

# MULTICULTURAL HANDBOOK OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

An Interdisciplinary Perspective

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## COMMENTARY 5

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### *Reorganizing Student Support to Enhance Equity*

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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 of Young Adolescents (1989, p. 61)

For society, *No Child Left Behind* (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001) must be a commitment to equity. For education, the commitment must be to enable every student to have an equal opportunity for success at school. This requires good schools and good teaching.

Good schools are ones where the staff works cohesively not only to teach effectively, but also to address barriers to student learning. They are designed to prevent learning, behavior, and emotional problems and to address problems quickly and effectively when they do arise. They do all this in ways that promote positive socioemotional development and create an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring, and a sense of community. Schools whose improvement plans do not assign these matters a high priority are unlikely to address diversity as an instructional consideration or incorporate a multicultural focus into the classroom curriculum and the school-wide context. Such schools must rethink school improvement policies and practices. The focus on improving instruction must be accompanied by a fundamental reorganization of every school's approach to enabling student learning.

## TOO MANY STUDENTS ARE NOT DOING WELL

### Ask Any Teacher

Most days, how many of your students come to class motivationally ready and able to learn what you have planned to teach them? We have asked that question across the country. The consistency of response is surprising and disturbing. In urban and rural schools serving economically disadvantaged families, teachers tell us they are lucky if 10% to 15% of their students fall into this group. In suburbia, teachers usually say 75% fit that profile. Reports on student achievement continue to show a significant gap between those who have traditionally done well in the nation's public schools and those who come from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Although reliable data do not exist, some sources suggest that at least 30% of public school students in the United States are not doing well academically and could be described as having learning and related behavior problems (Hodgkinson, 1989). It is not surprising, therefore, that teachers continuously ask for help.

### Talk With Students

Students report experiencing many barriers to learning, most of which stem from unaccommodating and often hostile environments. For example, student surveys consistently indicate that bullying and harassment at school are widespread problems (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). More generally, students across the country suggest that many who drop out are really *pushed out* by systems that do not accommodate difference, diversity, and disability (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2002; Dryfoos, 1990) (Ironically, many young teachers who seem to burn out quickly could also be described as *pushouts*.)

We all treasure the fact that some individuals manifest the type of resiliency that enables them to succeed despite experiencing adverse conditions. The reality in poor urban and rural neighborhoods, however, is that many children suffer from restricted opportunities associated with poverty and low income, difficult and diverse family circumstances, high transience rates, lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, problems related to substance abuse, inadequate health care, and lack of enrichment opportunities (Cohen & Lotan, 2003; Dryfoos, 1990; Hodgkinson, 1989). Some youngsters, of course, also have intrinsic conditions that make some facets of learning and performing at school difficult. Most schools in these neighborhoods are not designed to address the complexities that result from such factors. As a result, teachers at every grade level encounter students who are not ready and able to learn what curricula standards and high-stakes testing demand of them.

Youngsters' problems are exacerbated as they internalize the frustrations of confronting so many barriers and the debilitating effects of performing poorly at school. In some locales, over 50% of students manifest problems in behavior, learning, and emotional problems as they move into the upper elementary grades and beyond (Kauffman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). In most schools in these neighborhoods, teachers are ill prepared to address the problems of students from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Thus, when students are not doing well, the trend increasingly is to refer them directly for counseling or assessment in hopes of referral for special help—perhaps even special education assignment. Stemming the tide of unnecessary referrals requires enhancing the competence of teachers, support staff, and administrators with respect to differentially assessing the source of student problems and designing programs that are personalized to match student motivation and capabilities (Quintana, Castillo, & Zamarripa, 2000; Taylor & Adelman, 1999).

The number of referrals can be dramatic and often overrepresent minority students (Lorsen & Orfield, 2002). Where special teams have been established to review teacher requests for help, the list grows as the year proceeds. The longer the list, the longer the lag time for review—to the point that, by the end of the school year, such teams have only been able to review a small percentage on the list. No matter how many are reviewed, there are always more referrals than can be served.

