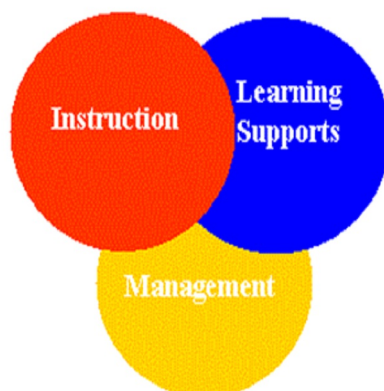

New Directions for Student and Learning Supports: From Fragmented Initiatives to System Transformation

(2026)

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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

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Adelman and Taylor have worked together for over 40 years with a constant focus on improving how schools and communities address barriers to learning and teaching, reengage disconnected students and families, and promote healthy development. Over the years, they have led major projects focused on dropout prevention, enhancing the mental health facets of school-based health centers, and developing comprehensive, school-based approaches for students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Their work has involved them in schools and communities across the country. Their current focus is on policies, practices, and large-scale systemic transformation. This work includes facilitating the National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports.

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Preface

Schools have long been expected to provide high-quality instruction and effective management. Today, however, there is growing recognition that these two imperatives, while essential, are not sufficient to ensure that all students have an equitable opportunity to learn and succeed. Students come to school affected by a wide range of factors that influence engagement, behavior, attendance, well-being, development, and academic performance. Mental and physical health concerns, family and housing instability, poverty, chronic absenteeism, social isolation, trauma, and other barriers to learning and teaching profoundly shape students' opportunities to benefit from instruction. As a result, increasing attention is being given to strengthening student and learning supports.

Across the country, educators, policymakers, researchers, and community leaders are pursuing a variety of initiatives intended to address these concerns. Whole-child approaches, integrated student supports, community schools, comprehensive school mental health efforts, Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), expansion of student support personnel, and system transformation initiatives all reflect a growing awareness that learning, development, and well-being are deeply interconnected. Although these efforts differ in emphasis, terminology, and strategy, they share a common recognition: improving student outcomes requires more than improving instruction. Schools also must strengthen their capacity to address barriers to learning and teaching and to promote conditions that enable all students to thrive.

The purpose of this report is to examine major initiatives being pursued to strengthen student and learning supports, identify lessons emerging from these efforts, and explore implications for new policy and practice directions. In doing so, we highlight progress that has been made and the significant challenges that remain.

A central theme running throughout this report is that no single initiative has provided a sufficiently comprehensive framework for addressing the full range of factors that interfere with learning and teaching. Moreover, despite decades of reform activity, student and learning supports continue to operate largely as fragmented and often marginalized endeavors.

While much of the current discussion focuses on fragmentation of services and supports, this report argues that fragmentation is not the fundamental problem. It is a symptom of a deeper policy problem: efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching have never been established as a primary and essential component of school improvement. Consequently, programs, services, personnel, and initiatives frequently develop in parallel rather than as parts of a coherent and comprehensive system.

From this perspective, the next major stage of progress requires moving beyond the longstanding two-component framework for school improvement focused on instruction and management/governance. Our view is that school improvement policy must incorporate a third primary component dedicated to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Operationalized as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, this third component provides a foundation for weaving together existing programs, services, personnel, and community resources into a coherent system for enhancing learning, development, well-being, and equity of opportunity.

The central challenge ahead is system development, not program development.

The next major frontier in school improvement is not program expansion – it is system transformation.

Our hope is that this report contributes to ongoing discussions among educators, policymakers, researchers, families, and community stakeholders about how best to strengthen supports for children and youth. More importantly, we hope it advances the conversation from program development to system development and encourages efforts to transform fragmented initiatives into unified, comprehensive, and equitable systems of student and learning supports.

It will be evident that our work owes much to many. We are especially grateful to colleagues across the country who have shared their experiences, insights, and wisdom over the years. We also remain indebted to the scholars whose research informs this work, the UCLA students who contribute so significantly to our ongoing efforts, and the many children, youth, families, educators, and community partners from whom we continue to learn.

As always, what we present reflects work in progress. We welcome your comments, critiques, and suggestions.

Send your input to us at – adelman@psych.ucla.edu Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Respectfully submitted for your reflection,

Executive Summary

For decades, school improvement policy has focused primarily on instruction and management-governance while giving far less attention to transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. In recent years, major initiatives have been implemented in efforts to improve how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. Nevertheless, student and learning supports remain marginalized and fragmented in school improvement policy and practice.

