



## *New Directions for Student Support* ... an Initiative for Connecticut \*

### ***Assuring No Child is Left Behind.\*\****

### **Enhancing Our Learning Support System by Building a Comprehensive Approach that Closes the Achievement Gap and Ensures Every Student has an Equal Opportunity to Succeed at School**

*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 Council on Education Task Force

As schools pursue their mission to educate and as communities pursue the aim of improving the quality of life of their residents, major initiatives have been introduced and progress is being made. At the same time, it is evident that there remains considerable fragmentation and significant gaps in some of our efforts to assure no child is left behind. Fortunately, we have the opportunity and are at a place where we can take the next steps in strengthening our systems for addressing barriers to development and learning and promoting healthy development.

\*The *New Directions for Student Support* initiative was established in October 2002 in response to widespread interest in mounting a strategic effort to move in new directions. It is designed to encourage advocacy for and establishment of new directions and is building a leadership network to accomplish this. The initiative is hosted and facilitated by the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, and the list of co-sponsoring associations and agencies has grown to over 30. After holding a national and three regional summits, the emphasis is now on state-wide initiatives through an initial summit followed by establishment of steering and work groups to guide the state's initiative. For the Report and participant list from the Connecticut Summit, progress updates, and information about the steering and work groups, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/currentstatus.htm>.

\*\*The following statement reflects input from participants at Connecticut's statewide summit for *New Directions for Student Support*. It also incorporates pioneering work from Hawai'i and Iowa and proposed legislation in California. It is intended to guide discussion and provide a template that can be adapted by schools, districts, and state educational agencies. To provide feedback or request additional copies of this document, contact [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

Connecticut's schools strive for excellence in education, with strong parent and community-wide support. No community, however can be satisfied until all its young people are healthy and socially competent, successful in school, and have an equal opportunity to grow into productive and contributing citizens.

## The Challenge

In recent years, there has been increasing concern about a decline in standardized achievement test scores in reading and math and about drop out rates. And, now the accountability requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) challenge us to develop ways to raise academic achievement levels of all students.

As the 2002 mission statement of the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) stresses:

*a system that  
**enables**  
all children  
to succeed*

*It is not enough to say that all children can learn or that no child will be left behind; the work involves . . . achieving the vision of an American education system that enables all children to succeed in school, work, and life.*

Our schools recognize the essential nature and challenge of providing effective learning supports to enable the learning and development of all students by preventing and reducing barriers to student success. Given achievement gaps and recent evidence of a plateau effect in many schools, it seems evident that meeting the challenge will require not only improving how we teach, but also will necessitate developing better ways for schools and communities to address factors that interfere with learning and teaching.

Reports from across the country verify earlier predictions that key facets of the *No Child Left Behind* reforms would result in modest immediate test score increases followed by a longer-term plateau. Data show that states reporting a steady few years climb in achievement test scores during the 1990s now indicate faltering levels of achievement (e.g., Florida, Michigan, Texas). California is a recent example of such a fade-out; the state's chief school officer has cautioned that a majority of the state's schools have hit a plateau or worse.

Building on  
Our History:  
Using What  
We've Learned

Everyday a wide range of learning, behavioral, physical, and emotional problems interfere with the ability of students to participate effectively and fully benefit from the instruction teachers provide. Even the best schools find that *too many* youngsters are growing up in situations where significant barriers regularly interfere with their reaching full potential.

*We understand the  
need, and we have  
examples and a  
science-base upon  
which to build.*

The notion of *barriers to learning* encompasses both external and internal factors. Some children bring with them a wide range of problems stemming from restricted opportunities associated with poverty, difficult and diverse family conditions, high rates of mobility, lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, problems related to substance abuse, inadequate health care, and lack of enrichment opportunities. Some youngsters also bring with them intrinsic conditions that make learning and performing difficult. As a result, at every grade level there are students who come to school each day not quite ready to perform and learn in the most effective manner. And, student's problems are exacerbated as they internalize the frustrations of confronting barriers to learning and the debilitating effects of performing poorly at school. All this interferes with the teacher's efforts to teach.\*

Connecticut's schools have a long-history of assisting teachers in dealing with problems that interfere with school learning. Prominent examples are seen in the range of counseling, psychological, and social service programs and in initiatives for enhancing students' assets and resiliency. A great deal is done, but efforts are fragmented and often marginalized. As a result, they are less effective than they can be. It is time to establish as a priority the development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach for addressing barriers to student learning and promoting healthy development.

Previous initiatives for enhancing student supports, in our schools and around the country, provide a foundation upon which we can build on our efforts to close the achievement gap and ensure all students have equal educational opportunities. Fortunately, the science-base provides evidence about what needs to be changed and what new directions hold promise.

