

# SAFE SCHOOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Schools are confronted with a host of complicated problems, such as ensuring safety and ameliorating learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Viewed individually, such problems are challenging; together they can be overwhelming.

Given that many problems experienced by students arise from the same underlying causes, it makes sense not to consider each one separately. Indeed, various policy and practice analyses indicate that it is untenable to do so.

If schools are to be good and safe places, the agenda for school safety must be combined with other efforts to address the variety of factors that interfere with a school accomplishing its mission. And, all such efforts must be embedded in the larger agenda for school improvement. Unfortunately, this generally is not the case.

To place school safety back into proper context, four fundamental concerns must be brought to school improvement planning tables. These concerns stress the need to:

1. Expand policy – broadening policy for school improvement to fully integrate, as primary and essential, a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, with school safety embedded in natural ways,
2. Reframe interventions in-classrooms and school-wide – unifying the fragmented interventions used to address barriers to learning and teaching and promote healthy development under a framework that can guide development of a comprehensive system at every school,
3. Reconceive infrastructure – reworking the operational and organizational infrastructure for a school, a family of schools, the district, and for school-family-community collaboration with a view to weaving resources together to develop a comprehensive system,
4. Rethink the implementation problem – framing the phases and tasks involved in "getting from here to there" in terms of widespread diffusion of innovations in organized settings that have well-established institutional cultures and systems.

## Expanding Policy

Prevailing school improvement policy marginalizes efforts to address factors that interfere with youngsters' well-being. An enhanced policy framework is needed to stress that a comprehensive component for

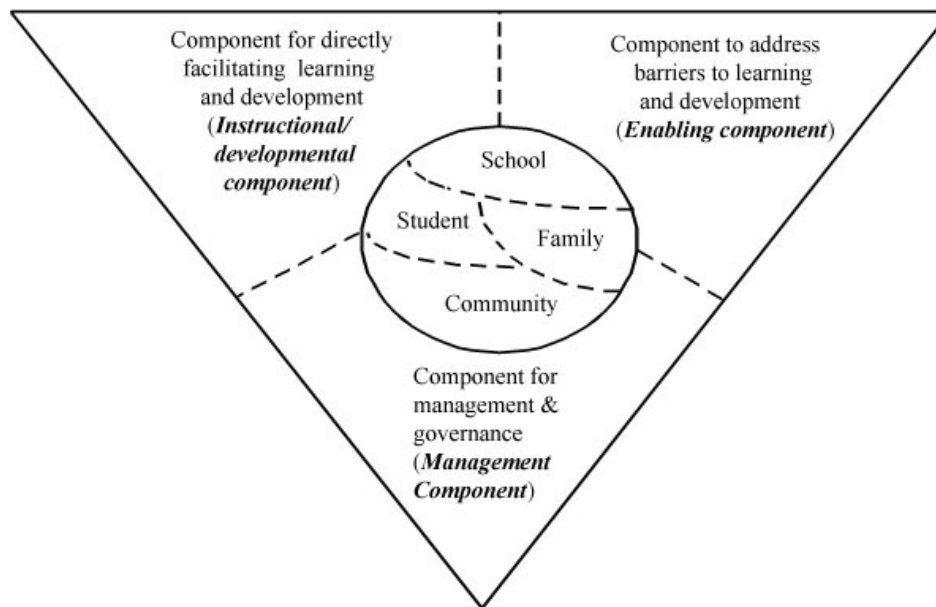
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addressing such factors is primary and essential. As illustrated in Figure 1, such an “Enabling” component complements efforts to directly facilitate learning and development by addressing both external and internal “barriers.”

The intent of an Enabling component is to prevent and minimize as many interfering factors as possible and maximize engagement and re-engagement in productive learning. And, this is to be done in ways that produce a safe, healthful, nurturing environment/culture characterized by respect for differences, trust, caring, support, and high expectations.

Figure 1. A three-component framework for school improvement



## Reframing Intervention

Because of the complexity of the problems confronting schools, an Enabling component (sometimes referred to as a Learning Supports component) must be comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive. The aim is to enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school by both addressing barriers to learning and re-engaging students in classroom instruction. It is from such a component that, over time, a safe and caring school climate emerges.

An Enabling or Learning Supports component can be framed as consisting of (1) an integrated and systemic continuum of interventions and (2) a multifaceted and cohesive set of content arenas.

*An integrated and systemic continuum of interventions.* A widely advocated way to outline the continuum of interventions is in terms of levels of focus. To emphasize the importance of an integrated and systemic approach, these levels can be conceived as consisting of:

- Systems for promoting healthy development and preventing problems,
- Systems for intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible, and

- Systems for assisting those with chronic and severe problems.

This continuum encompasses approaches for enabling academic, social, emotional, and physical development and addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and doing so in ways that yield safe and caring schools. Most schools and communities have some programs and services that fit along the entire continuum.