This report reviews:

- major initiatives being pursued across the country related to improving student supports
- lessons learned and their implications

The report stresses

- the need for system transformation
- next steps for school improvement policy and practice

The report concludes that current lessons and future challenges require frameworks that transform student/learning supports. One framework shifts school improvement policy beyond its traditional two-component framework – focused on (1) Instruction and (2) Management-Governance – and expands it to include a third primary component – focused on (3) Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching.

Such a framework elevates student/learning supports from a marginalized collection of initiatives to a central and essential responsibility of schools. It provides the foundation for organizing existing programs, personnel, services, and community resources into a transformed student/learning supports. It also provides a basis for organizing and developing existing programs, personnel, services, and community resources.

Major Initiatives Reviewed

National efforts to strengthen student and learning supports that are reviewed include the following overlapping movements:

- Whole-child and science-of-learning approaches
- Integrated student supports and wraparound initiatives
- Community schools movement
- Comprehensive school mental health approaches
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS)
- Expansion of student and learning support personnel
- Efforts to transform the framework for student and learning supports

Analysis finds that although initiatives differ in terminology, emphasis, and strategy, they share the concern that schools must do more than provide academic instruction if all students are to have an equitable opportunity to succeed. Collectively, they have broadened awareness about the matter and have expanded services, strengthened school-community collaboration, and increased attention to prevention and early intervention.

The Central Challenge

To date, the various efforts to improve student and learning supports have not made a significant dent in the state of the art surrounding how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. Student and learning supports remain largely fragmented and marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. Schools frequently operate multiple initiatives addressing attendance, behavior, mental health, school climate, family engagement, academic intervention, and related concerns, but these efforts often function independently rather than as parts of a cohesive system.

As a result:

- Resources are used inefficiently.
- Programs compete rather than complement one another.
- Gaps and redundancies persist.
- Prevention and early intervention receive insufficient attention.
- Many students and families continue to experience limited access to needed supports.
- Schools struggle to sustain improvements over time.

The challenge is to establish a unifying framework capable of organizing existing efforts to improve student and learning supports into a comprehensive approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Major Lessons Underscored

Analysis of current reform efforts underscores several consistent lessons:

- **Fragmentation remains a widespread concern.** The field has accumulated many valuable initiatives, but too often they exist as disconnected activities rather than as an integrated system.
- **Fragmentation is a symptom of marginalization.** School improvement policy and practice focuses mainly on instruction and management-governance and pursue student and learning supports in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner.
- **System development matters more than adding a few more programs, personnel, and services.** Sustainable progress requires building systems that unify resources and develop a comprehensive approach that enhances equity of opportunity for all students.
- **Prevention and early intervention are essential.** Schools perform better when they prevent problems and keep others from becoming severe.
- **Working relationships and collaboration are fundamental.** Positive connections among students, families, educators, and community partners remain central to student success in school.
- **Leadership and infrastructure are indispensable.** Effective implementation and sustainability depend on leadership, planning mechanisms, accountability structures, and resource coordination.

The convergence of whole-child initiatives, MTSS implementation, community schools, school mental health expansion, and growing attention to disparities creates a unique window of opportunity. At this time, many of the elements needed for transformation already exist. The challenge no longer is to create new initiatives but to rethink and reorganize student and learning supports into a unified system.

The report's central conclusion is straightforward:

the next major frontier in school improvement is not program expansion – it is system transformation.

New Directions for Student and Learning Supports: What's Happening Across the Country and Next Steps

For decades, school improvement efforts have focused primarily on enhancing instruction and strengthening management/governance. While essential, these two components alone have proven insufficient for addressing the many barriers that interfere with learning, teaching, and student well-being (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a; 2017).

Students come to school affected by a wide range of challenges, including economic hardship, mental and physical health concerns, chronic absenteeism, family and housing instability, food insecurity, trauma, social isolation. These and other factors directly affect engagement and achievement (Adelman & Taylor, 2006b; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Darling-Hammond, Schachner, Edgerton et al., 2019; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023a,b; Parisi, 2024).¹

Despite a growing body of evidence about barriers to learning and teaching, efforts to address such factors too often remain peripheral to school improvement policy and practice. Consequently, student and learning supports continue to be marginalized and insufficiently integrated into the overall mission of schools.