One solution might be to fund more services. However, even if the policy climate favored expanding public services, an overemphasis on health and social services ignores the need to address the many external factors interfering with students having an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Certainly, more services to treat student problems are needed. But so are prevention and early-after-onset programs that can reduce the number of students who end up being referred for special assistance. Schools must be designed to prevent and, when necessary, respond appropriately each day to external and internal barriers to learning and teaching. Those that aren't so designed promote inequities and collide with practices that tend to blame the victims (Ryan, 1971).

### SCHOOLS AREN'T ORGANIZED WELL FOR ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Most teachers have a clear picture of the external and internal factors that interfere with effective learning and teaching at their school. They aren't making excuses; they are stating facts. Moreover, schools are aware of the need to help address such barriers. With passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal government set in motion events that require even more attention to providing supplemental services.

As a result, a considerable expenditure of resources goes for student support programs and the growing number of initiatives to enhance school-community collaboration (Adelman & Taylor, 2002a). Most districts offer a wide range of programs and services oriented to student needs and problems. Some are provided throughout a school district, whereas others are carried out at or linked to targeted schools. Some are owned and operated by schools; some are from community agencies. The interventions may be for all students in a school, for those in specified grades, for those identified as at risk, for those in need of compensatory or special education, and/or for those new to the country.

Student and teacher supports are provided by various divisions in a district, each with a specialized focus such as curriculum and instruction (e.g., bilingual education programs), student support services, compensatory education, special education, language acquisition (e.g., English as a second language [ESL] programs), parent involvement, intergroup relations, and adult and career education. Such divisions commonly are organized and operate as relatively independent entities. For example, many school-owned and operated services are offered as part of what are called pupil personnel or support services. Federal and state mandates tend to determine how many pupil services professionals are employed, and states regulate compliance with mandates.

Governance of their daily practice usually is centralized at the school district level. In large districts, psychologists, counselors, social workers, and other specialists may be organized into separate units. Such units overlap regular, special, and compensatory education.

At the school level, analyses of the current state of affairs find a tendency for student support staff to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with a great deal of the work oriented to discrete problems and with an overreliance on specialized services for individuals and small groups. The implications for CLD students are that, in some schools, students identified as English language learners (ELL) and as having learning difficulties receive services from multiple programs (e.g., bilingual education, special education, ESL) that operate independently of each other and may not work together to plan instruction and learning support. Such fragmentation is not only costly, but it works against developing cohesiveness and effectiveness, and the limited focus on services works against developing more comprehensive, multifaceted approaches to prevent problems and improve student achievement (Adelman & Taylor, 1997).

In short, a variety of divisions and support staff are dealing with the same common barriers to learning (e.g., instruction that inadequately accounts for diversity and disability, inadequate support for student transitions, hostile school environments, difficult home conditions). In doing so, however, they tend to respond with service-oriented strategies, little or no coordination, and sparse attention to developing comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated efforts. Furthermore, in every aspect of a school district's operations, an unproductive separation usually is manifested between those focused directly on instruction and those concerned with student support. It is not surprising, then, that efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching are planned, implemented, and evaluated in a narrow, fragmented, and piecemeal manner. This can compound the problems of CLD students.

Moreover, despite the variety of activities across a school district, it is common knowledge that few schools come close to having enough resources to respond when confronted with a large number of students experiencing barriers to learning. Many schools offer only bare essentials. Too many schools do not even meet basic needs. Thus, it comes as no surprise to those who work in schools that teachers usually do not have the supports they need to effectively accommodate the wide range of diversity in their classrooms and address problems when they arise. The limited, dwindling, and inequitable distribution of resources to most schools serving students raised in poverty and/or coming from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds makes it especially difficult to provide the supports that are essential for meeting instructional needs.

Clearly, school improvement and capacity-building efforts (including pre- and in-service staff development and consultation practices) have yet to deal effectively with the fundamental enterprise of providing supports for a broad and diverse range of students and teachers. The simple psychometric reality is that, in schools where a large proportion of students encounter major barriers to learning, achievement levels are unlikely to increase adequately until such supports are rethought and redesigned. Schools that do not take steps to do so will remain ill equipped to meet their mission.

