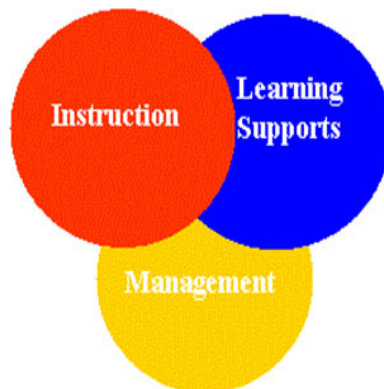# Building on MTSS to Enhance How Schools Address Barriers to Learning

(2025)

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*Initially, the Center was named the *Center for Mental Health in Schools*; in 2017, to more fully underscore the breadth of the work, the Center name was expanded.

*The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise
lies not in developing new ideas
but in escaping old ones.*

John Maynard Keynes

Over the last decade, an increasing number of districts and schools have adopted/adapted a multi-tiered support system (MTSS). The investments in some states have been in the millions. For example, California has allocated 95 million to date to establish its version of MTSS statewide.

Over the last five years, a variety of concerns have arisen across the country about how well MTSS is meeting teachers' needs for student/learning supports. Some concerns have emphasized implementation problems.

Our concern has stressed that MTSS is not doing much to end the fragmentation and marginalization that has long characterized the ways that schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. We suggest that it is essential to realize that more is involved in building a truly comprehensive system of student/learning supports than the emphasis on a continuum of interventions. That is, while a full continuum is essential, it is just one facet of a comprehensive intervention system. Given this, we view schools using MTSS as their intervention framework continue to limit understanding of why school improvement policy marginalizes student/learning supports.

It is time to (1) end the maginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and (2) evolve MTSS into an intervention framework that guides development of student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

In what follows, we briefly highlight MTSS' concerns and limitations with respect to addressing barriers to learning. This analysis is followed by discussion of (1) ending the maginalization of student/learning supports and (2) evolving MTSS. We end by outlining steps for moving forward.

As a framework for preventing and addressing behavior and learning problems, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) offers a school-wide tiered model (also referred to as a multi-tier system of supports). Emphasis on the tiered model is a carryover from previous federal policy guidelines related to "Response to Intervention" and "Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports." Federal guidelines note that the tiered model is to be coordinated with similar activities and services carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The result has been that states, districts, and schools increasingly are framing student and learning supports in terms of tiers or levels.

In ESSA, the tiered model is defined as "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making." The framework is referred to widely as MTSS and has proven to have considerable appeal for a variety of reasons, including its conceptual simplicity.

Unfortunately, while a full continuum of interventions is essential, it is just one facet of a truly *comprehensive intervention system.* So, system building requires moving beyond the limitations of the way MTSS generally is conceived.

Concerns and Limitations of MTSS in Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning

Analyses indicate that the term MTSS is being adopted widely as a planning convenience often without detailing how it will be translated into practice at schools. As the term becomes yet one more set of initials, the risk is that it simply will become another school improvement buzzword. As such, it will do little to enhance a school's effectiveness in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students.

Part of the term's appeal is that it is a simple framework. However, efforts to implement the three tiers in a comprehensive way are complex, challenging, and resource expensive.

Sullivan (2024) and colleagues note that the emphasis has focused on categorization and treatment of "top of the triangle" or "Tier 3" students; they state that this runs "counter to the principles and goals of MTSS, as well as undermining efforts to support prevention and social justice." Others have suggested that the focus is mainly on Tier 2 and Tier 3 levels. Relatedly, **Fallon, Veiga, and Sugai** (2021) have been concerned that MTSS fails to consider root conditions of harm.

At our Center, we have been concerned about the **limitations of MTSS**. We stress that enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond requires going beyond how MTSS generally is conceived and implemented. Moreover, our analyses indicate that MTSS is an inadequate depiction of a continuum of student/learning supports. By mainly delineating levels of intensity of school interventions, the framework does not include a focus on:

- systematically connecting the *school with community* interventions that fall into and across each level

- developing each level as a school/community *subsystem* of student and learning supports

- organizing the many fragmented approaches to addressing barriers to learning and teaching into a cohesive and circumscribed set of *domains of student and learning supports.*

As a result of these limitations, adopting MTSS does little to end the fragmentation, never mind the marginalization, of student and learning supports in school improvement efforts.

Moving MTSS Forward

If the promise of MTSS is to be achieved, two fundamental matters must be addressed:

(1) understanding how school improvement policy must be expanded to end the marginalization of student/learning supports

(2) reframing MTSS into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

Ending the Marginalization of Student/Learning Supports in School Improvement Policy

The problems encountered by students and schools are complex and overlapping. The number of students not doing well at a school can be staggering. For too long, it has been clear that student/learning supports as they currently operate can't meet the need in too many schools.

School budgets always are tight; cost-effectiveness is a constant concern. In some schools, principals report that up to 25% of their budget is consumed in efforts to address barriers to learning. Analyses of current approaches indicate extremely limited results, redundancy in resource use, and counterproductive competition among support staff and with community-based professionals who link with schools.

Over many years, increasing concern about fragmented approaches has produced calls for "integrated services" and recently for "integrated support systems." However, by focusing primarily on fragmentation, policy makers and school improvement advocates fail to deal with a core underlying problem. What drives the fragmentation is the *marginalization* in school improvement policy of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching *in a direct, unified, comprehensive, and equitable way.*

A Policy Shift to End the Marginalization

Ending the fragmentation is not just about integrating student supports!

It requires ending the marginalization, and ending the marginalization requires expanding the prevailing school improvement policy framework.

Evidence of the marginalization of efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching is seen in the ad hoc and piecemeal way the programs, services, and special projects are established and implemented. Student/learning supports are viewed as supplementary (often referred to as auxiliary services) and generally are given short shrift in school plans. Further evidence is seen in the limited way school-community-home collaboration is pursued, and the lack of attention to mapping, analyzing, and rethinking how the resources used to address barriers are allocated. All this seriously hinders efforts to provide the help teachers, students, and families so desperately need.

The marginalization stems from the reality that current policy and practice planning primarily is guided by a two-component framework, namely a framework emphasizing (a) instruction and (b) governance/management. Interventions for addressing learning barriers and reengaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. It cannot be emphasized enough that this marginalization is a fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports.

The Current Two Component Framework for School Improvement is Insufficient

As stressed, districts have a variety of programs, services, and initiatives aimed at problems interfering with learning and teaching (e.g., school violence, drugs on campus, dropouts, delinquency). However, they are not unified into a cohesive component and are not well-integrated with the instructional and management components (see Exhibit 1). This remains the situation despite the current widespread emphasis on framing the work as a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).

Exhibit 1

Prevailing Two-Component Framework Shaping School Improvement Policy

PRIMARY FOCUS	SECONDARY & MARGINALIZED FOCUS

Direct Facilitation of Learning
(*Instructional Component*)

- High quality teachers
- Improved academic assessment systems
- Standards based instruction
- Staff development

- Shared governance
- Improved data collection systems
- Increased accountability
- Building level budget control & management
- Flexible funding

Governance, Resources, & Operations
(*Management/Governance Component*)

Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching
(Not a unified component)

Districts and schools have a variety of marginalized staff and interventions that are implemented in a fragmented manner. They are not well-integrated with each other or with the instructional and management components.

*A few examples are:
- Student support personnel (e.g.,counselors, social workers, psychologists)
- School wide positive behavioral supports and interventions
- Response to intervention
- Safe Schools, Healthy Students Program
- Full Service Community Schools Initiatives
- School Based Health Centers
- Specialized instructional support services
- Compensatory and special education interventions
- Bullying prevention
- Family Resource Centers
- Foster Child and Homeless Student Education

Despite the fact they are essential, student and learning supports are not developed as a unified comprehensive system and are not treated in school improvement policy and practice as a primary component of school improvement.

