

NEEDED: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ENABLING LEARNING

THE IMPERATIVE

The imperative for all of us is to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed in school and have a strong start toward being productive contributors to society. To these ends, we must raise student achievement, reduce drop out rates, address disparities among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, close racial and ethnic achievement gaps, and increase the level of expectations of – and support for – all children.

ENABLING LEARNING BY ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO LEARNING & RE-ENGAGING DISCONNECTED STUDENTS

Everyone knows that there are major factors that can interfere with learning and teaching. That is why schools institute support programs designed to mitigate and alleviate school adjustment and attendance problems, substance abuse, emotional problems, relationship difficulties, violence, physical and sexual abuse, delinquency, and dropouts. Currently though, the majority of the resources expended end up assisting only a relatively small number of students and the various efforts are terribly fragmented and marginalized in policy and practice.

New directions are needed to effectively address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage disconnected students. And such new directions must thoroughly embed mental health concerns and be fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice.

Schools and districts need to redeploy existing funds allocated for enabling learning at school. In doing so, they must weave these resources together with the invaluable resources that can be gained by collaboration with students, family members, and community stakeholders. The aim must be to assist every district and school in developing a *Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports*.

Without such a comprehensive systemic approach, ensuring every student has an equal opportunity to succeed at school and in life will remain a dream. With such a system, schools can enhance a positive school climate, increase student, home, and community engagement, increase attendance, narrow the achievement gap, and increase graduation rates.

WHERE'S IT HAPPENING?

The Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA is working with states and districts across the country that are trailblazing the way in designing and implementing a *Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports*. Hawaii's version is called a Comprehensive Student Support System; Iowa has designed a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports System; Louisiana designates its design as a Comprehensive Learning Supports System. At the district level, work is underway in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Ohio, among others.

(See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/nind7.htm>)

Such pioneering efforts have major implications for school and mental health policy and practice. Factors leading to learning, behavior, and emotional problems pose some of the most pervasive and entrenched challenges across the country, particularly in chronically low performing schools and low-income neighborhoods. Failure to directly address these matters ensures that (a) too many children and youth will continue to struggle in school and will manifest social and emotional problems, and (b) educators and mental health professionals will continue to divert sparse and precious resources to preventable problems. Every school needs rethink its approach to addressing barriers to learning and re-engaging disconnected students, and the mental health field needs to play a role in helping school develop a comprehensive system that (a) promotes healthy development, (b) prevents problems, (c) responds as early after problem onset as is feasible, and (d) provides for those whose problems are chronic and severe. To do less is to undermine our democracy.