#### RETHINKING STUDENT AND TEACHER SUPPORTS

Policymakers have come to appreciate the relationship between limited intervention efficacy and the widespread tendency for programs to operate in isolation. Concern has focused on the plethora of piecemeal, categorically funded approaches, such as those created to compensate for restricted opportunities associated with poverty, account for disabilities, accommodate language and cultural differences, and reduce substance abuse, violence, dropouts, delinquency, and pregnancy. Some major initiatives have been designed to reduce the fragmentation. For examples of how such fragmentation can be reduced, readers are encouraged to review such efforts as the transition programs for immigrant students (Cardenas, Taylor, & Adelman, 1993) and other programs designed to create inclusive schools to accommodate diversity (Riehl, 2000). Policymakers, however, have

failed to deal with the overriding issue—namely, that addressing barriers to development and learning remains a marginalized aspect of school policy and practice. The whole enterprise is treated as supplementary (often referred to as auxiliary services).

The degree to which marginalization is the case is seen in the lack of attention given to addressing barriers to learning and teaching in consolidated school improvement plans and certification reviews. It is also seen in the lack of attention to mapping, analyzing, and rethinking how the resources used to address barriers are organized and allocated. For example, educational reformers virtually have ignored the need to reframe the work of pupil services professionals and other student support staff and, in doing so, enhancing competence for addressing the many forms of human diversity. All this seriously hampers efforts to provide the caring help teachers and their CLD students so desperately need.

#### Needed: A Policy Shift

Clearly, current policies designed to enhance support for teachers and students are seriously flawed. It is unlikely that an agenda for enhancing equity of opportunity in schools can succeed in the absence of concerted attention to ending the marginalized status of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching (Adelman & Taylor, 2000a, 2002b).

Increasing awareness of the policy deficiencies has stimulated analyses that indicate current policy is dominated by a two-component model of school improvement. That is, the primary thrust is on improving instruction and school management. Although these two facets obviously are necessary, effectively addressing barriers requires establishing a third component—a component to enable students to learn and teachers to teach. Such an enabling component provides both a basis for combating marginalization and a focal point for developing a comprehensive framework to guide policy and practice. To be effective, however, it must be established as essential and fully integrated with the other two components in policy and practice.

Various states and localities are moving in the direction of a three-component approach for school improvement. In doing so, they are adopting different labels for their enabling component. For example, the California Department of Education and districts such as the Los Angeles Unified School District call it a Learning Supports component. This is also the terminology used by the New American Schools' Urban Learning Center comprehensive school reform model. Some states use the term Supportive Learning Environment. The Hawaii Department of Education calls it a Comprehensive Student Support System (CSSS). In each case, policy shifts have recognized that schools must do much more to enable *all* students to learn and *all* teachers to teach effectively. In effect, such shifts recognize that, over time, good schools play a major role in establishing a continuum of interventions ranging from a broad-based emphasis on promoting healthy development and preventing problems, through approaches for responding to problems early after onset and extending on to narrowly focused treatments for severe problems.

## REFRAMING HOW SCHOOLS ADDRESS BARRIERS TO LEARNING

School-wide approaches to address barriers to learning are especially important where large numbers of students are not doing well and at any school not yet paying adequate attention to considerations related to equity and diversity. Leaving no child behind means addressing the problems of the many who are not benefiting from instructional reforms.

Because of the complexity of ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school, policymakers and practitioners need an operational framework to guide development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive enabling/learning supports component. Pioneering efforts have operationalized such a component into six programmatic arenas. Based on this work, the intervention arenas are conceived as (a) enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning (i.e., ensuring teachers can accommodate student diversity, and improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild to moderate learning and behavior problems); (b) supporting transitions (e.g., supporting newcomers, especially immigrant populations; assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions); (c) increasing home and school connections and doing so in ways that specifically address the needs of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; (d) responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises; (e) increasing community involvement and support (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers from diverse backgrounds); and (f) facilitating student and family access as needed to effective services and special assistance that are sensitive to diversity. As a whole, this six-area framework provides a unifying umbrella to guide the reframing and restructuring of the daily work of all staff who provide learning supports at a school. Extensive work has been done in delineating each of these arenas for intervention. A brief overview is provided in various published works (e.g., Adelman, Taylor, & Schnieder, 1999). (For surveys covering each arena, see Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1997).