*A multifaceted and cohesive set of content arenas.* To enhance efforts across the continuum, pioneering efforts have begun to coalesce programs and services into six content arenas. In doing so, they have moved from a “laundry list” to a defined and organized way of capturing the essence of basic interventions domains. The six content arenas encompass efforts to effectively:

- Enhance regular classroom strategies to enable learning (i.e., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems),
- Support transitions (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions),
- Increase home and school connections,
- Respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises,
- Increase community involvement and support (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers), and
- Facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.

*Combining the continuum and the content arenas yields a guiding matrix.* The continuum of interventions and the six content arenas provide a comprehensive and multifaceted intervention framework to guide and unify school improvement planning for developing an Enabling component. The resultant matrix is shown in Figure 2 (next page). This unifying framework facilitates mapping and analyzing the current scope and content of how a school, a family of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern of schools), a district, and the various levels of community address factors interfering with learning, development, and teaching.

School improvement planners need to understand the essence of such a unifying intervention framework. Ultimately, the well-being of youngsters, their families, schools, and neighborhoods depends on the development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system for addressing interfering factors and promoting well-being.

Accomplishing all this requires weaving together existing school, family, and community resources and fully integrating development of a comprehensive intervention approach into school improvement planning. It also requires rethinking infrastructure at all levels and making essential changes.

## **Reconceiving Infrastructure**

For schools to be good, caring, and safe places, significant changes also are needed in the ways stakeholders formally connect with each other to accomplish the many tasks involved in school improvement. So, current operational and organizational infrastructure must be reworked.

*Structure follows function.* In organizing any infrastructure, the fundamental principle is: structure follows function. Thus, each mechanism in an infrastructure is defined by its *functions*.

Figure 2. Matrix for reviewing the nature and scope of an enabling component\*

		Levels of Intervention		
		Systems for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	Systems for Early Intervention (Early after problem onset)	Systems of Care
<b>Intervention Content Arenas</b>	Classroom-Focused Enabling			
	Crisis/Emergency Assistance & Prevention			
	Support for Transitions			
	Home Involvement in Schooling			
	Community Outreach/Volunteers			
	Student and Family Assistance			
		Accommodations for Differences & Disabilities		Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., Special Education & School-Based Behavioral Health)

\*Note that various venues, concepts, and initiatives will fit into several cells of the matrix. Examples include venues such as day care centers, preschools, family centers, and school-based health centers, concepts such as social and emotional learning and development, and initiatives such as Safe Schools/Healthy Students, positive behavior support, response to interventions, and the coordinated school health program. Most of the work of the considerable variety of personnel who provide student supports also fits into one or more cells.

Obviously, school improvement involves working with others to produce important results. This requires clear roles, responsibilities, and well-designed, institutionalized infrastructure mechanisms for performing tasks, solving problems, and mediating conflict. Major examples of functions include:

- Facilitating communication, cooperation, coordination, and integration;
- Operationalizing the vision of stakeholders into desired functions and tasks;
- Enhancing support for and developing a policy commitment to ensure necessary resources are dispensed for accomplishing desired functions;
- Advocacy, analysis, priority setting, governance, planning, implementation, and evaluation related to desired functions;
- Aggregating data from schools and neighborhood to analyze system needs;
- Mapping, analyzing, managing, redeploying, and braiding available resources to enable accomplishment of desired functions;
- Establishing leadership and institutional and operational mechanisms (e.g., infrastructure) for guiding and managing accomplishment of desired functions;
- Defining and incorporating new roles and functions into job descriptions;
- Building capacity for planning, implementing and evaluating desired functions, including ongoing stakeholder development for continuous learning and renewal and for bringing new arrivals up to speed;
- Defining standards & ensuring accountability; and
- Social marketing.

Once functions and related tasks are articulated, they become the basis for developing a differentiated infrastructure. Minimally, the need is for *effective* mechanisms to steer and do work on a regular basis (e.g., mechanisms for governance and steering, administrative and staff leadership, and carrying out essential tasks). Effective is defined in terms of potent, synergistic, and sustainable *working relationships*. With this definition in mind, steps must be taken to ensure all persons involved are provided with the training, time, support, and authority to carry out their roles and functions.

*Conceiving an integrated infrastructure.* Infrastructure for a comprehensive system of interventions to address barriers to learning and teaching should be designed from the school outward. That is, conceptually, the emphasis is first on what an integrated infrastructure should look like at the school level.

The need *at a school* is to rework infrastructure to support efforts to address barriers to learning in a cohesive manner and to integrate the work with efforts to facilitate instruction and promote healthy development. Key here is establishment of an administrative leader with a job description that makes her or him accountable for working with a resource-oriented work group to develop a comprehensive Enabling or Learning Supports component that is fully integrated into the school's improvement plan.