Needed: a Three Component Framework

Efforts to address student and schooling problems are funded and pursued as "categorical" initiatives, some supported by school district general funds and some underwritten by the federal, state, and private sector. Overlapping what schools offer are initiatives from the *community* to link resources to schools (e.g., school-linked services, full-service schools, community and school partnerships, community schools). Some of these efforts braid resources together; however, others contribute to further fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and marginalization of student support.

Local, state, and federal agencies also have generated initiatives that play out at schools. One major focus is on promoting interagency coordination and collaboration (e.g., fostering "integrated services"); another focus is on special funding streams (e.g., ESSA funds, billing Medicaid for school health services, pandemic relief funding).

The various initiatives do help *some* students who are not succeeding at school. However, they come nowhere near addressing the scope of need. Their limited potency further underscores the degree to which efforts to address barriers to learning are marginalized in policy and practice.

The need is for transformative system changes. These involve
- elevating the policy priority for addressing barriers to learning and teaching in a unified, comprehensive, and equitable way
- fully integrating the policy into school improvement strategic planning and daily practice
- institutionalizing mechanisms that facilitate effective development, implementation, scale-up, and sustainability of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach

As illustrated below, an enhanced policy framework is needed to ensure efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching are pursued as a primary and essential component of school improvement.

Exhibit 2

Moving to a Three Component Framework

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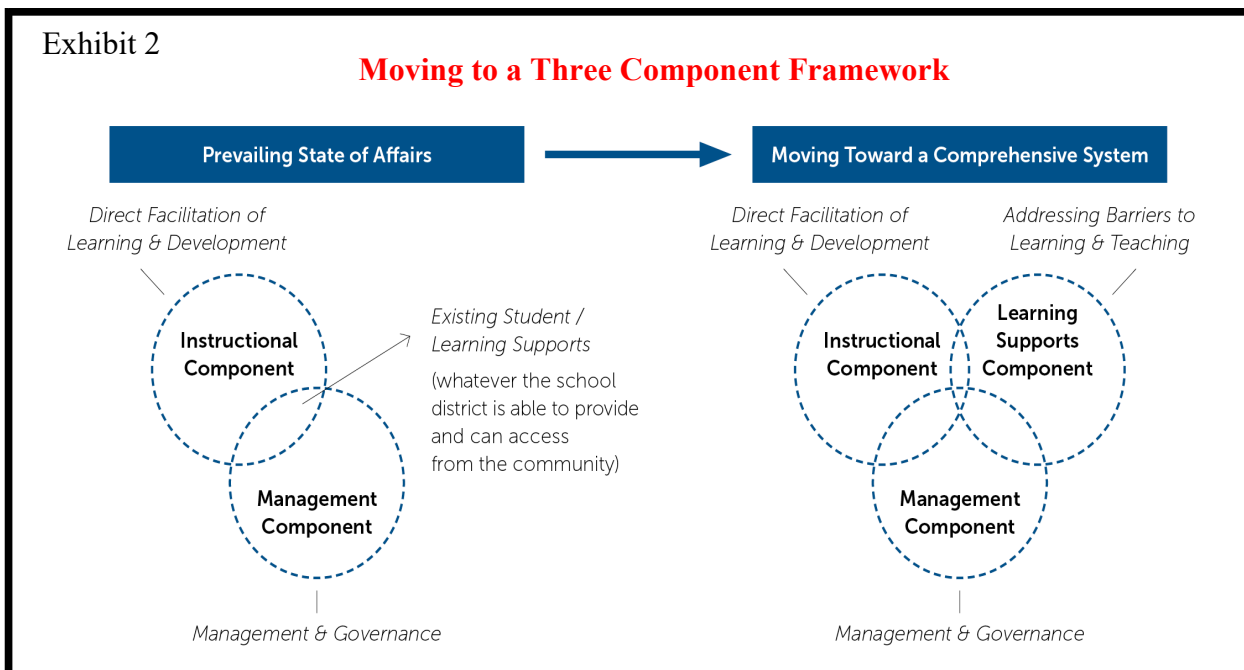
Unifying Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Ending the marginalization of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching requires policy action that establishes and institutionalizes a component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a primary and essential facet of school improvement (on a par with the components for instruction and governance-management). The Learning Supports Component aims at enabling learning by (1) addressing factors that interfere with learning, development, and teaching and (2) reengaging students in classroom instruction.
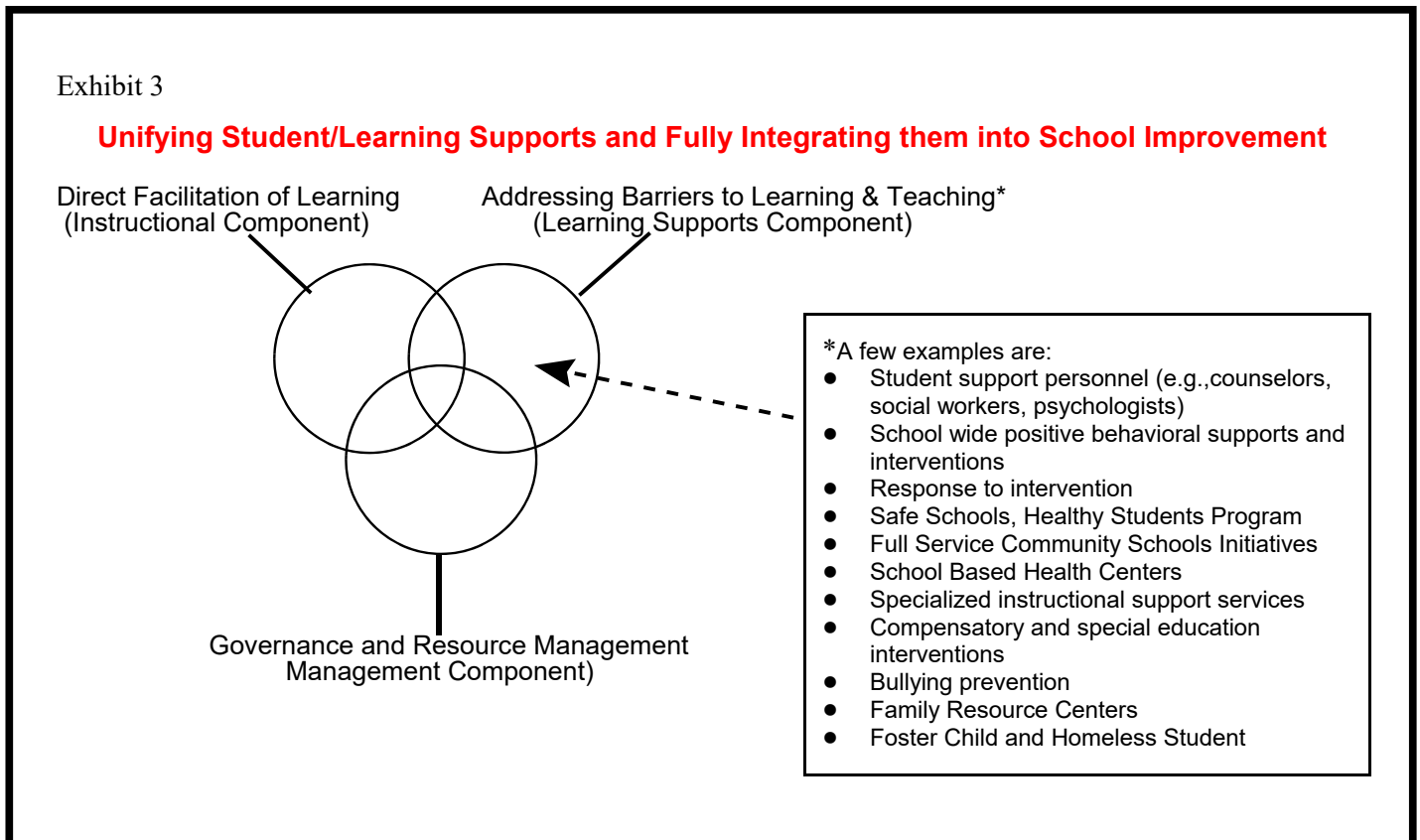
Learning Supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that support physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development and well-being to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school. They are deployed in classrooms and schoolwide to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

As Exhibit 3 and 4 underscore:

- a first objective of adopting the concept of a Learning Supports Component is to emphasize *unifying* student/learning supports and ensuring they are fully integrated as a primary and essential facet of school improvement

- then the aim over several years is to develop the unified supports into a comprehensive and equitable system.