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\*Clearly, addressing barriers is not at odds with the "paradigm shift" that emphasizes strengths, resilience, assets, and protective factors. Efforts to enhance positive development and improve instruction clearly can improve readiness to learn. However, it is frequently the case that preventing problems also requires direct action to remove or at least minimize the impact of barriers, such as hostile environments and intrinsic problems. Without effective direct intervention, such barriers can continue to get in the way of development and learning.

## Learning Supports: The Logic and the Science-Base

Educators recognize, and research supports, that barriers to learning demand consistent, system-wide attention. The need is for a focused, cohesive, research-based effort that engages schools and their communities in collaboratively addressing all major barriers to learning and teaching.

We are committed to strengthening learning supports for all students. The aim is to enhance our system of learning supports. The specific focus is on developing a comprehensive and adaptable learning supports framework that can be fully integrated with efforts to improve instruction and management of resources. Such a framework will guide us in pursuing essential new directions for establishing a systemic approach to enhance outcomes for students, families, schools, and neighborhoods.

The logic for policy and systemic changes to enhance learning supports stems from the following basic premises:

### ***Schools Must Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching in Order to Accomplish their Instructional Mission***

- The mission of education includes a fundamental commitment to and accountability for academic achievement.
- Children/youth must be healthy, safe, and supported if they are to achieve academically and succeed in school.
- Some students experience significant barriers to learning.
- Student achievement is improved and barriers to learning are alleviated through a system of learning supports that incorporates a full continuum of evidence-based programs and services which ensure safe, health promoting, supportive, and inclusive learning environments.

### ***School-Community-Family Collaboration is Essential***

- A full continuum of programs and services transcends what any one system can provide and requires a combination of school and community changes.
- Youngsters thrive and overcome barriers to learning when families are strengthened and assisted to find pathways to support their children's education and to pursue their own learning.
- Schools are strengthened when the efforts of community organizations and institutions are results-oriented and include policies, programs, practices, and resources that are aligned with those of schools to improve student achievement.
- Efforts to address barriers to learning are enhanced when interveners are willing to coordinate and integrate their efforts to support academic achievement.

*The logic is clear . . .*

***Cohesive Leadership and Aligned Policy are Needed at Every Level***

- Systems of learning supports require quality leaders at all levels who use effective systems of communication and data management, efficient and effective organization of resources, and well articulated planning.
- Cohesive, aligned policies and practices within a district and among its community partners are essential to effect system changes at schools.
- The role of state, regional, and local agencies is to align, assist, and support local level changes.

Beyond the logic, data show both a clear need and a science- base for learning supports. In addition to lagging reading and math scores, the need is reflected in achievement gaps and high drop out rates for subpopulations of students, such as African Americans and Hispanics, students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch, English language learners, and students with disabilities. The increased accountability and related timelines set by the *No Child Left Behind Act* places increasing pressure on schools where the population of students is diverse.

*... the science-base  
is expanding  
in volume and  
positive results.*

The science-base for learning supports is gleaned from a growing volume of research on the value of schools, families, and communities working together to provide supportive programs and services that enable students to learn and teachers to teach. Findings include improved school attendance, fewer behavior problems, improved inter-personal skills, enhanced student engagement and re-engagement in classroom learning, enhanced achievement, and increased bonding at school and at home.

All this leads to the following conclusion:

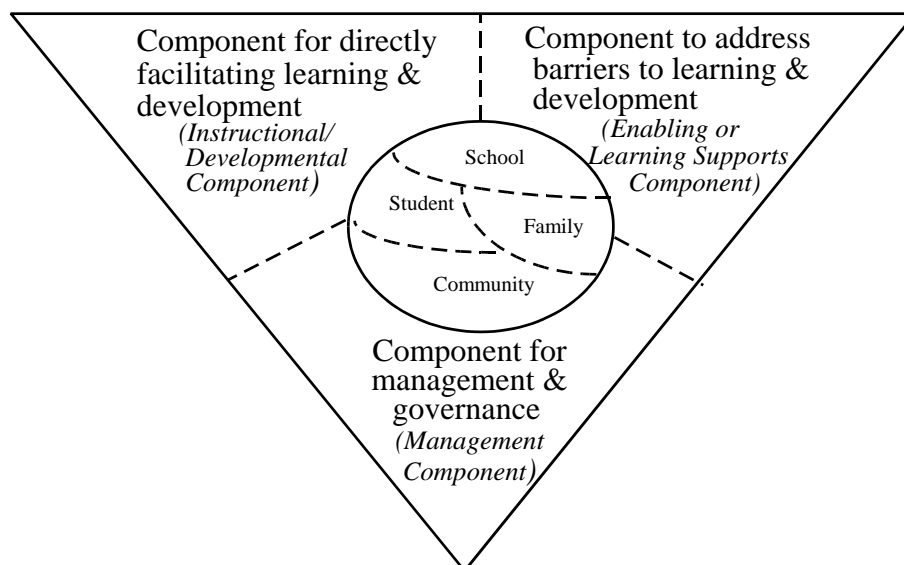
*Schools must implement and sustain a fully integrated system of learning supports into school improvement programs and practices. When a comprehensive range of learning supports are provided in a timely and effective manner, fewer students will require more intensive and expensive services. And, the learning, achievement, and performance of all children and youth will improve in ways that enable them to become self sufficient and successful members of a community and workforce.*

