
From the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

Is your School Board Prioritizing a Focus on Helping Schools Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching?

*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

We just finished reading a new report on school boards –

>*California School Boards Navigating Democracy in Divided Times* (September 2025)

<https://rossier.usc.edu/documents/policyhub-csb1>

It offers important insights into the challenges school boards face.

But here's the problem: like so many reports on school improvement, **it pays little attention to the student/learning supports urgently needed by so many students and school staff.**

This gap is reflected in a statement from one of the board members interviewed:

“... priorities of academic achievement and equity come into conflict. I have found that it's much easier for folks to prioritize academic achievement and the fixation around data and dashboards, and test scores.”

This mindset is widespread—and it's a mistake. Academic achievement cannot be separated from addressing barriers to learning and teaching. When boards ignore this, they undermine their own goals for equity and excellence.

The unfortunate fact is that school boards tend to **marginalize discussions about addressing barriers to learning and teaching.** And, the report's data collection, analysis, and recommendations do so as well.

The Realities Boards Can't Ignore

- Student need for supports is growing. More students than ever struggle with learning, behavior, and emotional challenges.
- Schools already invest heavily. In some schools it is estimated that up to 25% of resources go toward addressing barriers to learning and teaching—yet outcomes remain unsatisfactory.
- Current efforts are fragmented. Psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, and special programs operate in silos, competing for scarce resources.

This fragmentation isn't accidental—it's the result of policy neglect. Student/learning supports have been marginalized in school improvement planning for decades.

The consequence? Wasted resources, frustrated staff, and students who fall through the cracks.

Research shows the fragmentation stems from the marginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy. The scope of need and the shortcomings of current approaches make it clear: a transformative shift is essential (see <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>). This isn't about adding new programs—it's about transforming how schools use what they already have to better serve students and staff.

School Boards Need to Prioritize Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

School boards have the authority—and the responsibility—to ensure every student has a real opportunity to succeed. Given the importance and complexity of this, that means moving beyond dashboards and test scores to tackle the root causes of underachievement.

School boards can and must play a leadership role related to ending the marginalization of student/learning supports. The call to action is to focus on doing what they can to *transform*

- a) how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and
- b) how districts can facilitate such a transformation.

Our research found that working on these matters requires prioritizing as a standing agenda item a focus on unifying available resources for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and developing them into a comprehensive and equitable system.

The work is greatly facilitated when the board's operational infrastructure is redesigned to establish a standing subcommittee charged with developing recommendations for how schools can use existing school (and community) resources to develop such a system.

For more on this – including discussion of the primary functions related to the needed work and the composition of a standing subcommittee – see:

> *School Boards Must Pursue New Directions to Help Schools Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/winter25.pdf>

Best wishes and be well,

Howard & Linda

Howard Adelman, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology & Center Co director

Linda Taylor, Ph.D., Center Co director

Dept. of Psychology, UCLA

Emails: adelman@psych.ucla.edu Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Website: <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>