Recognition of these realities has stimulated a growing array of efforts across the country to strengthen how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. States, districts, schools, and community partners are pursuing a wide variety of initiatives designed to ensure that students receive the supports needed to engage, learn, and thrive (Adelman & Taylor, 2026; Brackenridge et al; 2024; Falconer et al, 2025).

Although these efforts are often pursued under different labels and through separate initiatives, they reflect a shared recognition that schools need a more unified and comprehensive approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. To better understand these developments, our Center's analysis groups them into seven major arenas of activity that collectively represent emerging directions for strengthening student and learning supports nationwide.

Part I

What is Happening Across the Country?

A growing number of initiatives are attempting to strengthen how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and promote student well-being, engagement, and success. Although these efforts differ in emphasis and strategy, they share a common recognition that improving instruction alone is insufficient for ensuring that all students have an equitable opportunity to succeed. They also illustrate the difficulties in responding to challenges resulting from fragmentation, marginalization, and the absence of unifying frameworks for school improvement policy and practice.

The discussion that follows reviews seven major and overlapping arenas of activity:

- Whole-child and science-of-learning approaches
- Integrated student supports and wraparound systems
- Community schools movement
- Comprehensive school mental health approach
- Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and its evolution
- Expansion of the ranks of student and learning support personnel
- Transformation of student and learning support systems

Whole-Child Approaches

One of the most prominent developments in education policy and practice has been the expansion of whole-child frameworks and related science-of-learning initiatives.

Organizations such as ASCD, the Learning Policy Institute, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have promoted approaches that focus on addressing students' academic, social, emotional, physical, and developmental needs (ASCD, 2026; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024a,b; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). These approaches emphasize:

- Positive relationships
- Safe and supportive school climates
- Social-emotional development
- Family engagement
- Community collaboration
- Equitable opportunities to learn

A major expression of this trend emerged in 2013 with the introduction of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) framework, which has become widely used to shape policies and practices that seek to align health, learning, and developmental supports (Brackenridge et al., 2024; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024a,b; Learning Policy Institute, 2026; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020). The CDC presents the framework as encompassing five whole child tenets:

- Healthy: Entering school physically and mentally ready to learn
- Safe: Protected from physical and emotional harm in the school environment
- Engaged: Connected to the school and broader community
- Supported: Guided by caring adults and personalized learning strategies
- Challenged: Prepared for academic, personal, and future career success

and ten interactive components:

- Health Education: Curriculum that promotes health literacy and positive behaviors
- Physical Education & Physical Activity: Programs fostering lifelong movement and wellness
- Nutrition Environment & Services: Access to healthy meals and nutrition education
- Health Services: Preventive care, screenings, and emergency management
- Counseling, Psychological, & Social Services: Mental health support and guidance
- Social & Emotional Climate: Cultivating a safe, supportive, and respectful school culture
- Physical Environment: A safe campus structure, including air quality, lighting, and security
- Employee Wellness: Programs supporting the physical and mental health of school staff
- Family Engagement: Active integration of parents and caregivers into the school community
- Community Involvement: Utilizing local resources, businesses, and agencies to enhance student success.

In presenting the framework, the CDC recognizes that educational progress is severely constrained when students face unaddressed health, emotional, social, and environmental barriers. They report that the framework has helped broaden understanding of the multiple factors that affect student success and has elevated attention to health, well-being, relationships, engagement, and positive development as essential contributors to learning.

While WSCC broadens attention beyond mental health and promotes a more holistic view of student development, it provides limited guidance for developing a unified system of student and learning supports. It highlights what matters for student success, but provides less direction about how schools should systematically organize available resources to address barriers to learning and teaching. As a result, implementation often remains fragmented and marginal to the school's primary improvement agenda.

Initiatives for Integrated Student Supports

A second major trend is the growing effort to implement Integrated Student Supports (ISS) as a strategy for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The approach is designed to address barriers to learning and teaching by systematically connecting students and families with a broad range of academic, health, mental health, social service, and enrichment resources.

To support service and program delivery, ISS initiatives generally pursue strategies for:

- Identifying student needs through data-informed processes
- Coordinating services and supports across sectors
- Connecting students and families with available resources
- Monitoring participation and outcomes
- Strengthening collaboration among schools, agencies, and communities

The focus on ISS reflects longstanding concerns about fragmented programs and services, as well as the need to use available resources more effectively. At its core, ISS represents an effort to improve coordination among supports that often operate in isolation from one another. ISS initiatives have highlighted the importance of mechanisms that connect, coordinate, and embed supports into the daily functioning of schools.