## Meeting the Challenge

The challenge, then, is to create a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system that supports student learning and healthy development and addresses barriers. Developing such a system of learning supports necessitates working in ways that reduce marginalization and fragmentation and minimize counterproductive competition for sparse resources. Toward these ends, we must rethink and redesign our current approach to learning supports with respect to

- policies
- intervention frameworks, standards, and accountability indicators
- infrastructure design at the school level, for a feeder pattern (to achieve economies of scale), and for providing support from the district and community, intermediate regional agencies, and the state's department of education and its agency partners.

In proceeding, we can draw upon and become part of pioneering initiatives emerging around the country that are rethinking how schools and communities meet the challenge of addressing persistent barriers to student learning. These initiatives reflect a fundamental commitment to a three component framework for school improvement (see the figure). Such a framework encompasses an agenda for developing intervention *systems* to (1) promote healthy development and prevent problems, (2) provide assistance as early as feasible after the onset of problems, and (3) address the needs of students with chronic and severe problems.



*a component to  
address barriers to  
learning and teaching*

In developing a component to address barriers to learning and development, a major emphasis is on improving neighborhood, home, school and classroom environments to prevent problems and enhance youngsters' strengths. At the same time, essential supports and assistance are provided those who need something more to address barriers and engage or re-engage them in schooling and *enable* learning. This has led to calling this facet of school-community improvement an *Enabling Component*. The usefulness of the concept of an Enabling Component as a broad unifying focal point for policy and practice is evidenced in its adoption by various states and localities around the country. These include the California and Iowa Departments of Education, whose version is called a *Learning Supports* component, and the Hawai'i Department of Education, whose version is called a *Comprehensive Student Support System*. Others have used terms such as *supportive learning environment*.

Whatever the component is called, the goals are the same:

- providing students with comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated learning supports that are accessible, timely, and strength-based so students can achieve in school, be confident and caring, and become contributing citizens in their communities;
- involve families, fellow students, educators, and community members as integral partners in the provision of a supportive, respectful learning environment; and
- integrate the human and financial resources of public and private agencies to create caring communities at each school.

The focus of such a component begins in the classroom, with differential classroom practices as the base of support for each student and extends beyond the classroom to include school and community resources. Specifically, each school is to have programs to:

- comprehensive,  
multifaceted,  
and cohesive*
- enhance the ability of the classroom teacher and other to facilitate learning through prevention and early intervention;
  - increase family involvement in schools and schooling;
  - provide support for the many transitions experienced by students and their families;
  - expand community involvement through volunteers, businesses, agencies, faith-based organizations, etc.;
  - respond to and prevent crises, violence, bullying, substance abuse, etc.;
  - provide specialized student and family assistance.

*a school committed  
to promoting equal  
opportunities for  
all students to  
succeed at school*

The above elements are essential to a school's ability to accomplish its instructional mission; it does not represent an agenda separate from that mission. Moreover, the emphasis on such programs and activities creates a school-wide culture of caring and nurturing. Such an atmosphere helps students, families, staff, and the community at large feel a school is a welcoming and supportive place that accommodates diversity and is committed to promoting equal opportunities for all students to succeed at school.

To pursue the functions involved in developing a learning supports component at a school, each school should establish:

- an administrative leader who guides and is accountable for daily implementation, monitoring, and problem solving and long-term development of the learning support component;
- a team of learning support staff (e.g., pupil services personnel) who ensure that all relevant resources are woven together to install, maintain, and evolve a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive continuum of interventions over a period of years;
- mechanisms for identifying and responding to specific student's problems based on the principle of using the least intervention necessary.

## Concluding Comments

For some youngsters, regular development and improvement in school performance and academic achievement are hampered because of the absence of comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approaches for addressing barriers to development and learning. At this stage in the ongoing development of our schools and community, it is essential to take the next steps toward ensuring such approaches are in place. By doing so, we move closer to fulfilling the intent of assuring every child reaches full potential and no child is left behind.

### **Learn More About the *New Directions for Student Support Initiative***

For detailed information on the initiative, click on "New Directions: Student Support" on the homepage of the Center for Mental Health in Schools' website – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>. It provides a list of the co-sponsors, a concept paper, reports and recommendations from the summits, progress updates, guidelines for a student support component at a school, resource aids for new directions, descriptions of trailblazing efforts, and much more.

*Interested in being involved in the New Directions for Student Support Initiative?* See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm> or email [smhp@ucla.edu](mailto:smhp@ucla.edu) | Ph. Toll free (866) 846-4843 | (310) 825-3634 | Fax: (310) 206-8716