

Leadership for Developing and Sustaining a Student and Learning Supports System

Successful student and learning supports depend not only on effective practices but also on the leadership and infrastructure needed to organize, coordinate, and sustain them. Schools and districts that establish leadership, planning, and accountability mechanisms for student and learning supports are better positioned to reduce fragmentation, strengthen implementation, and maintain progress over time.

Recognition of the need for high level leadership for student and learning supports is seen in recent efforts by school districts to recruit an “Assistant Superintendent Student & Family Support.” Here is how the role is described:

>Seattle Public Schools (WA) – “The Assistant Superintendent of Student and Family Support provides executive leadership, strategic direction, and districtwide oversight for a comprehensive portfolio of services designed to promote student well-being, safety, engagement, belonging, and success. Reporting directly to the Superintendent and serving as a member of the Superintendent’s Cabinet, this position works collaboratively with district and school leaders, families, community organizations, government agencies, and external partners to ensure students and families have access to coordinated, equitable, and effective supports.

The Assistant Superintendent provides leadership and oversight for departments and functions including, but not limited to, Safety and Security, Coordinated School Health, Student Discipline, Family Outreach and Engagement, and district partnerships, including tutoring, mentoring, community-based programs, and partnerships with the City of Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL).” See job description at

<https://www.governmentjobs.com/jobs/5451232-0/assistant-superintendent-student-family-support>

>Covington Independent Public Schools (KY) – “Build and lead an integrated system of academic, behavioral, health, mental-health, family, and postsecondary supports so that barriers are identified early, services are coordinated, schools are held to high expectations, and every student is known, supported, safe, and prepared for life after graduation.” See job description at

<https://www.applitrack.com/covingtonky/onlineapp/default.aspx?AppliTrackPostingSearch=Assistant%20Superintendent>

We see these developments as a promising step forward and an opportunity for districts to initiate a fundamental transformation in how they address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage students in classroom learning.

Major Functions for Leading Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Support

While the current job descriptions appropriately emphasize oversight of services and programs, the next step is to define responsibilities that ensure development, implementation, and long-term sustainability of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.* This moves beyond administering existing programs to leading systemic transformation.

For a Student/Learning Supports System to become a primary and essential component of school improvement, it is imperative that the administrative leader be a full partner in district governance, planning, advisory, and steering bodies. The leader’s responsibilities encompass four interrelated functions:

I. Establishing and Maintaining Leadership and Organizational Infrastructure

Provide leadership for creating and sustaining the policy, planning, operational, and accountability structures needed to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports throughout the district. This includes ensuring that student and learning supports are an integral component of school improvement policy, planning, implementation, and evaluation at district

and school levels.

II. Guiding Systemic Changes to Enhance School Supports

Lead strategic efforts to strengthen and unify programs, services, and initiatives intended to address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage disconnected students. Guide the redesign of existing interventions so they function as a coherent system rather than as separate and often fragmented programs. Promote continuous improvement, innovation, and accountability for equitable outcomes.

III. Enhancing School-Community Linkages and Partnerships

Provide leadership for developing, coordinating, and sustaining collaborative relationships with families, community agencies, higher education, businesses, health and mental health organizations, and other stakeholders. Ensure that community resources are mobilized and woven effectively into the district's student and learning supports system, expanding capacity while reducing fragmentation, duplication, and gaps in services.

IV. Building Capacity for Transformation and Sustainability

Develop the knowledge, skills, and commitment of administrators, student support personnel, teachers, families, community partners, and other stakeholders to carry out and sustain system transformation. This includes providing leadership for professional learning, coaching, technical assistance, succession planning, and ongoing stakeholder development designed to support both implementation and long-term sustainability.

The following examples illustrate the types of responsibilities and accountabilities that should be incorporated into job descriptions for district leaders charged with developing and sustaining a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

- Leads development, implementation, evaluation, and continuous refinement of a strategic plan for building and sustaining a cohesive and comprehensive student/learning support system, including benchmarks, indicators of progress, and mechanisms for accountability and ongoing improvement.
- Represents the Student/Learning Supports System at the decision making, administrative, and planning tables to address policy implementation, budget allocations, systemic changes and daily operations, infrastructure development, maintenance, and interface with instruction and governance, information management, development of an effective communication system, development of an effective system for evaluation and accountability with an emphasis on positive accomplishments and quality improvement
- Monitors and provides support, guidance, visibility, public relations, and advocacy for the system at the school and in the community (e.g., maintaining a high level of interest, support, and involvement with respect to the system)
- Ensures effective communication, coordination, and integration among those involved in the Student/Learning Supports System and the district's instructional and management/governance systems.
- Leads a Steering Committee that reviews and monitors progress, guides long-range planning, facilitates problem solving, and acts as a catalyst for the ongoing development of a comprehensive Student/Learning Supports System and its full integration into school improvement planning and implementation.
- Develops a student/learning supports leadership team to facilitate progress related to plans and priorities for the system's ongoing operations and development.
- Mentors and helps restructure the roles and functions of key Student/Learning Supports staff (e.g., pupil services personnel and others whose roles and functions fall within the major facets of the system); in particular, helps redefine traditional pupil service roles and functions in ways that enable them to contribute to all content domains and the major levels of the intervention continuum encompassed by a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

- Anticipates and identifies problems and provides rapid problem solving.
- Identifies immediate and future capacity building needs related to the system (e.g., status of stakeholder development and particularly inservice staff development), takes steps to ensure that plans are made to meet needs, and ensures that an appropriate amount of capacity building is devoted to system transformation, daily operation, and sustainability.
- Meets with the Staff Lead for Learning Supports on a regular basis to review progress and discuss and advocate for ways to enhance progress.

About Improving Student/Learning Supports

The responsibilities outlined above are intended to support development of a transformed Student/Learning Supports System. Such a system encompasses:

(a) a full continuum of school-community intervention subsystems ranging from promoting healthy development and preventing problems, through intervention early after onset, to treatment of serious problems and

(b) programs, services, and initiatives organized into a delimited set of content domains.

(Note: the content arenas include a focus on major concerns such as: (1) enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning, (2) providing support for the many transitions experienced by students and families, (3) increasing home and school connections, (4) responding to and preventing crises, (5) facilitating student and family access to effective specialized assistance as needed, and (6) expanding community involvement and support.)

Developing and sustaining such a system requires leadership that extends beyond administration of existing programs. It requires a designated leader with responsibility and accountability for guiding systemic change, building capacity, fostering collaboration, and ensuring that student and learning supports become a fully integrated and enduring component of school improvement policy and practice.

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>

Best wishes and be well,

Howard & Linda

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