

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

About School Accountability Data and Improving Student and Learning Supports

This week WestEd highlighted the importance of using accountability data to identify where school improvement is needed and to learn what works over time. We strongly support the use of data for continuous school and system improvement. Our concern, however, is that current accountability measures continue to limit meaningful school improvement by marginalizing the essential role of student and learning supports.

This long-standing concern is underscored in the recent report, *New Directions for Student and Learning Supports: From Fragmented Initiatives to System Transformation* (view report at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Newdirs.pdf>).

As the report emphasizes:

Accountability is a policy tool with extraordinary power to reshape schools, for better and for worse. Systems are driven by what they measure. Yet current accountability frameworks place far greater emphasis on academic outcomes than on the conditions that influence learning and development. Consequently, factors that affect students' opportunities to learn often receive insufficient attention in school improvement efforts.

Simply put, what gets measured becomes a priority. As long as accountability systems focus primarily on test scores and other academic outcomes, efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching will remain vulnerable to marginalization.

Current accountability pressures often sideline initiatives that are not seen as producing immediate gains in achievement scores. The result is a growing disconnect between what research and experience tell us is needed to improve learning and what policy makers and school reformers emphasize. This disconnect is especially evident in schools serving students living in poverty, where educators confront daily barriers that interfere with students' ability to benefit from classroom instruction.

Expanding School Accountability to Improve Student and Learning Supports

Across the country, there is growing recognition of factors that affect students' ability to engage, learn, and succeed at school. Too often, however, student and learning supports remain fragmented, marginalized, and only loosely connected to the broader school improvement agenda. As a result, schools continue to struggle with duplication, service gaps, inefficient use of resources, and limited impact relative to the scope of need.

An expanded accountability framework is needed. Such a framework should include direct indicators of the impact of student and learning supports, including:

- Improved attendance
- Reduced tardiness
- Reduced disciplinary incidents
- Less bullying and harassment

- Increased family engagement
- Fewer referrals for specialized services
- Fewer referrals for special education
- Reduced suspensions
- Reduced dropout rates

Benchmark measures of such factors provide a more complete picture of school effectiveness and help ensure sustained attention to the direct impact of the efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

The policy implications are straightforward. Schools need more than additional programs, services, and isolated initiatives.

They need an expanded framework for school improvement and accountability that fully incorporates a comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

Addressing barriers to learning and teaching must be recognized as a primary and essential function of schooling, and accountability measures should reflect that reality. This requires moving beyond the traditional two-component model of school improvement and establishing a third component devoted to student and learning supports. The goal is not to create one more initiative; it is to organize existing resources into a unified, comprehensive, equitable, and sustainable system.

Ultimately, the future of student and learning supports does not depend on launching another program or adding another fragmented service. It depends on transforming a school's approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

The central messages are clear:

- **Improving instruction and transforming student and learning supports are not competing agendas. Together, they define a comprehensive approach to school improvement.**
- **The next major frontier in school improvement is the transformation of student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, equitable, and sustainable system.**

>For a prototype accountability framework, see <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/account.pdf> .

>For guidance and resources related to transforming student and learning supports, see the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html> .

Let's stay connected and feel free to contact us at any time. If you would like, we can add you to our Center listserv; we send out resources and more each week.

Best wishes and be well,

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