### Redesigning Infrastructure

Infrastructure redesign is essential if schools are to enhance their capacity for addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development (Adelman & Taylor, 1997, 2000b; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999). Such redesign must ensure there are effective and interconnected organizational and operational mechanisms to provide oversight, leadership, resource development, and ongoing support at a school, for a family of schools, and system-wide. More specifically, the mechanisms must provide ways to (a) arrive at decisions about resource allocation; (b) maximize systematic and integrated planning, implementation, maintenance, and evaluation of innovations; (c) outreach to create formal working relationships with community resources to bring some to a school and establish special linkages with others; and (d) upgrade and modernize all activity to reflect the best intervention thinking and use of technology. At each system level, accomplishing such tasks requires that staff adopt some new roles and functions, and that parents, stu-

dents, and other representatives from the community enhance their involvement. Cost-effectiveness also calls for redeployment of existing resources.

From a school's perspective, few programs or services have relevance if they don't play out effectively at the school site or in the local community. It is a good idea, therefore, to conceive systemic change from the school outward. That is, the first focus is on mechanisms at the school-neighborhood level. Then, based on analyses of what is needed to facilitate and enhance efforts at a locality, mechanisms are conceived that enable several schools and localities to work together to increase efficiency and effectiveness and achieve economies of scale. Then, system-wide mechanisms can be (re)designed to provide support for what each school and its surrounding neighborhood are trying to develop. A brief discussion of mechanisms at each level follows.

#### Site-Based Resource-Oriented Team

From a school's perspective, there are four overlapping challenges in moving from piecemeal approaches to an integrated approach for addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development. One involves weaving existing activity together to enhance cohesiveness and minimize redundancy. A second entails adopting a unifying framework for evolving existing activity into a comprehensive, multifaceted continuum of interventions to enhance effectiveness. The third encompasses reorganizing to develop such a unified, comprehensive approach. The fourth challenge is to reach out to others in ways that fill gaps and expand resources. Outreach encompasses forming collaborations with other schools, establishing formal linkages with community resources, and attracting more volunteers, professionals in training, and the resources of the business community to work at the school site.

Meeting these challenges requires development of well-conceived mechanisms that are appropriately sanctioned and endowed by governance bodies (Adelman, 1993; Adelman & Taylor, 2002a; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999, 2001; Rosenblum, DiCecco, Taylor, & Adelman, 1995). A good starting place is to establish a school-based resource-oriented team (e.g., a resource coordinating team). Properly constituted, a resource team leads and nurtures efforts to maintain and improve a multifaceted and integrated approach. Such a team reduces fragmentation and enhances cost-efficacy by analyzing, planning, coordinating, integrating, monitoring, evaluating, and strengthening ongoing school and community efforts. In a school with families from diverse backgrounds, this provides a valuable forum for their concerns to be heard and addressed.

Because most schools are unable to establish many new program areas simultaneously, they must establish priorities and plans for how to develop and phase in new programs. The initial emphasis, of course, should be on weaving together existing resources and developing work groups designed to meet the school's most pressing needs, such as enhancing programs to provide student and family assistance, crisis assistance and prevention, and ways to enhance how classrooms accommodate difference, diversity, and disability.

Another key infrastructure concern is administrative leadership. Most schools do not have an administrator whose job definition outlines a leadership role and



functions related to activities that are not primarily focused on academics, and this is not a role for which most principals have time. Thus, it is imperative to establish a policy and restructure jobs to ensure there is a site administrative leader who is accountable for moving the school from piecemeal activity to an integrated approach for addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development. This leader must be part of the resource-oriented team and represent and advocate for the team's recommendations at the administrative and governing body tables, and wherever else decisions are made regarding programs and operations—especially decisions about use of space, time, budget, and personnel.

