

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

Mental Health in Schools: Taking Stock, Moving Ahead

*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 Adolescent Development

If you don't agree with the above quote, you may not be interested in what follows.

Are Schools Meeting The Challenge? Certainly part of meeting the needs of all students involves addressing concerns about mental health. And such concerns undoubtedly should be a high priority for society. However, students, parents, and school staff are confronted every day with a range of *learning, behavior, and emotional problems*, and the pandemic has increased the numbers.

Given the mission of schools is education, the specific challenge for them is to improve the role they play in directly confronting many factors negatively affecting students' learning. These factors include a full range of pervasive and complex barriers to learning and teaching.

So how well are schools meeting the challenge?

Taking Stock. We suspect that the findings from our research on student/learning supports before the pandemic remain true. Districts and schools taking stock likely will conclude that the long-standing piecemeal and disjointed approach to providing student/learning supports is still the situation at most schools. And the review of current practices will highlight that student/learning supports tend to be marginalized in school improvement policies and plans.

In some schools, principals have reported that up to 25 percent of their budget is consumed in efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching. Because school budgets are always tight, cost-effectiveness is a constant consideration. Analyses indicate limited results and redundancy in resource use. Rivalry for sparse resources also has produced counterproductive competition among support staff and with community-based professionals who link with schools. And these deficiencies typically are compounded as schools strive to meet immediate demands for more services.

Schools cannot continue to spend all the time of student and learning support staff responding to the culture of crisis that dominates efforts to address barriers to teaching and learning and reengage disconnected students and their families. To do so means maintaining the marginalization, fragmentation, counterproductive competition, redundancy, and limited outcomes that characterize most schools' approach to providing student/learning supports.

Meeting the Challenge. Moving ahead at this time involves

- >rethinking student and learning supports and the roles and functions of staff providing such supports
- >approaching learning, behavior, and emotional problems as interrelated concerns
- >using an umbrella concept, such as addressing barriers to learning, to create a *unified component* the various programs and initiatives currently being implemented for that purpose

(e.g., MTSS, Community Schools, integrated services, social emotional learning as a response to problems, response to intervention, trauma informed practices, suicide and substance use prevention, crisis response, special efforts to close the opportunity and achievement gaps, etc., etc., etc....)

>adopting a design and a multiyear strategic plan for developing the unified component into a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports.

Here are some first steps that can be taken to improve student/learning supports at schools and the district level (and even at regional, state, and federal levels).

- (1) Establish a *Learning Supports Leadership Team* (See “*What is a learning supports leadership team?*” – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/resource%20coord%20team.pdf>) The prototype described can be adapted to fit current settings and situations.
- (2) Have the team
 - (a) map existing student/learning support resources -- see “*Mapping & Analyzing Learning Supports and An Aid for Initial Listing of Current Resources Used at a School for Addressing Barriers Learning and Teaching*” – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf>
 - (b) analyze what's working, what needs strengthening, and critical gaps
 - (c) develop a set of prioritized recommendations for moving toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports
 - (d) present the recommendations for approval.
- (3) As soon as a set of proposed improvements are approved, establish a workgroup to develop a strategic action plan that details the who, what, and when of the steps forward.
- (4) Assign the Learning Supports Leadership Team to guide implementation of the strategic plan.

Some General Resources from the Center to Aid in Moving Forward

- >*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
- >*Improving School Improvement*
- >*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
all three can be accessed at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html
- >*Restructuring California Schools to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching in the COVID 19 Context and Beyond*
https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/pb_adelman_nov2020.pdf
(At the end of 2020, we were invited to prepare this brief by the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). The content, of course, is applicable to other states.)
- > *Evolving Community Schools and Transforming Student/Learning Supports*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/evolvecomm.pdf>

A host of other free resources to aid in the transformation process are available on the Center's website <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> – for example, see the *System Change Toolkit*

Note: The many reports, journal articles, chapters, and books related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and transforming student and learning supports that we have generated in recent years are catalogued at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/materials/resources.htm> .

Our Center offers free technical assistance and coaching if you need it -- see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>

We don't have email addresses for all who we hope will read this, so please share this with your colleagues.

And as always, we ask that you share with us whatever you think others might find relevant.

Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Best wishes, be well,

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