## Transforming Schools to Better Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching: While Some Schools Don't Need to Do It, Most Do!

In response to our Center's emphasis of transforming school improvement policy to better address barriers to learning and teaching, a superintendent recently told us his district was doing well without making changes. We note that his district is rather small and serves a predominately white and economically advantaged student body. So he, of course, is right. (We do wonder, however, how well the current system in his district is working for whatever number of students are experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems.)

At any rate, it is clear that things are not working well at many urban and rural schools serving students from economically disadvantaged communities. Remedies have tended to amount to adding one or two support staff, tinkering with current practices, adding another program, and delineating yet another set of things for teacher to learn how to cope with. The proposed changes stem from real needs and usually follow any event that increases public concern about matters such as violence at schools, bullying, dropouts, toxic stress, student trauma, depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns, etc.

While special initiatives to address a specific problem in school usually are well-intentioned (and when extramural funds are attached, budget-starved schools generally find special initiatives almost irresistible). However, ad hoc additions can have pernicious effects on school improvement. For example: (a) a new initiative often reduces attention to other important concerns – especially when budgets are tight; (b) many such initiatives are keyed to a relatively few students; (c) projects funded extramurally tend to be short-lived; (d) piecemeal policies and practices further fragment what is already a too scattered approach to ameliorating problems. Of greatest consequence, however, is that this type of tinkering tends to exacerbate the ongoing marginalization of efforts to make fundamental systemic changes in how student and learning supports are provided.

The reality is that schools are constantly confronted with requests and mandates that can't all be assimilated in the short-run without interfering with what already is in progress and what needs to be developed into a coherent, comprehensive, and equitable system if significant, long-lasting progress is to be made.

So it is not surprising that a common reaction of many administrators, teachers, and student support staff is: *Enough - we can't take on another thing!*

In terms of public education policy, a considerable part of the problem in improving student/learning supports in substantive and sustainable ways lies with the reality that prevailing policy stresses a two component framework for school improvement. One component emphasizes enhancing instruction; the other intends to improve the management/governance of schools. Some attention, of course, also is given to student and schooling problems. However, in most school districts, these matters are at best a secondary concern in school improvement planning and practice.

What most schools need to do is transform their policies and practices for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. Such a transformation involves

(1) adopting a school improvement policy framework for unifying (not just coordinating and integrating) school approaches to providing student/learning supports

and then

(2) working on developing the supports into a comprehensive and equitable system that weaves togetherschool and community resources.

This is the focus of the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports in 2020.*
For details see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/winter2020.pdf

**What's your take on all this?**

Best wishes,
Howard & Linda

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