

An Integrated Framework for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Enhancing Healthy Development at a School Site: A Six Area Curriculum

The notion of barriers to learning encompasses external and internal factors. It is clear that too many youngsters are growing up and going to school in situations that not only fail to promote healthy development, but are antithetical to the process. A few children also bring with them intrinsic conditions that make learning and performing difficult. At some time or another, most students bring problems with them to school that affect their learning and perhaps interfere with the teacher's efforts to teach. In some geographic areas, many youngsters bring a wide range of problems stemming from restricted opportunities associated with poverty and low income, difficult and diverse family circumstances, high rates of mobility lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, problems related to substance abuse, inadequate health care, and lack of enrichment opportunities. The result of all this is that some youngsters at every grade level come to school unready to meet the setting's demands effectively and a cycle of failure often ensues. In some locales, the reality often is that over 50% of students manifest forms of behavior, learning, and emotional problems. And, in most schools in these locales, teachers are ill-prepared to address the problems in a potent manner.

Ultimately, of course, addressing barriers to learning must be approached from a societal perspective and requires fundamental systemic reforms designed to improve efforts to support and enable learning. This calls for developing and weaving together a continuum of community and school interventions.

Moving from a Two- to a Three-Component Framework for School Reform

With the full continuum in mind, pioneer initiatives around the country are demonstrating the need to rethink how schools and communities can meet the challenge of addressing persistent barriers to students learning and to healthy development. These initiatives are underscoring that (a) current reforms are based on an inadequate two component model for restructuring schools and (b) movement to a three component model is necessary if schools are to benefit all young people appropriately.

The three component model calls for elevating efforts to address barriers to development, learning, and teaching to the level of one of three fundamental and essential facets of education reform. We call this third component an Enabling Component. The concept of an Enabling Component is formulated around the proposition that a comprehensive, multifaceted, integrated continuum of enabling activity is essential in addressing the needs of youngsters who encounter barriers that interfere with their benefitting satisfactorily from instruction. Thus, to enable teachers to teach effectively, there must not only be effective instruction and well-managed schools, but barriers must be handled in a comprehensive way. All three component are seen as essential, complementary, and overlapping.

In establishing such a third component, some schools and education agencies around the country have labeled it a "Learning Supports" component or a "Supportive Learning Environment" component or a "Comprehensive Student Support System". By calling for reforms that fully integrate a focus on addressing barriers to student learning, the notion of a third component (whatever it is called) provides a unifying concept for responding to a wide range of factors interfering with young people's learning and performance. And, the concept calls on reformers to

expand the current emphasis on improving instruction and school management to include a comprehensive component for addressing barriers to learning and to ensure it is well integrated with the other two components.

Framing an Enabling Component for a School Site

Operationalizing an enabling component requires (a) formulating a delimited framework of basic program areas and the (b) creating an infrastructure to restructure and enhance existing resources. Based on an extensive analysis of activity schools use to address barriers to learning, we cluster enabling activity into six interrelated areas (see Figure 3 on page 13). A brief description of the six areas is provided below.¹

(1) Classroom-Focused Enabling. This area provides a fundamental example not only of how the enabling component overlaps the instructional component, but how it adds value to instructional reform. When a teacher has difficulty working with a youngster, the first step is to address the problem within the regular classroom and involve the home to a greater extent. Through programmatic activity, classroom-based efforts that enable learning are enhanced. This is accomplished by increasing teachers' effectiveness so they can account for a wider range of individual differences, foster a caring context for learning, prevent and handle a wider range of problems when they arise, and reengage students in actively pursuing school learning. Such a focus is seen as essential to increasing the effectiveness of regular classroom instruction, supporting inclusionary policies, and reducing the need for specialized services.