Beyond the school, the focus expands to include the mechanisms needed to connect a family or complex (e.g., feeder pattern) of schools and establish collaborations with surrounding community resources. Because schools in a locality have common concerns (e.g., for safety and well-being), they may have programmatic activity that can use the same resources. Many natural connections exist in catchment areas serving a high school and its feeder schools. For example, the same family often has children attending all levels of schooling at the same time. In addition, some school districts and agencies already pull together several geographically-related clusters to combine and integrate personnel and programs. Through coordination and sharing at this level, redundancy can be minimized and resources can be deployed equitably and pooled to reduce costs.

Ultimately, *at the district level*, the need is for administrative leadership and capacity-building support that helps maximize development of a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching at each school. Development of system-wide mechanisms should reflect a clear conception of how each supports local activity. Key at this level is system-wide leadership with responsibility and accountability for maintaining the vision, developing strategic plans, supporting capacity building, and ensuring coordination and integration of activity among schools, families of schools, and the entire system (including the community at large). Other functions at this level include evaluation, encompassing determination of the equity in program delivery, quality improvement reviews of all mechanisms and procedures, and review of results. It is crucial to establish the district's leadership for this work at a high enough level to ensure the administrator is always an active participant at key planning and decision-making tables.

## Getting from Here to There

As Seymour Sarason stressed a long time ago:

*Good ideas and missionary zeal are sometimes enough to change the thinking of individuals; they are rarely, if ever, effective in changing complicated organizations (like the school) with traditions, dynamics, and goals of their own* (Sarason, 1971, p. 213).

Those who set out to improve schools and schooling across a district are confronted with two enormous tasks. The first is to develop prototypes; the second involves large-scale replication. One without the other is insufficient. Yet considerably more attention is paid to developing and validating prototypes than to delineating and testing systemic change processes required for sustainability, replication, and scale-up. The frequent failure to sustain innovations and take them to scale in school districts has increased interest in understanding systemic change as a central concern in school improvement.

Efforts to make substantial and substantive school improvements that enhance safety and caring require much more than implementing a few demonstrations. Equity calls for ensuring that essential school improvements play out at schools across a district. Improved approaches are only as good as a school district's ability to develop and institutionalize them equitably in all its schools. This often is called diffusion, replication, roll out, or scale-up.

In replicating to scale, however, it is essential not to lose sight of a simple truth: If improvements don't play out effectively at a school and in the classroom, they don't mean much. Schools and classrooms must be the center and guiding force for all prototype and systemic change planning.

*Planning for implementation of school improvements.* Despite the nationwide emphasis on school improvement, there has been widespread failure to address how desired improvements will be accomplished. That is, we find little evidence of sophisticated strategic planning for how schools and districts intend to move from where they are to where they want to go. Little attention has been paid to the complexities of large scale diffusion. Leadership training for policy makers and education administrators has given short shrift to the topic of strategic planning that addresses scale-up processes and problems.

From the perspective of systemic change, the importance of creating an atmosphere at a school and throughout a district that encourages mutual support, caring, and a sense of community takes on added importance. New collaborative arrangements must be established, and authority (power) redistributed. Key stakeholders and their leadership must understand and commit to the changes. And, the commitment must be reflected in policy statements and creation of an organizational and operational infrastructure at all levels that ensures effective leadership and resources. For significant school improvements to occur, policy and program

commitments must be demonstrated through effective allocation and redeployment of resources. That is, finances, personnel, time, space, equipment, and other essential resources must be made available, organized, and used in ways that adequately operationalize and sustain policy and promising practices. This includes ensuring sufficient resources to develop an effective structural foundation and well-trained change agents and related capacity building.

School improvement obviously needs to begin with a clear framework and map for what changes are to be made. It should be equally obvious that there must be a clear framework and map for how to get from here to there, especially when the improvements require significant systemic change. And, in both cases, there is a need to build on the existing science-base and ensure effective leadership and adequate resources to facilitate changes and capacity building. With all this in mind, it is essential to understand what is involved in widespread diffusion of innovations in organized settings that have well-established institutional cultures and systems.

In particular, implementation and scaling-up of major school improvement efforts require *administrative leadership* and the addition of *temporary infrastructure mechanisms* to facilitate changes. Fullan stresses that what is needed is leadership that “motivates people to take on the complexities and anxieties of difficult change.” We would add that such leadership also must develop a refined understanding of how to facilitate systemic change and have appropriate support. That is, reforms and major school improvements obviously require ensuring that those who operate essential mechanisms have adequate training, resources, and support, initially and over time. Moreover, there must be appropriate incentives and safeguards for individuals as they become enmeshed in the complexities of systemic change.