Unifying Student and Learning Supports   As the following Exhibit illustrates, the aim is to establish a third component that is fully integrated into school improvement.

Exhibit 3

Unifying Student/Learning Supports and Fully Integrating them into School Improvement

Direct Facilitation of Learning
(Instructional Component)

Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching*
(Learning Supports Component)

*A few examples are:
- Student support personnel (e.g.,counselors, social workers, psychologists)
- School wide positive behavioral supports and interventions
- Response to intervention
- Safe Schools, Healthy Students Program
- Full Service Community Schools Initiatives
- School Based Health Centers
- Specialized instructional support services
- Compensatory and special education interventions
- Bullying prevention
- Family Resource Centers
- Foster Child and Homeless Student

Governance and Resource Management
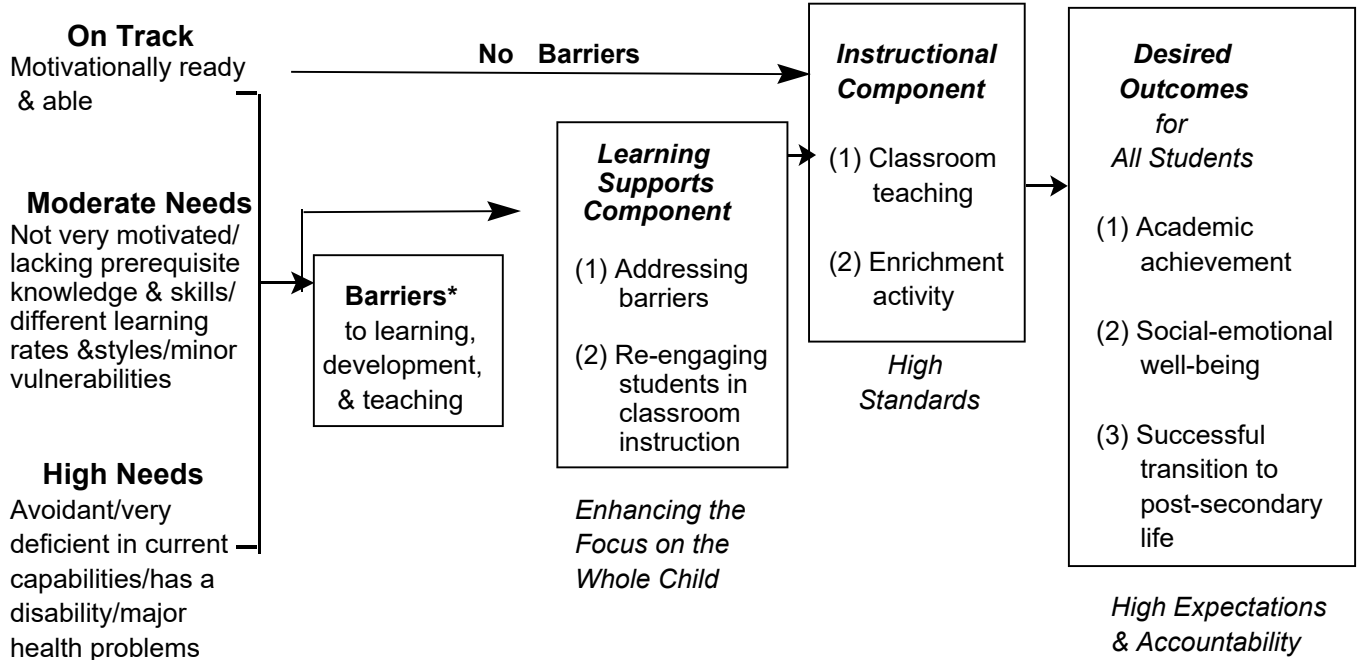Management Component)

After unifying the staff, programs, services, and initiatives, the aim over several years is develop the unified component into a comprehensive and equitable system. The following Exhibit graphically emphasizes that the aim of such a system is to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. This necessitates a system that is dedicated directly to (1) addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (2) reengaging disconnected students. Note the emphasis on engagement. Systems that do not ensure students are engaged meaningfully in classroom learning usually are insufficient in sustaining, over time, student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.

Exhibit 4

A Learning Supports Component to Address Barriers and Reengage Students

Range of Learners
(based on their response to academic
instruction at any given point in time)

On Track
Motivationally ready
& able

No   Barriers

Moderate Needs
Not very motivated/
lacking prerequisite
knowledge & skills/
different learning
rates &styles/minor
vulnerabilities

Barriers*
to learning,
development,
& teaching

*Learning
Supports
Component*

(1) Addressing
barriers

(2) Re-engaging
students in
classroom
instruction

*Instructional
Component*

(1) Classroom
teaching

(2) Enrichment
activity

*High
Standards*

*Desired
Outcomes
for
All Students*

(1) Academic
achievement

(2) Social-emotional
well-being

(3) Successful
transition to
post-secondary
life

High Needs
Avoidant/very
deficient in current
capabilities/has a
disability/major
health problems

*Enhancing the
Focus on the
Whole Child*

*High Expectations
& Accountability*

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*Examples of Barriers to Learning and Development

E N V I R O N M E N T A L   C O N D I T I O N S   PERSON FACTORS

Barriers to Development and Learning (Risk producing conditions)

Neighborhood
>extreme economic deprivation
>community disorganization,
  including high levels of
  mobility
>violence, drugs, etc.
>minority and/or immigrant
  status

>chronic poverty

Family
>conflict/disruptions/violence
>substance abuse
>models problem behavior
>abusive caretaking
>inadequate provision for
  quality child care

>poor quality school
>negative encounters with
  teachers

School & Peers
>negative encounters with
  peers &/or inappropriate
  peer models

Individual
>medical problems
>low birth weight/
  neurodevelopmental delay
>psychophysiological
  problems
>difficult temperament &
  adjustment problems
>inadequate nutrition

Points We Emphasize in Making the Case

Current school improvement policy and practice is guided primarily by a two-component framework which stresses (a) instruction and (b) governance/management. Interventions for addressing learning barriers and reengaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. This marginalization is a fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports.

> ***Ending the marginalization rather than focusing just on integrating student supports is essential to effectively improve how schools respond to learning, behavior, and emotional problems.****

Ending the marginalization requires expanding the prevailing school improvement policy framework from a two- to a three-component framework for school improvement. Dubbed a Learning Support Component, the new component focuses directly and systemically on addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The intent is to pursue it as a primary and essential facet of school improvement and develop it into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that (a) plays out in classrooms and schoolwide and (b) takes advantage of the natural opportunities at schools for addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and promoting personal and social growth.

Given sparse budgets, the third component requires rethinking and redeployment of existing resources. This includes strategic collaboration to weave school-owned resources and community-owned resources together.

*Because MTSS is the current emphasis in schools, calls for integrating student/learning supports increasingly are associated with the multi-tier framework (i.e., I-MTSS). *A caution about this*: **our Center's analyses** indicate that the emphasis only on integrating student/learning supports fails to deal with ending their marginalization in school improvement policy. Of course, as emphasized here, work related to integrated supports and MTSS can be readily evolved.

