To: Those Interested in the Race to the Top Initiative

From: Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor, co-directors of the center at UCLA

Now that the USDOE has finalized the guidance for the Race to the Top proposals, the clock is ticking. The proposals for the first round are due by Jan 16th. (The application guidance is online at http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html.)

We have been pleased to note interest in exploring ways to fully integrate a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports into Race to the Top proposals. This bodes well for moving schools forward in ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

There are six priorities outlined in the application. For those interested in including learning supports in their Race to the Top applications, it has been tempting to focus on priorities 5 and 6. (Invitational priority 5 “Coordination, Vertical and Horizontal Alignment”; Invitational priority 6, stresses “School level Conditions for Reform, Innovation, and Learning.”) Unfortunately, these priorities are not awarded points in the application. (This reflects the continuing marginalization of efforts to help schools develop a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.)

Therefore, the benefits of including a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports come from integrating such a component into the Priority 1 – the Absolute Priority "Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform." Such a system is an integral component of school transformation and improvement and needs to be fully integrated with the instructional and management/governance components.

To these ends, Priority 1 needs to delineate a commitment to designing and strategically planning the phasing-in and scaling-up of a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports across a state (and then using the invitational priorities 5 and 6 to elaborate on how the system fits there as well).

In including a focus on a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports, the main themes that can be highlighted (and embellished in many ways) are as follows:

   In transforming schools across the state and especially in turning around the lowest achieving schools, the emphasis will not only be on enhancing personalized instruction and improved management and governance of resources. Our state is ready to be one of the first states over the next five years to implement and sustain a comprehensive system of learning supports at every school in order to increase the likelihood that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed K-12 and beyond. We will begin with schools in need of immediate turn-around.

   The state will develop an innovative prototype design for such a comprehensive system of learning supports with the intent of markedly improving how our schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. The system will not only enhance coordination of resources, it will reduce redundancy and redeploy resources by weaving together overlapping school and community efforts to reduce behavior problems (including bullying and other forms of school violence), reduce dropouts and increase graduation rates, close achievement gaps, and better enable students to go on to postsecondary education.

   Using a unifying concept, the design unites a full continuum of interventions with a research-based articulation of the content needed to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students in classrooms and school-wide. The continuum stresses vertical and horizontal alignment and integration of three subsystems within schools, among families of schools, between school and community, and at district, regional, and state agencies. The subsystems focus on three levels: (1) promoting healthy development and preventing problems, (2) intervening as early after onset of a problem as is feasible, and (3) providing for those with severe, pervasive, and chronic problems. The content focus is on six critical overlapping arenas for classroom and
school-wide support. These supports encompass the need for enabling learning and teaching through a cohesive system that provides: (a) classroom-based strategies designed to enhance engagement and re-engage disconnected students, (b) transition interventions that address a full range of transition concerns, (c) home involvement outreach and engagement interventions, (d) community involvement outreach and engagement interventions, (e) crisis response and prevention, and (f) student and family assistance for those with severe, pervasive, and chronic problems.

It is from the development of such a comprehensive system of learning supports that an increasingly safe and nurturing school climate and culture emerges. And, it is by coalescing all student and learning support resources into a primary school improvement component that schools are better positioned to play a greater role in strengthening students and their families and neighborhoods and to become the heart of their communities.

It is important not only to describe the proposed system but to highlight the strategic approach to “getting there from here” (i.e., the strategic plan for implementing, rolling out, sustaining, and evaluating the Comprehensive Learning Supports System as a fully integrated component in the school turnaround/ transformation process). In particular, we suggest including a strong description of the operational infrastructure mechanisms (leaders and staff work groups) that will be put in place to ensure the necessary capacity building, realignment of resources and interventions, and accountability for systemic changes. Realignment needs to address horizontal and vertical coherence and cohesion (e.g., horizontal – across the department and with other stakeholders/resources at all levels and especially cross division, cross agency and connecting school-community; vertical – state, regional, district, school). It also needs to include budgeting related to additional but temporary costs of the operational work at the state, regional, districts, and school levels.

There are places throughout the proposal where reference to such an innovative component for school transformation and improvement can be made. We would be pleased to share our thoughts about this with anyone who is interested. Also, our Center can provide many references to support this facet of any proposal. Contact: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

We hope you find some of this useful. Please let us know if we can do more to help.