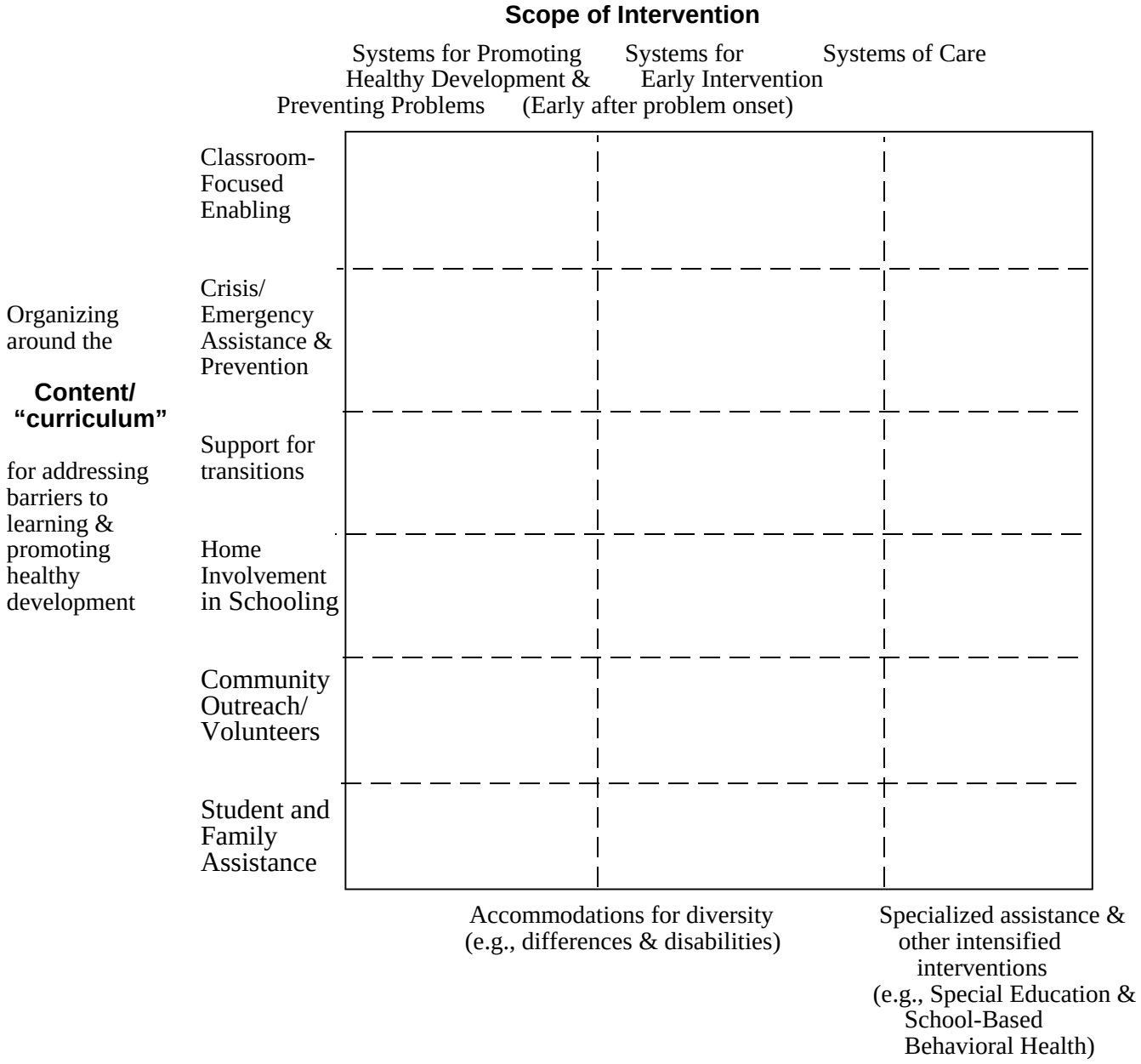
*Such collaboration involves horizontal and vertical restructuring of programs and services
(a) within jurisdictions, school districts, and community agencies (e.g., among departments, divisions, units, schools, clusters of schools)
(b) between jurisdictions, school and community agencies, public and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

Exhibit C. **Matrix for reviewing scope and content of a component to address barriers to learning.***