Moving Forward Requires Reframing MTSS

Simply tweaking prevailing views of a multi-tier framework falls far short of planning and developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of in-classroom and schoolwide student/learning supports. A well-designed system of student and learning supports requires more than a continuum of interventions.

As discussed below and in the next sections, moving toward such a system involves reframing MTSS into a cohesive, multifaceted, and systemic approach. Such an approach involves both (1) an interconnected *continuum of subsystems* that weaves school and community resources together and (2) student and learning support that are organized cohesively into a circumscribed set of domains (rather than the current trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level).

> *This section illustrates a reframing of the MTSS continuum; the following section lays out a way to organize learning support domains.*

Exhibit 5

Reframing MTSS's Levels into a School-Community Intervention *Continuum of* Interconnected *Subsystems*

School **Resources**
(facilities, stakeholders, programs, services)

Examples:
• General health education
• Social and emotional learning programs
• Recreation programs
• Enrichment programs
• Support for transitions
• Conflict resolution
• Home involvement
• Drug and alcohol education

Community **Resources**
(facilities, stakeholders, programs, services)

Examples:
• Recreation & Enrichment
• Public health & safety programs
• Prenatal care
• Home visiting programs
• Immunizations
• Child abuse education
• Internships & community service programs
• Economic development

Subsystem for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems
primary prevention – includes universal interventions
(low end need/low cost per individual programs)

• Drug counseling
• Pregnancy prevention
• Violence prevention
• Gang intervention
• Dropout prevention
• Suicide prevention
• Learning/behavior accommodations & response to intervention
• Work programs

Subsystem for Early Intervention
early-after-onset – includes selective & indicated interventions
(moderate need, moderate cost per individual)

• Early identification to treat health problems
• Monitoring health problems
• Short-term counseling
• Foster placement/group homes
• Family support
• Shelter, food, clothing
• Job programs

• Special education for learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and other health impairments

Subsystem for Treatment of **severe and chronic problems**
indicated interventions as part of a "system of care"
(High need/high cost per individual programs)

• Emergency/crisis treatment
• Family preservation
• Long-term therapy
• Probation/incarceration
• Disabilities programs
• Hospitalization
• Addiction treatment
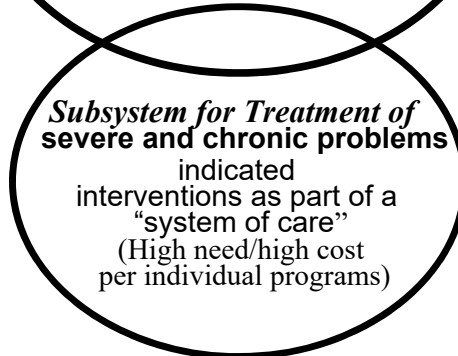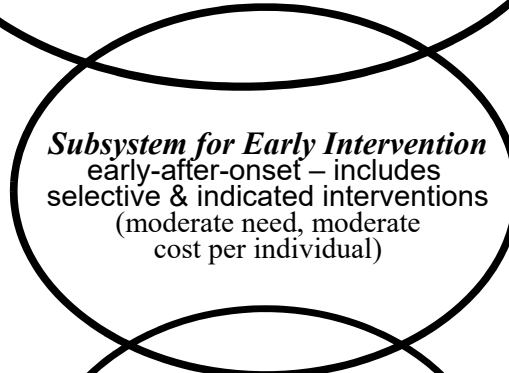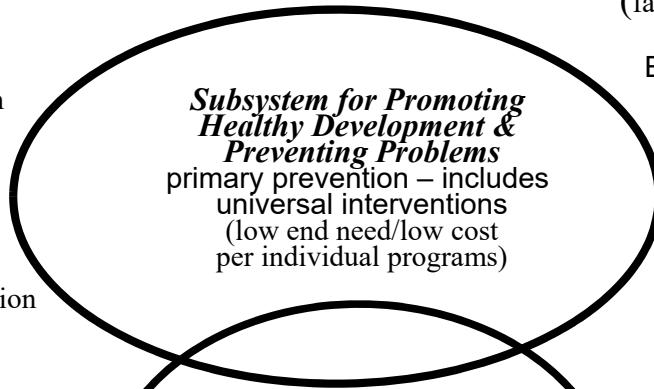
As illustrated, the continuum levels are conceived as three subsystems. Each subsystem is weaves together a wide range of school with community (including home) resources. The subsystems focus on (1) promoting whole-child development and prevention, (2) identifying and addressing problems as soon as they arise, and (3) providing for students with severe and chronic problems.

The interrelated and overlapping subsystems are illustrated as intertwined and tapering. This is meant to convey that if the top subsystem is designed and implemented effectively, the number of students needing early intervention are reduced and fewer need specialized "deep-end" interventions. (This is critical given that current evidence is that too many students are referred inappropriately for costly deep-end services.)

Points We Emphasize in Making the Case

MTSS is an insufficient organizing framework for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Given this, as states, districts, and schools adopt some version of (MTSS), they tend to box themselves in with old thinking about student/learning supports and miss the opportunity to significantly build a better system.

Those using MTSS as a intervention framework need to build on and expand their intervention framework into a *unified, comprehensive, and equitable system*. Doing so will move beyond the limitations of the MTSS framework and can lead to ending the marginalization and fragmentation of student and learning supports in schools.

The prototype presented as Exhibit 5 conceives the intervention continuum as an overlapping and intertwined set of *subsystems that weave school-community-home resources* together with the aim of

- promoting healthy development and preventing problems

- intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible

- assisting with chronic and severe problems.

The following section stresses that, rather than the current trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level of the continuum, system building benefits from cohesively organizing student and learning supports into a circumscribed set of six domains.

Framing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System

As illustrated in Exhibit 6, combining the continuum and the six domains of supports provides an intervention framework that can guide development of a learning supports component as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that weaves together school and community funding (regular and extramural) budgeted for addressing shared agenda.

The matrix framework is used as a tool for mapping existing interventions, identifying strengths and critical intervention gaps, and analyzing resource use with a view to redeploying resources to strengthen the system of student and learning supports. Based on school priorities, the analyses can be used in strategic planning for system improvement, including targeted outreach to bring in community resources that can fill critical gaps.

The specific examples inserted in the matrix are just illustrative of those that schools already may be using. As the examples illustrate, the framework embeds a wide range of student/learning supports. It encompasses the work of specialized instructional support personnel, compensatory and special education efforts, programs for English learners and homeless students, and interventions for psychosocial, mental health, and learning problems.

Exhibit 6

Intervention Framework for the Learning Supports Component

		Integrated Intervention Continuum (levels)		
		Subsystem for promoting healthy development & preventing problems	Subsystem for early intervention	Subsystem for treatment ("system of care")
Categories of Classroom & Schoolwide Student and Learning Support Domains	Classroom-based learning supports	e.g., personalized instruction	e.g., special assistance in the classroom provided as soon as a problem arises	e.g., referral for specialist assistance
	Supports for transitions	e.g., welcoming newcomers and providing social and/or academic supports	e.g., when problems arise, using them as teachable moments to enhance social-emotional development and learning	e.g., personalized supports for students returning to school from incarceration
	Home involvement & engagement	e.g., outreach to attract and facilitate participation of hard-to-reach families	e.g., engaging families in problem-solving	e.g., support services to assist families with addressing basic survival needs
	Community involvement & collaborative engagement	e.g., outreach to recruit volunteers	e.g., developing community links and connections to fill critical intervention gaps	e.g., outreach to reengage disconnected students and families
	Crisis response & prevention	e.g., promoting positive relationships	e.g., immediate response with physical and psychological first aid	e.g., referral for follow-up counseling
	Student & family special assistance	e.g., enhancing coping and problem-solving capability	e.g., providing consultation, triage, and referrals	e.g., ongoing management of care related to specialized services
		Accommodations for differences & disabilities		*Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., special education, school-based interventions)*

A Intervention Framework for Moving in New Directions

With all the criticism of public schools, policy makers have difficult choices to make about improving schools. Ultimately, the choices made will affect not only students and school staff but the entire society. Choosing to continue with old ways of thinking about student/learning supports is a recipe for maintaining the achievement and opportunity gaps. Unifying available resources and starting a process to develop a comprehensive and equitable system of learning supports over the coming years is an alternative.