Strategic planning must address all four overlapping phases of systemic change that are involved in prototype implementation and eventual scale-up. These are: (1) *creating readiness* – increasing a climate/culture for change through enhancing both the motivation and the capability of a critical mass of stakeholders, (2) *initial implementation* – change is phased in using a well-designed infrastructure for providing guidance and support and building capacity, (3) *institutionalization* – accomplished by ensuring there is an infrastructure to maintain and enhance productive changes, and (4) *ongoing evolution and creative renewal* – through use of mechanisms to improve quality and provide continuing support in ways that enable stakeholders to become a community of learners who creatively pursue renewal. At any time, an organization may be involved in introducing one or more innovations at one or more sites; it may also be involved in replicating one or more prototypes on a large-scale. Whether the focus is on establishing a prototype at one site or replicating it at many, the systemic changes involve all four phases.

*Needed: a systemic change infrastructure.* It is rare to find situations where a well-designed systemic change infrastructure is in place. More characteristically, ad hoc mechanisms have been set in motion with personnel who have too little training and without adequate formative evaluation. It is common to find structures, such as teams and collaboratives operating without clear understanding of functions and major tasks. This, of course, defies the basic organizational principle that structure should follow function.

In general, existing infrastructure mechanisms must be modified in ways that guarantee new policy directions are translated into appropriate daily operations. Well-designed mechanisms ensure local ownership, a critical mass of committed stakeholders, processes that overcome barriers to stakeholders effectively working together, and strategies that mobilize and maintain proactive effort so that changes are implemented and there is renewal over time.

Effective and linked administrative leadership *at every level* is key to the success of any systemic change initiative in schools. Everyone needs to be aware of who is leading and is accountable for the development of the planned changes. It is imperative that such leaders be specifically trained to guide systemic change. And,

they must be sitting at key decision-making tables when budget and other fundamental decisions are discussed.

For major system changes, a systemic change infrastructure also benefits from a formal group of “champions” who agree to steer the process. Such a team provides a broad-based mechanism for guiding change. At the school level, for example, such a steering group creates a special leadership body to own the linked visions for school improvement and systemic change and to guide and support the work. Their first focus is on assuring that capacity is built to accomplish the desired systemic changes. This includes ensuring an adequate policy and leadership base for implementation. Clearly, such advocates must be well-versed with respect to what is planned, and they should be highly motivated not just to help get things underway, but to ensure sustainability.

In our work, we have stressed the value of a special change agent called an *Organization Facilitator*. This specially trained change agent was developed to ensure necessary expertise for helping schools and districts substantively implement and institutionalize a comprehensive system of learning supports. Such an individual can be used as a change agent for school improvements in one school or a group of schools. A cadre of such professionals can be used to facilitate change across an entire district.

## **Call to Action**

Enhancing school safety is first and foremost in the hands of policy makers. If good, caring, and safe schools are to emerge from school improvement efforts, policymakers must understand the nature and scope of what is involved. They must revise policy that perpetuates narrow-focused, categorical approaches since such policy is a grossly inadequate response to the many complex factors that interfere with positive development, learning, and teaching. Current policy promotes an orientation that overemphasizes individually prescribed treatment services to the detriment of prevention programs, results in marginalized and fragmented interventions, and undervalues the human and social capital indigenous to every neighborhood. School improvement policy must be expanded to support development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. To do less is to make values such as *We want all children to succeed* and *No child left behind* simply rhetorical statements.

What is needed is a fundamental *transformation* of how schools, families, and communities address not only safety, but other major barriers to learning and teaching. Such a transformation is essential to reducing bullying and violence, enhancing achievement for all and closing the achievement gap, reducing dropouts, and increasing the opportunity for schools to be valued as treasures in their neighborhood.

Given the current state of school resources, the transformation must be accomplished by rethinking and redeploying how existing resources are used and by taking advantage of the natural opportunities at schools for countering learning, behavior, and emotional problems and promoting personal and social growth. Every school needs to commit to fostering staff and student resilience and creating an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring, and sense of community. Staff and students need to feel good about themselves if they are to cope with challenges proactively and effectively. For example, a welcoming induction and ongoing support are critical elements both in creating a positive sense of community and in facilitating staff and student school adjustment and performance. School-wide strategies for welcoming and supporting staff, students, and families at school *every day* are part of creating a safe and healthy school – one where staff, students, and families interact positively and identify with the school and its goals.

All this, of course, involves major systemic changes. Such changes require weaving school owned resources and community owned resources together over time at every school in a district and addressing the complications stemming from the scale of public education in the U.S.



The next decade must mark a turning point for how schools, families, and communities address the problems of children and youth. In particular, the focus must be on initiatives to reform and restructure how schools work to prevent and ameliorate the many problems experienced by students. There is much work to be done as public schools across the country strive to leave no child behind.

## **References**

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