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

Facing and Addressing Realities Before More Students Fall Through the Cracks

National indicators make it painfully clear: a substantial proportion of students are not doing well academically, developmentally, or in terms of engagement. While the prevailing response pursues this as primarily an instructional problem, the reality is broader and deeper. What we are witnessing is a *systemic failure*, not an instructional one.

Schools cannot continue relying on the same marginalized and fragmented approaches to student and learning supports. The data point toward an urgent need for fundamental, systemic changes in how schools (and the communities that work with them) address barriers to learning and teaching. This means building on existing strengths while also de-implementing practices that impede progress toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

Academic Struggles Are Widespread

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data indicate that:

- About 40% of fourth graders and one-third of eighth graders perform below the basic level in reading.
- National reading proficiency remains at 30-31%, meaning roughly 70% of students are not meeting proficiency standards.

Whatever the limitations of these assessments, the pattern is unmistakable: these are not isolated pockets of under-performance but widespread, systemic challenges requiring systemic solutions.

Student Engagement Is Eroding

Chronic absenteeism (missing at least 10% of the school year) remains at elevated levels nationwide. In many urban districts:

- 30% or more of students are chronically absent.
- Urban districts are five to six times more likely than suburban or rural districts to report extreme absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism is widely recognized as a symptom of unaddressed barriers, including unsafe environments, negative home conditions, peer problems, and personal vulnerabilities. *Addressing these challenges is beyond the reach of instruction alone.*

Gaps Are Widening, Especially for the Most Vulnerable

Recent analyses show:

- Achievement gaps have widened significantly, particularly for students in the lowest quartile, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations.
- Many students whose learning was disrupted during the pandemic have advanced in grade level without recovering lost opportunities, while 35 million younger students now follow without the supports necessary to thrive.

The message is unmistakable: schools cannot rely on pre-pandemic practices to meet post-pandemic needs.

What the Data Mean for School Improvement

The scale and persistence of these challenges underscore that doing “more of the same” will not meet the moment. Schools need a schoolwide learning supports component that:

- Is fully integrated—not marginalized—in school improvement policy and practice.
- Unifies and organizes currently fragmented disjointed, but promising interventions.
- Aligns and collaborates with overlapping community interventions to strategically develop and implement a comprehensive and equitable system.

A well designed learning supports system moves beyond MTSS in enabling schools to prevent problems where possible, intervene early when issues arise, and play a role in ensuring chronic problems are appropriately addressed.

The Bottom Line

The most recent national data tell a consistent story: large numbers of students are struggling not just because of instructional shortcomings, but because schools lack a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

Transforming the current approach to providing student and learning supports is not optional. It is essential.

Here’s a start, see --

An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports:

A Month by Month Guide for Systemic Change with Existing Resources

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/agendapaper.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/>