Establishing a comprehensive and equitable intervention system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students requires coalescing ad hoc and piecemeal policies and practices. Doing so will help end the fragmentation of student and learning supports and related system disorganization and will provide a foundation for weaving together whatever a school has with whatever a community is doing to confront barriers to learning and teaching.

Effectively designed and developed at a school, a learning supports component increases supports for all students. The emphasis is on

- unifying student and learning supports by grouping the many fragmented approaches experienced at school in ways that reduce the number of separate and sometimes redundant intervention responses to overlapping problems

- addressing barriers to learning and teaching by improving personalized instruction and increasing accommodations and special assistance when necessary

- enhancing the focus on motivational considerations with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation as it relates to individual readiness and ongoing involvement and with the intent of fostering intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome

- reengaging disconnected students

- adding specialized remediation, treatment, and rehabilitation as necessary, but only as necessary
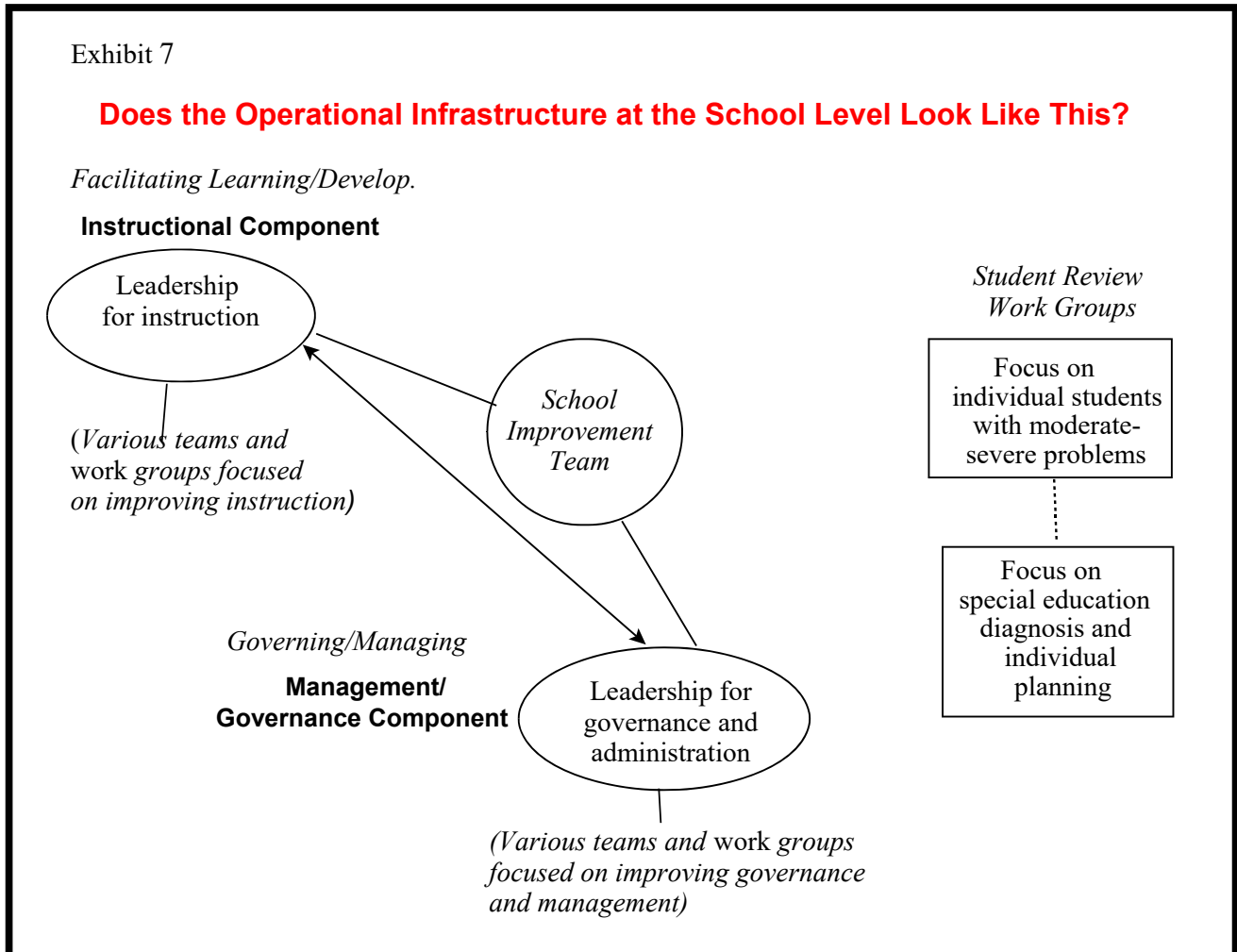
In doing all this, a learning supports component enhances equity of opportunity, plays a major role in improving student and school performance and promoting whole child development, fosters positive school-community relationships, minimizes the school's reliance on social control practices, and contributes to the emergence of a positive school climate. And it fully embeds interventions to address mental health concerns.

Implementation of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports as a primary school improvement component is essential to the focus on whole child, whole school, and whole community (including fostering safe schools and the emergence of a positive school climate). Properly implemented, the component increases the likelihood that schooling will be experienced as a welcoming, supportive experience that accommodates diversity, prevents problems, enhances youngsters' strengths, and is committed to assuring equity of opportunity for all students to succeed.

Strengthening Operational Infrastructures

The mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. And the reality is that the current operational infrastructure at all levels require major reworking. What follows are excerpts from a recent report, ***Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure***.

> The report stresses that the operational infrastructure at too many schools looks as is illustrated below.

Exhibit 7

Does the Operational Infrastructure at the School Level Look Like This?

Facilitating Learning/Develop.

Instructional Component

Student Review Work Groups

Leadership for instruction

(*Various teams and* work *groups focused on improving instruction*)

