Data Related to the Need for New Directions for School Improvement
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/data.pdf

Commonly heard these days:

> *In God we trust;*
> *from all others demand data.*

Increasingly, policy makers and others who make decisions are demanding:

> *Show me the data!*

Proposals for new directions are consistently met with demands from policy makers for data showing that the additional effort will immediately improve student achievement. Too often, essential systemic changes are not made because of this inadequate appreciation of (1) the growing body of evidence indicating a plateau effect related to prevailing approaches to school improvement, (2) analyses focusing on what's missing in such approaches, and (3) the existing research base supporting development of comprehensive, multifaceted approaches to address barriers to learning and promote healthy development.

The Leveling Off or Plateau Effect

As schools strive valiantly to meet the accountability demands of the No Child Left Behind Act, reports from across the country indicate modest immediate test increases followed by a longer-term plateau effect. Available evidence suggests that prevailing strategies for increasing achievement test scores generate score inflation for the first few years then test averages level off.[1-4] There are many reasons for this, one of which is the marked deficiencies in prevailing approaches to school improvement.

What's Missing?

The current demands for accountability have been accompanied by a "no excuses" response to discussions of what's missing in efforts to improve schools and schooling. While this has had an impact on discourse, the data remain clear about the many factors associated with subpar student performance and the achievement gap.[5,6]

A related set of findings supporting the need for new directions comes from policy analyses indicating that prevailing school improvement planning guides fail to adequately address barriers to learning and teaching. These data all support the reality that student supports are fragmented and marginalized, and that there is no comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching.[7,8]

Beyond the Plateau: Pathway Indicators of the Value of New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning

The concept of addressing barriers to learning, development, and teaching suggests that there is a need for schools to enable learning by effectively dealing with such barriers. The focus is on interventions that establish pathways for students around barriers and that move them toward enhanced engagement in classroom learning.

The immediate and direct indicators that such interventions are effective are data showing that students are on the right pathways. And, there is an extensive body of literature on the value of schools, families, and communities working together to provide such interventions.[9-12] Findings include improved school attendance, fewer behavior problems, improved interpersonal skills, increased bonding at school and at home, some indicators of enhanced achievement, and other positive outcomes for school and society.[13]

Improvements in academic achievement are long-term indicators. They are only attainable if enabling pathways are achieved and obviously are dependent on the subsequent effectiveness of classroom instruction.

Because of the fragmented nature of available studies on student supports, the findings are best appreciated in terms of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts, and implications are best derived from a "big picture" perspective. When such a broad perspective is adopted, schools have a larger science-base to draw upon in addressing barriers to learning and enhancing healthy development.

The research-base supporting development of a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching has been spotlighted.[14] The findings have been organized into the six arenas of an enabling or learning supports component:[6] (1) enhancing classroom teachers' capacity for addressing problems and for fostering positive social, emotional, intellectual, behavioral and physical development, (2) enhancing school capacity to handle transition concerns confronting students and families, (3) responding to, minimizing impact of, and preventing crisis, (4) enhancing home involvement, (5) outreaching to the community to build linkages and collaborations, and (6) providing special assistance to students and families.

It also is relevant to note data from the many "natural" experiments underscoring the promise of ensuring that all youngsters have access to a comprehensive, multifaceted set of interventions. These natural experiments play out in every school and neighborhood where families are affluent enough to purchase the additional programs and services they feel will maximize their youngsters' well-being. Those who can afford such interventions clearly understand their value. And, not surprisingly, most indicators of well-being, including higher achievement test scores, are correlated with socio-economic status. Available data highlight societal inequities that can be remedied through cost-effective public financing.[15]

Taken as a whole, the research-base for initiatives to pursue a comprehensive focus on addressing barriers indicates the value of a range of activity that can enable students to learn and teachers to teach. The findings also underscore that addressing major psychosocial problems one at a time is unwise because the problems are interrelated and require multifaceted and cohesive solutions. In all, the literature supports the need for new directions, offers content for learning supports, and stresses the importance of coalescing such activity into a comprehensive, multifaceted approach.

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