Work in this area requires programs and systems designed to personalize professional development of teachers and support staff, develop the capabilities of paraeducators and other paid assistants and volunteers, provide temporary out of class assistance for students, and enhance resources. For example: Personalized help is provided to increase a teacher's array of strategies for accommodating, as well as teaching students to compensate for, differences, vulnerabilities, and disabilities. Teachers learn to target the activity of paid assistants, peer tutors, and volunteers to enhance social and academic support. (The classroom curriculum already should encompass a focus on fostering socio-emotional and physical development; such a focus is seen as an essential element in preventing learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems.) As appropriate, support *in the classroom* also is provided by resource and itinerant teachers and counselors. This involves restructuring and redesigning the roles, functions, and staff development of resource and itinerant teachers, counselors, and other pupil service personnel so they are able to work closely with teachers and students in the classroom and on regular activities. All this provides the teacher with the knowledge and skills to develop a classroom infrastructure that transforms a big classroom into a set of smaller ones.

(2) Crisis Assistance and Prevention. Schools must respond to, minimize the impact of, and prevent crises. This requires systems and programs for (a) emergency/crisis response at a site, throughout a school complex, and community-wide (including a focus on ensuring follow-up care) and (b) prevention at school and in the community to address school safety and violence reduction, suicide prevention, child abuse prevention and so forth.

Desired outcomes of crisis assistance include ensuring provision of immediate emergency and follow-up care so students are able to resume learning without undue delay. Prevention activity outcomes are reflected in indices showing there is a safe and productive environment and that students and their families have the type of attitudes and capacities needed to deal with violence and other threats to safety.

A key mechanism in this area often is development of a crisis team. Such a team is trained in emergency response procedures, physical and psychological first-aid, ensuring aftermath needs are addressed, and so forth. The team also can take the lead in planning ways to prevent certain crises by facilitating the development of programs for conflict mediation and enhancing human relations and a caring school culture.

(3) *Support for Transitions.* Students and their families are regularly confronted with a variety of transitions (e.g., changing schools, changing grades, and encountering a range of other daily hassles and major life demands). Many of these can interfere with productive school involvement.

A comprehensive focus on transitions requires systems and programs designed to (a) establish school-wide and classroom specific activities for welcoming new arrivals (students, their families, staff) and rendering ongoing social support, (b) provide counseling and articulation strategies to support grade-to-grade and school-to-school transitions, moving to and from special education, going to college, and moving to post school living and work, and (c) organize before and after-school and intersession activities to enrich learning and provide recreation in a safe environment. Anticipated outcomes are reduced alienation, enhanced positive attitudes toward school and learning, and increased involvement in school and learning activities. Outcomes related to specific programs in this area can include reduced tardies as the result of participation in before-school programs and reduced vandalism, violence, and crime at school and in the neighborhood as the result of involvement in after-school programs and increased experiencing of school as a caring place. There also are suggestions that a caring school climate can play a significant role in reducing student transiency. Articulation problems can be expected to reduce school avoidance and dropouts, as well as enhancing the number who make successful transitions to higher education and post school living and work.

(4) *Home Involvement in Schooling.* This area expands concern for parent involvement to encompass anyone in the home who plays a key role in influencing the student's formal education. In some cases, parenting has been assumed by grandparents, aunts, or older siblings. In many cases, older brothers and sisters are the most significant influences on a youngster's life choices. Thus, schools and communities must go beyond focusing on parents in their efforts to enhance home involvement.

This area includes systems and programs to (a) address the specific learning and support needs of adults in the home, such as offering them ESL, literacy, vocational, and citizenship classes, enrichment and recreational opportunities, and mutual support groups, (b) help anyone in the home learn how to meet basic obligations to a student, such as providing instruction for parenting and helping with schoolwork, (c) improve communication that is essential to the student and family, (d) enhance the home-school connection and sense of community, (e) foster participation in making decisions essential to a student's well-being, (f) facilitate home support of a student's basic learning and development, (g) mobilize those at home to problem solve related to student needs, and (h) elicit help (support, collaborations, and partnerships) from those at home with respect to meeting classroom, school, and community needs. The context for some of this activity may be a *parent center* (which may be part of a *Family Service Center* facility if one has been established at the site). Outcomes include indices of parent learning, student progress, and community enhancement specifically related to home involvement.

