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. They recognize that 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.

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. All three components are seen as essential, complementary, and overlapping. 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.

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.

Operationalizing an enabling component requires (a) formulating a delimited framework of basic program areas and then (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 Exhibit on the following pages).1

A well-designed and supported infrastructure is needed to establish, maintain, and evolve this type of comprehensive approach to addressing barriers to student learning. 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. It also includes reframing the roles of education support personnel.2

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1 Also, see the surveys covering the six areas in the tools section of this Quick Training Aid. These 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.

2 Documents describing infrastructure mechanisms and new roles for support staff also are available from the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA and can be downloaded from the website. For example, See Training Tutorial entitled Creating the Infrastructure for an Enabling (Learning Support) Component to Address Barriers to Student Learning.
Exhibit

“Curriculum” Areas for an Enabling Component

(1) Enhancing teacher capacity for addressing problems and for fostering social, emotional, intellectual and behavioral development. When a classroom teacher encounters difficulty in working with a youngster, the first step is to see whether there are ways to address the problem within the classroom and perhaps with added home involvement. It is essential to equip teachers to respond to garden variety learning, behavior, and emotional problems using more than social control strategies for classroom management. Teachers must be helped to learn many ways to enable the learning of such students, and schools must develop school-wide approaches to assist teachers in doing this fundamental work. The literature offers many relevant practices. A few prominent examples are: prereferral intervention efforts, tutoring (e.g., one-to-one or small group instruction), enhancing protective factors, and assets building (including use of curriculum-based approaches to promoting social emotional development). Outcome data related to such matters indicate that they do make a difference.

(2) Enhancing school capacity to handle the variety of transition concerns confronting students and their families. It has taken a long time for schools to face up to the importance of establishing transition programs. In recent years a beginning has been made. Transition programs are an essential facet of reducing levels of alienation and increasing levels of positive attitudes toward and involvement at school and learning activity. Thus, schools must plan, develop, and maintain a focus on transition concerns confronting students and their families. Examples of relevant practices are readiness to learn programs, before, during, and after school programs to enrich learning and provide safe recreation, articulation programs (for each new step in formal education, vocational and college counseling, support in moving to and from special education, support in moving to post school living and work), welcoming and social support programs, to and from special education programs, and school-to-career programs. Enabling successful transitions has made a significant difference in how motivationally ready and able students are to benefit from schooling.

(3) Responding to minimizing impact, and preventing crises. The need for crisis response and prevention is constant in many schools. Such efforts ensure assistance is provided when emergencies arise and follow-up care is provided when necessary and appropriate so that students are able to resume learning without undue delays. Prevention activity stresses creation of a safe and productive environment and the development of student and family attitudes about and capacities for dealing with violence and other threats to safety. Examples of school efforts include (1) systems and programs for emergency/crisis response at a site, throughout a complex/family of schools, and community-wide (including a program to ensure follow-up care) and (2) prevention programs for school and community to address safety and violence reduction, child abuse and suicide prevention, and so forth. Examples of relevant practices are establishment of a crisis team to ensure crisis response and aftermath interventions are planned and implemented, school environment changes and safety strategies, and curriculum approaches to preventing crisis events (violence, suicide, and physical/sexual abuse prevention). Current trends stress school- and community-wide prevention programs.

(cont.)
(4) Enhancing home involvement. In recent years, the trend has been to expand the nature and scope of the school’s focus on enhancing home involvement. Intervention practices encompass efforts to (1) address specific learning and support needs of adults in the home (e.g., classes to enhance literacy, job skills, ESL, mutual support groups), (2) help those in the home meet their basic obligations to their children, (3) improve systems to communicate about matters essential to student and family, (4) enhance the home-school connection and sense of community, (5) enhance participation in making decisions that are essential to the student, (6) enhance home support related to the student’s basic learning and development, (7) mobilize those at home to problem solve related to student needs, and (8) 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 the Family and Community Service Center Facility if one has been established at the site).

(5) Outreaching to the community to build linkages and collaborations. The aim of outreach to the community is to develop greater involvement in schooling and enhance support for efforts to enable learning. Outreach may be made to (a) public and private community agencies, colleges, organizations, and facilities, (b) businesses and professional organizations and groups, and (c) volunteer service programs, organizations and clubs. Efforts in this area might include 1) programs to recruit and enhance community involvement and support (e.g., linkages and integration with community health and social services; cadres of volunteers, mentors, and others with special expertise and resources; local businesses to adopt-a-school and provide resources, awards, incentives, and jobs; formal partnership arrangements), 2) systems and programs specifically designed to train, screen, and maintain volunteers (e.g., parents, college students, senior citizens, peer and cross-age tutors/counselors, and professionals-in-training to provide direct help for staff and students--especially targeted students), 3) outreach programs to hard-to-involve students and families (those who don’t come to school regularly--including truants and dropouts), and 4) programs to 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 Family and Community Service Center Facility might be a context for some of this activity. (Note: When there is an emphasis on bringing community services to school sites, care must be taken to avoid creating a new form of fragmentation where community and school professionals engage in a form of parallel play at school sites.)

(6) Providing special assistance for students and families. Some problems cannot be handled without a few special interventions; thus the need for student and family assistance. The emphasis is on providing special services in a personalized way to assist with a broad range of needs. School-owned,- based, and -linked interventions clearly provide better access for many youngsters and their families. Moreover, as a result of initiatives that enhance school-owned support programs and those fostering school-linked services and school-community partnerships (e.g., full service schools, family resource centers, etc.), more schools have more to offer in the way of student and family assistance. In current practice, available social, physical and mental health programs in the school and community are used. Special attention is paid to enhancing systems for prereferral intervention, triage, case and resource management, direct services to meet immediate needs, and referral for special services and special education resources and placements as appropriate. A growing body of data indicates the current contribution and future promise of work in this area.