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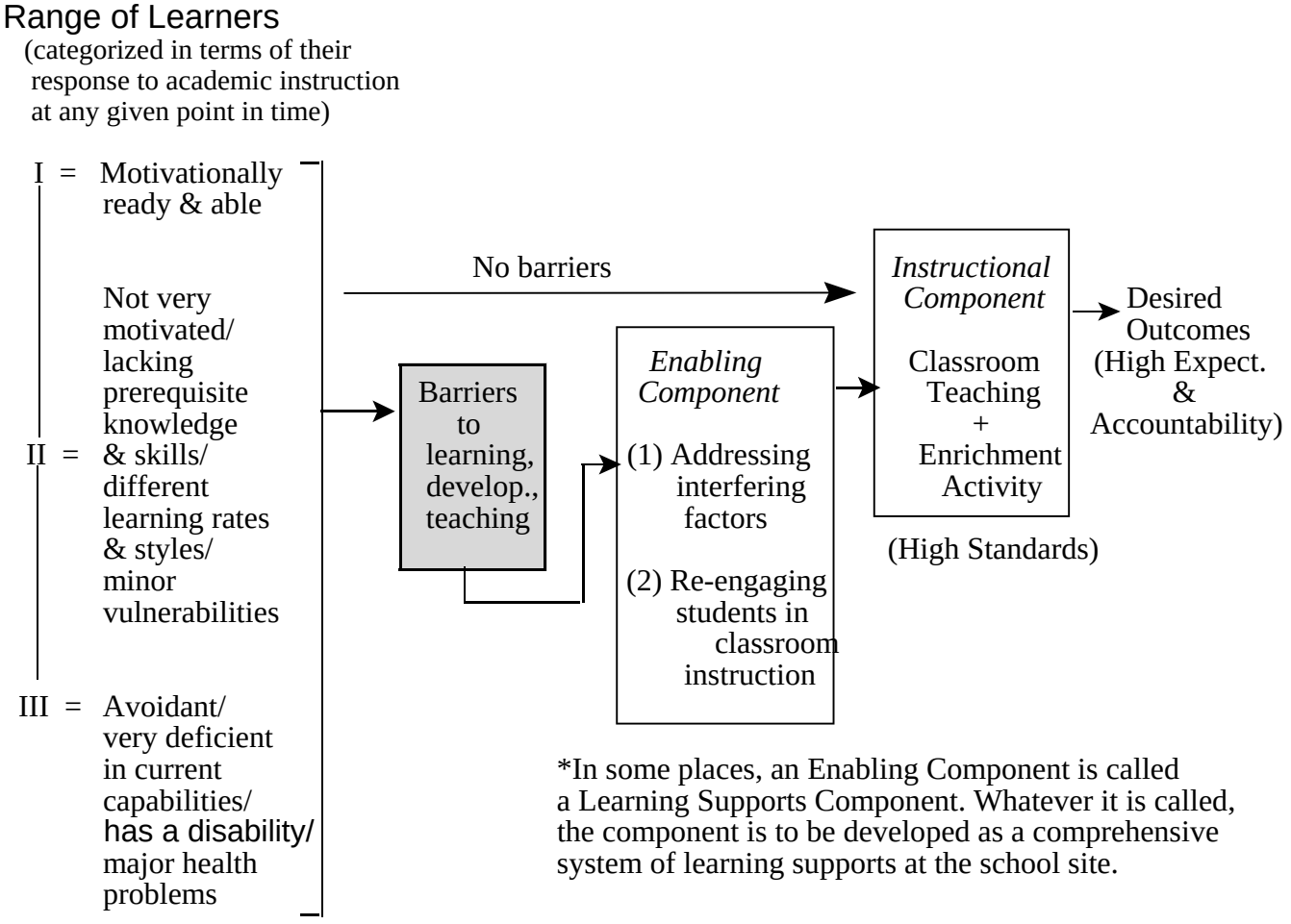
*General initiatives and specific school-wide and classroom-based programs and services can be embedded into the matrix. Think about those related to positive behavioral supports, programs for safe and drug free schools, full service community schools and Family Resource Centers, special project initiatives such as the *School Based Health Center* movement, the *Safe Schools/Healthy Students* projects, and the *Coordinated School Health Program*, efforts to address bi-lingual, cultural, and other diversity concerns, compensatory and special education programs, and the mandates stemming from the No Child Left Behind Act.

Exhibit D. **An Enabling or Learning Supports Component to Address Barriers and Re-engage Students in Classroom Instruction***



*In some places, an Enabling Component is called a Learning Supports Component. Whatever it is called, the component is to be developed as a comprehensive system of learning supports at the school site.

***Examples of Risk-Producing Conditions that Can be Barriers to Learning**

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****

Neighborhood	***Family***	***School and 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 nutrition
	>inadequate provision for quality child care		

**A reciprocal determinist view of behavior recognizes the interplay of environment and person variables.