(5) *Community Outreach for Involvement and Support (including a focus on volunteers).*

Most schools do their job better when they are an integral and positive part of the community. Unfortunately, schools and classrooms often are seen as separate from the community in which they reside. This contributes to a lack of connection between school staff, parents, students, and other community residents and resources. For schools to be seen as an integral part of the community, steps must be taken to create and maintain collaborative partnerships. Potential benefits for include enhanced community participation, student progress, and community development.

Outreach to the community can build linkages and collaborations, develop greater involvement in schooling, and enhance support for efforts to enable learning. Outreach is made to public and private agencies, organizations, universities, colleges, and facilities; businesses and professional organizations and groups; and volunteer service programs, organizations, and clubs. Activity includes systems and programs designed to

- recruit community involvement and support (e.g., linkages and integration with community health and social services; cadres of volunteers, mentors, and individuals with special expertise and resources; local businesses to adopt-a-school and provide resources, awards, incentives, and jobs; formal partnership arrangements),
- train, screen, and maintain volunteers (e.g., parents, college students, senior citizens, peer-cross-age tutors and counselors, and professionals-in-training to provide direct help for staff and students -- especially targeted students),
- outreach to hard to involve students and families (those who don't come to school regularly – including truants and dropouts),
- enhance community-school connections and sense of community (e.g., orientations, open houses, performances and cultural and sports events, festivals and celebrations, workshops and fairs).

A good place to start is with community volunteers. Greater volunteerism on the part of parents, peers, and others from the community can break down barriers and increase home and community involvement in schools and schooling. Thus, a major emphasis in joining with the community is establishment of a program that effectively recruits, screens, trains, and nurtures volunteers. Another key facet is the opening up of school sites as places where parents, families, and other community residents can engage in learning, recreation, enrichment, and find services they need.

(6) *Student and Family Assistance.* Student and family assistance should be reserved for the relatively few problems that cannot be handled without adding special interventions. In effect, this one area encompasses most of the services and related systems that are the focus of integrated service models.

The emphasis is on providing special services in a personalized way to assist with a broad-range of needs. To begin with, social, physical and mental health assistance available in the school and community are used. As community outreach brings in other resources, these are linked to existing activity in an integrated manner. Additional attention is paid to enhancing systems for triage, case and resource management, direct services for immediate needs, and referral for special services and special education resources and placements as appropriate. Ongoing efforts are made to expand and enhance resources. A valuable context for providing such services is a center facility (e.g., Family/Community/Health/Parent Resource Center).

A programmatic approach in this area requires systems and activities designed to support classroom focused enabling – with emphasis on reducing teachers' need to seek special programs and services, provide all stakeholders with information clarifying available assistance and how to access help, facilitate requests for assistance and evaluate such requests (including strategies designed to reduce the need for special intervention), handle referrals, provide direct service, implement effective case and resource management, and interface with

community outreach to assimilate additional resources into current service delivery. As major outcomes, the intent is to ensure that special assistance is provided when necessary and appropriate and that such assistance is effective.

As can be seen from the above description, the enabling component framework calls for a greatly expanded role for all who are interested in mental health in schools. Only one of the areas, “special assistance for students and families,” focuses on traditional mental health treatment approaches. The other five areas encompass a wide range of prevention and early intervention programs (universal and targeted interventions that include strategies for promoting healthy social and emotional development).

A well-designed and supported *infrastructure* is needed to establish, maintain, and evolve the type of a comprehensive approach to addressing barriers to student learning outlined above. Such an infrastructure includes mechanisms for coordinating among enabling activity, for enhancing resources by developing direct linkages between school and community programs, for moving toward increased integration of school and community resources, and for integrating the developmental/instructional, enabling, and management components (Creating the Infrastructure for an Enabling (Learning Support) Component to Address Barriers to Student Learning). It also includes reframing the roles of education support personnel (see Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2001).

1. A set of surveys covering the six areas is available from the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (see contact information at the end of the text). These surveys can be used as part of a school’s self-study or quality review processes to map what a school has and what it needs to address barriers to learning in a multifaceted and comprehensive manner.