School Improvement Team

Focus on individual students with moderate-severe problems

Focus on special education diagnosis and individual planning

Governing/Managing

Management/ Governance Component

Leadership for governance and administration

(*Various teams and* work *groups focused on improving governance and management*)
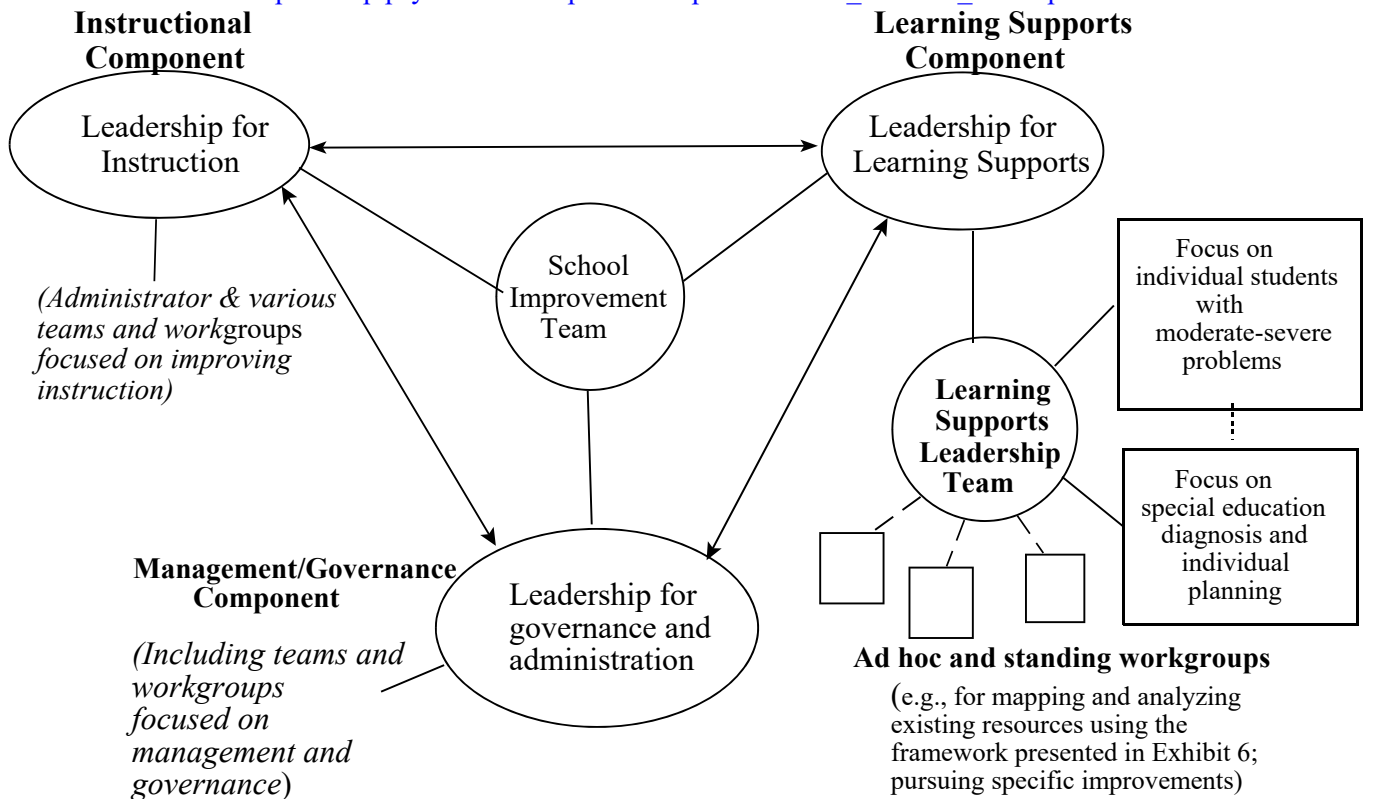
What's missing? Note that there is no designated leadership for student and learning supports. Also note that the two work groups focused on individual students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems mainly meet to review and make decisions for designated students about special assistance needs and referrals. In doing so, the teams usually develop a perspective on the type of systemic improvements that could prevent problems and stem the tide of referrals. However, addressing these concerns is not one of their formal functions. And, in general, these work groups have little or no connection to discussions and decisions about school improvement needs.

The move to a three component school improvement framework calls for added mechanisms and restructuring. For example, Exhibit 8 illustrates an operational infrastructure at the school level that fully emphasizes and integrates student/learning supports. This prototype was designed to ensure the type of interconnected leadership and workgroups necessary for daily operation and ongoing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.

Exhibit 8

Prototype for an Integrated Operational Infrastructure at the School Level

(This operational infrastructure should be paralleled at the district level, see
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf .

Instructional Component

Leadership for Instruction

*(Administrator & various teams and work*groups *focused on improving instruction)*

Learning Supports Component

Leadership for Learning Supports

School Improvement Team

Learning Supports Leadership Team

Focus on individual students with moderate-severe problems

Focus on special education diagnosis and individual planning

Management/Governance Component

(Including teams and workgroups focused on management and governance)

Leadership for governance and administration

Ad hoc and standing workgroups
(e.g., for mapping and analyzing existing resources using the framework presented in Exhibit 6; pursuing specific improvements)

Note: Each of the three primary and essential components for school improvement requires

- administrative leadership and other advocates/champions with responsibility and accountability for ensuring the vision for the component is not lost,

- a leadership team to work with the administrative lead on system development,

- standing workgroups with designated ongoing functions and occasional ad hoc workgroups to accomplish specific short-term tasks.

To ensure coordination and cohesion, the leaders for the instructional and learning supports components are full members of the management/governance component, and if a special team is assigned to work on school improvement, the leaders for all three components are on that team.

When we mention a Learning Supports Leadership Team, some school staff quickly respond: *We already have one!*

When we explore this with them, we usually find what they have is a *student case-oriented team* – that is, a team focused on individual students who are having problems. (Such a team may be called a student study team, student success team, student assistance team, teacher assistance team, and so forth.) A related team, of course, it the IEP team. The functions of student case-oriented teams include triage, referral, and care monitoring/management, progress review and reassessment.

Clearly, an emphasis on specific students is warranted. However, as the primary focus associated with student and learning supports, this approach tends to sidetrack development and implementation of improvements at schools that can prevent many individual problems and help many more students.

So, we designate the student case-oriented teams as one type of standing work group and contrast them with standing and ad hoc workgroups that focus on the functions related to system improvement. This involves pursuing tasks related to developing and implementing schoolwide and classroom student/learning supports and ensuring they are implemented in a unified, comprehensive, and equitable manner.

Connecting a Complex or "Family" of Schools

Beyond the school, mechanisms are conceived that enable groups or "families" of schools to work together to increase efficiency and effectiveness and gain economies of scale.

Schools in the same geographic (catchment) area have shared concerns, and feeder schools often are interacting with students from the same family. All three components of school improvement can benefit when a "family" of schools works together.

For example, some programs and personnel are (or can be) shared by several neighboring schools, thus minimizing redundancy and reducing costs. Think about overall capacity building and personnel development. Think about supports for transitions, shared crises, and working with families who have youngsters attending more than one level of schooling in the same cluster. (When a family has several children in need of special attention, it is neither cost-effective nor sound practice for each school to work with the family separately.)

School leaders from a "family" of schools can establish a multi-site leadership council to help ensure cohesive and equitable deployment of resources and also can enhance the pooling of resources to reduce costs. Such a multi-site mechanism can enhance leadership, facilitate communication and connection, ensure quality improvement across sites, and facilitate ongoing development of the component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The mechanism can be particularly useful for integrating the efforts of high schools and their feeder middle and elementary schools (see Exhibit 9). With respect to linking with community resources, a family of connected schools is especially attractive to community agencies who often don't have the time or personnel to link with individual schools.