Paralleling the administrative lead is the position of a staff lead. This individual can be identified from the cadre of line staff who have expertise with respect to addressing barriers to student learning and promoting healthy development, such as support service personnel. If a site has a center facility, such as a Family or Parent Resource Center or a Health Center, the center coordinator might fill this role. This individual also must sit on the resource team and advocate at key times for the team's recommendations at the administrative and governance body tables.

Besides facilitating the development of a potent approach for enhancing equity of student opportunity, both the administrative and staff leads play key operational roles related to daily implementation, monitoring, and problem solving. Obviously, if they are to have the time to carry out these special functions, their job descriptions must be rewritten to delineate their new responsibilities and associated accountabilities (see Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999). It is this daily focus that provides the type of monitoring that ensures appropriate accommodation and support for diverse populations.

#### At the Feeder Pattern and Neighborhood Level

Neighboring schools have common concerns and may have programmatic activity that can use the same resources. By sharing, they can eliminate redundancy and reduce costs. Some school districts already pull together clusters of schools to combine and integrate personnel and programs. These are sometimes called complexes or families of schools. A multilocality resource-oriented council provides a mechanism to help ensure cohesive and equitable deployment of resources and also can enhance the pooling of resources to reduce costs. Such councils can be particularly useful for pulling together the overlapping work of high schools and their feeder middle and elementary schools and integrating neighborhood efforts. Connecting the work of feeder schools is particularly important because they often encompass families with youngsters attending several levels of schooling at the same time.

To create a council, one to two representatives from each school's resource team can be chosen to meet at least once a month and more frequently as necessary. The functions of such a mechanism include (a) coordinating and integrating programs serving multiple schools and neighborhoods, (b) identifying and meeting common needs with respect to guidelines and staff development, and (c) creating linkages and collaborations among schools and agencies. More generally, the council provides a useful mechanism for leadership, communication, maintenance, quality

improvement, and ongoing development of a comprehensive continuum of programs and services. Natural starting points for councils are the sharing of needs assessment, resource mapping, analyses, and recommendations for reform and restructuring to better address barriers to learning and development. Specific areas of initial focus may be on such matters as addressing community-school partnerships to support CLD students and their families.

#### System-wide

Matters related to enhancing equity of student opportunity appear regularly on the agenda of school district administrators and local school boards. Too often each matter is handled in an ad hoc manner, without sufficient attention to the big picture. One result is that the administrative structure in the school district is not organized in ways that coalesce its various interventions. The piecemeal structure reflects the marginalized status of such functions and both creates and maintains the fragmented policies and practices that characterize efforts to address barriers to learning, development, and teaching.

To correct the problem, several system-wide mechanisms have been identified to ensure coherent oversight and leadership in developing, maintaining, and enhancing the component for addressing barriers to learning, development, and teaching. One is a system-wide leader (e.g., an assistant superintendent) with the responsibility and accountability for system-wide vision and strategic planning related to an enabling component. Large districts require additional organizational and administrative mechanisms to provide a critical mass of system-wide leaders, coordinate resources, and develop and integrate programs that accommodate and support diverse populations.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Good schools enable learning by playing a major role in addressing factors that interfere with students having an equal opportunity to succeed at school. The programs that emerge from a well-designed and developed enabling component are fundamental to enhancing a context for learning that embraces diversity as an instructional consideration and embeds a multicultural focus into the classroom and school-wide. The climate that emerges is supportive and caring and generates a psychological sense of community. The implications for student and staff morale, for learning, and for the future of all concerned are more than evident.

Ultimately, of course, enhancing equity must be approached from a societal perspective and requires fundamental systemic reforms that play out every day in every neighborhood and school. To do less is to maintain a status quo that not only is inequitable, but is self-defeating.

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**Endnotes:**

1. Extensive work has been done in delineating each of these arenas for intervention. A brief overview is provided in various published works (e.g., Adelman, Taylor, & Schnieder, 1999). For surveys covering each arena, see *Addressing Barriers to Learning: A Set of Surveys to Map What a School Has and What It Needs* – a Resource Aid Packet from the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (downloadable on the internet at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>).