Exhibit 9

Connecting Resources Across Feeder Schools, a District, and Community-Wide
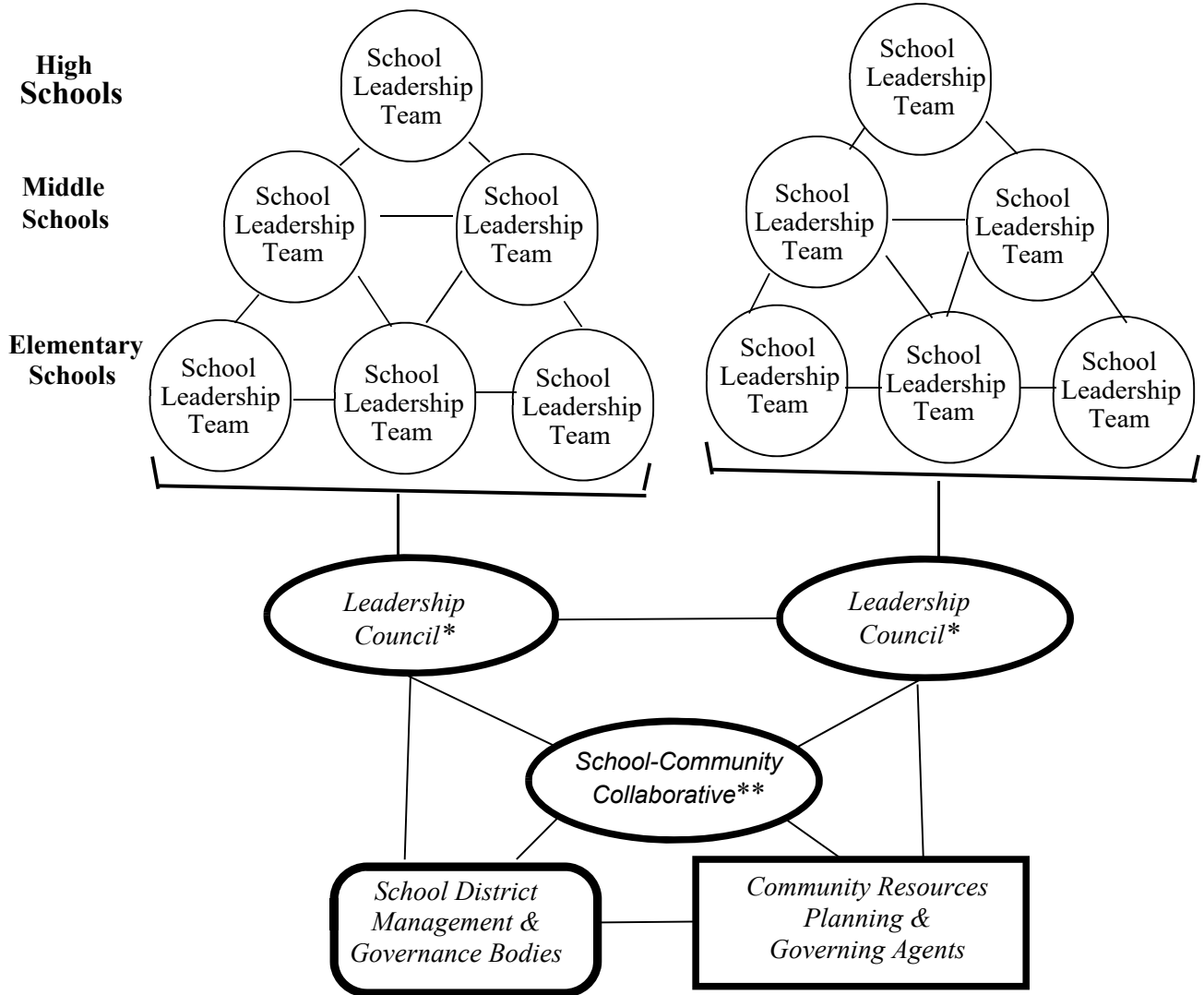
*A Leadership *Council* consists of representatives from each of the schools in a complex. It provides a mechanism for analyzing needs and resources at a family of schools and can enhance how resources are used and developed, achieve economies of scale, and improve outcomes. Councils also enable connections with and between district and community decision makers – again with an agenda of enhancing resources, garnering economies of scale, and whole school improvement.

**See following discussion.

As illustrated in Exhibit 9, a multisite team or Leadership Council brings together representatives from each participating school's Leadership Team to meet (e.g., once a month). The objectives are to

- identify and meet common needs with respect to mandates and other functions and personnel development
- create processes for communication, linkages, coordination, and collaboration among schools and with community resources (note: multi-school councils are especially attractive to community agencies lacking the time or personnel to link with each individual school)
- ensure cohesive and equitable deployment of resources
- weave together human and financial resources from public and private sectors and encourage the pooling of resources to minimize redundancy, reduce costs, and achieve economies of scale.

While all three components of school improvement can benefit from a multi-site council, if the schools are not ready to connect with a whole school focus, we recommend starting with the leadership for the learning supports component.

Operational Infrastructure for a School-Community Collaborative

Connecting school and community resources has mutual benefits, including school improvement, positive socialization of the young, higher staff morale, improved use of resources, an enhanced sense of community, community development, and more. In the long run, the aims are to strengthen young people, schools, families, and neighborhoods.

Temporary school-community connections often are established in the wake of a crisis or to address a particular problem. It is relatively simple to make informal linkages. However, major long-term formal working relationships are driven by a comprehensive vision about the shared role schools, communities, and families can play in strengthening youngsters, families, schools, and neighborhoods. This encompasses a focus on safe schools and neighborhoods and positive development and learning; personal, family, and economic well-being; and more.

School/district efforts to enhance community connections begin with outreach to a broad range of community entities. Initially, the objective often is to develop immediate links and connections with community resources that can help fill critical intervention gaps at schools. If the aim is to form ongoing partnerships, steps must be taken to establish a school-community collaborative.
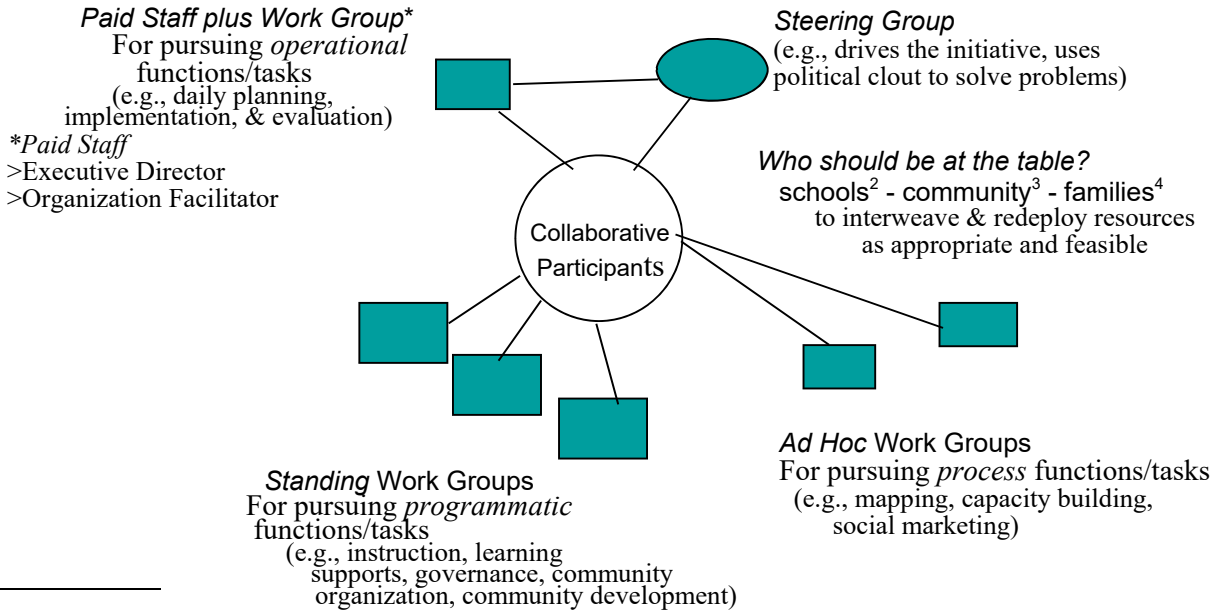
Outreach can involve a social marketing campaign to inform and invite participation with respect to district and school planning for working with the home and community to improve schools.

Effective pursuit of joint aims and functions requires establishing an effective school-community *collaborative* at the district level. To these ends, it is essential to develop a well-conceived operational infrastructure for collaboration. See Exhibit 10 for a prototype of the type of mechanisms needed to provide oversight, leadership, capacity building, and ongoing support as a collaborative plans and implements strategic actions.

Establishing such an infrastructure requires translating policy into authentic agreements about shared mission, vision, decision making, priorities, goals, roles, functions, resource allocation, redeployment, and enhancement, strategic implementation, evaluation, and accountability.

Exhibit 10

Prototype of a School-Community Collaborative Operational Infrastructure[1]

Paid Staff plus Work Group*
For pursuing *operational* functions/tasks
(e.g., daily planning, implementation, & evaluation)
*Paid Staff
>Executive Director
>Organization Facilitator

Steering Group
(e.g., drives the initiative, uses political clout to solve problems)

Who should be at the table?
schools[2] - community[3] - families[4]
to interweave & redeploy resources as appropriate and feasible

Collaborative Participants

Standing Work Groups
For pursuing *programmatic* functions/tasks
(e.g., instruction, learning supports, governance, community organization, community development)

Ad Hoc Work Groups
For pursuing *process* functions/tasks
(e.g., mapping, capacity building, social marketing)

[1] Connecting the resources of schools, families, and a wide range of community entities through a formal collaborative facilitates all facets of school improvement. Effectiveness, efficiencies, and economies of scale can be achieved by connecting a "family" (or complex) of schools (e.g., a high school and its feeder schools, schools in the same neighborhood). In a small community, the feeder pattern often is the school district.

[2] *Schools*. This encompasses all institutionalized entities that are responsible for formal education (e.g., pre-K, elementary, secondary, higher education). The aim is to draw on the resources of these institutions.

[3] *Community entities*. These encompass the many resources (public and private money, facilities, human and social capital) that can be brought to the table (e.g., health and social service agencies, businesses and unions, recreation, cultural, and youth development groups, libraries, juvenile justice and law enforcement, faith-based community institutions, service clubs, media). As the collaborative develops, additional steps must be taken to outreach to disenfranchised groups.

[4] *Families*. All families in the community should be represented, not just representatives of organized family advocacy groups. The aim is to mobilize all the human and social capital represented by family members and other home caretakers of the young.

Steps in establishing a school-community collaborative include:

- identifying community stakeholders who are interested in establishing a school-community collaborative

- formulating aims, short-term goals, and immediate objectives

- organizing participants into an effective operational infrastructure and establishing formal working agreements (e.g., MOUs) about roles and responsibilities

- forming and training workgroups to accomplish immediate objectives

- mapping school and community resources used to improve teaching and learning and address barriers to student success

- analyzing resource use to determine redundancies and inefficiencies

- identifying ways resources can be redeployed and interwoven to meet current priorities

- monitoring and facilitating progress

As illustrated in Exhibit 9, the family of schools leadership councils envisioned can readily be incorporated into a school-neighborhood collaborative. And the district's existing connections with community stakeholders and resources can be expanded and formalized as a district-wide school-community collaborative.

Summary

Ultimately, significantly improving student and learning supports requires not only a vision for how to better address barriers to learning and teaching, but a way to get there from here. The mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. And the reality is that the current operational infrastructure at all levels require major reworking.

Since planned improvements mean little if they don't play out at the school level, this section highlighted a prototype for a reworked operational infrastructure at that level. Then, to facilitate and enhance school level efforts, mechanisms are conceived that enable groups or "families" of schools to work together to increase efficiency and effectiveness and garner economies of scale. From this perspective, district level mechanisms must be reconceived with a view to supporting each school and family of schools as they change and develop. Also at the district level, establishment of a school-community collaborative is key to weaving together available resources.

Moving Forward to a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Student and Learning Supports

In our experience, there always are school and district personnel who want and are ready to make major improvements in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. They are a natural pool from which a *student/learning supports workgroup* can be mobilized to initiate a process for moving forward.

Whether the focus is on improving student and learning supports at one school or all schools in a district, the process can be conceived in terms of four overlapping *phases of system change* that are strategically pursued over several years. The phases are featured below:

First Phase – *Introduction and creating readiness, commitment, & engagement*
 (e.g., heightening a climate/culture for system change through enhancing
   the motivation and capacity of a critical mass of stakeholders)

Second Phase – *Start-up and phase-in: Expanding operational infrastructure and*
   capacity and pursuing initial implementation
 (e.g., reworking operational infrastructure and job descriptions to ensure
   effective leadership, guidance, collaboration, and support for proposed
   system changes)

Third Phase – *Institutionalizing, replicating to scale, sustaining, and evolving*
   to enhance system change outcomes
 (e.g., enhancing capacity to ensure quality improvements, adaptive
   scalability, and sustainability)

Fourth Phase – *Ongoing evolution and generating creative renewal*
 (e.g., enabling system stakeholders to become a community of learners
   and expanding accountability to support creative renewal)

Presentation of the strategic tasks associated with each phase can be found in Chapters 16 and 17 of *Improving School Improvement* .
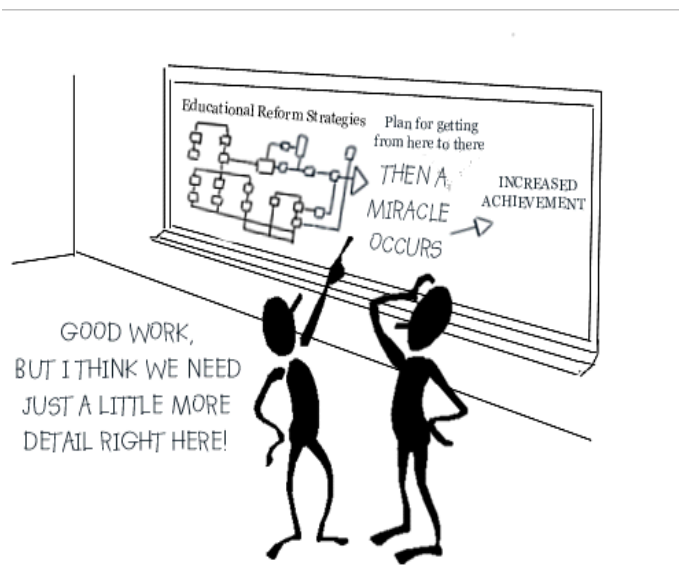
With respect to the *first two phases* noted above, we highlighted seven steps. The steps are adaptable at school, district, or state agency levels. At each level, the process is envisioned as beginning with establishment of a *workgroup* of interested and concerned stakeholders (hopefully including key administrators).

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First Steps in Transforming Student/Learning Supports

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The assigned *student/learning supports workgroup* pursues tasks related to Steps 1-3.

 Step 1. delineating what is in place & recommending system changes – Specifically
   (a) mapping existing student support activities and operational infrastructure,
   (b) analyzing what has been mapped,
   (c) identifying priorities for and clarifying the benefits of system changes,
   (d) developing recommendations for system changes,
   (e) building a critical mass of support

 Step 2: submitting recommendations for approval by appropriate authorities and policy makers with a written supportive policy commitment

 Step 3: facilitating establishment of a high level steering group as part of the temporary change agent mechanisms for championing, facilitating, and monitoring the improvements in student/learning supports

Once established, the *Steering Group* pursues tasks related to Steps 4-7.*

 Step 4: establishing a permanent administrative position to transform and lead a student/learning supports component of school improvement

 Step 5: establishing a student/learning support leadership team as a permanent operational infrastructure mechanism to work with the administrative lead

 Step 6. designating temporary mechanisms for facilitating system changes (e.g., change agents, coaches)

 Step 7. facilitating formative evaluation and accountability of the above steps

   *Examples of tasks related to Steps 4-7 include:
        >identifying and training change agents, coaches
        >building staff capacity related to system changes
        >reworking the existing operational infrastructure to ensure effective planning
        >initial implementation of the changes
        >initiating formative evaluation
        >ongoing development of the transformation of student/learning supports
        >*permanent mechanisms* for system development/improvement (i.e., an administrative leader and a leadership team for student/learning supports).

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> **An expanded discussion of first steps, a suggested monthly scheduling, and links to resource aids for pursuing the tasks involved is provided in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Starting the Process***
>
> The document also offers a few cautions to help avoid potential pitfalls.

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