Prominent examples include the work of organizations such as Communities in Schools, City Connects, and the Children's Aid Society, as well as state and local initiatives that utilize student support coordinators, case management systems, and interagency collaborations to improve attendance, engagement, academic performance, and well-being.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has supported the expansion of ISS approaches by authorizing and encouraging federal investment in integrated service models (Moore et al., 2017). While these provisions remain in law, recent funding reductions and budget uncertainties may constrain implementation in some settings.

Research has found promising effects on attendance, academic achievement, engagement, and longer-term outcomes for students facing adversity (Bowden & Gish, 2021; City Connects, 2026; Moore et al., 2017; Walsh et al., 2018). The findings for academic outcomes, particularly standardized test performance, are often modest and uneven; attendance, engagement, and school completion findings tend to be stronger.

Despite promising evidence, ISS initiatives face several challenges. For example:

- Implementation varies substantially across settings, and success depends heavily on sustained leadership, coordinated partnerships, community capacity, and stable funding. In addition, difficulties related to interagency coordination, data sharing, and long-term sustainability continue to limit the effectiveness and scalability of many initiatives (Somers & Haider, 2017).
- Much of what is referred to as integrated student supports emphasizes connecting community resources and services to schools (e.g., health, mental health, social services, and after-school programs). This often limits integration efforts to connecting services to schools rather than integrating all resources involved in addressing barriers to learning and teaching into a unified system of student and learning supports.
- Given the sparse availability of resources in many communities, implementation often focuses on enhancing linkages and co-locating services at a few school sites. While this can benefit students at those campuses, it may leave unmet needs at other schools and raise concerns about equitable access across a district. In some cases, these initiatives coordinate with, but do not fully integrate, the work of school- and district-based student support personnel whose responsibilities include prevention, early intervention, and treatment of learning, behavior, and emotional problems. These personnel include psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, special educators, and others. The lack of integration is reflected in the frequency with which community providers and school staff serve the same students and families with limited shared planning, communication, and accountability.

ISS initiatives continue to underscore the importance of moving beyond fragmented and isolated services toward integrated practices. However, while integration can reduce fragmentation, it does not by itself transform student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Community Schools Movement

A third major and rapidly expanding arena of activity is the community schools movement. Community schools are a school improvement strategy that strengthens relationships among schools, families, and communities to support student learning, development, and well-being. Although models vary, community schools typically seek to coordinate educational, health, mental health, social service, youth development, and family support resources around the needs of students and their families. A central goal is to make schools community hubs. That is, rather than viewing schools as isolated institutions, the community school approach positions the school as a hub for mobilizing community assets to address factors affecting learning, development, and well-being.

The community schools approach generally goes beyond the focus of ISS initiatives on integrating student supports and services. It emphasizes three other interrelated features:

- Expanded and enriched learning opportunities before, after, and during school
- Active family and community engagement
- Collaborative leadership and shared decision-making

Community schools use a site-based coordinator to help organize working relationships, connect students and families with needed resources, and facilitate collaboration among schools, agencies, community organizations, and other stakeholders.

The movement has grown substantially during the past two decades. Organizations such as the Coalition for Community Schools, the Children's Aid Society, the Institute for Educational Leadership, and federal, state, and local initiatives have helped promote and expand community school models across urban, suburban, and rural settings.

Federal and state investments in community schools increased substantially during the late 2010s and early 2020s, particularly following major federal investments through the Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) program and significant state initiatives in states such as California, New Mexico, Maryland, and New York. However, while Congress continues to determine final appropriations, uncertainty about the future of federal funding arose when recent federal budget proposals sought to eliminate or consolidate the FSCS program.

Research has documented a variety of positive outcomes associated with well-implemented community schools, although findings vary across initiatives and outcomes. Reported benefits include improvements in attendance, school climate, family engagement, student well-being, and, in some cases, academic performance. Studies of long-standing initiatives in cities such as New York, Cincinnati, Oakland, and Tulsa suggest that comprehensive community school strategies can contribute to stronger student outcomes while enhancing coordination among schools, families, and community partners (Coalition for Community Schools, 2024; Maier et al., 2017; Oakes et al., 2017; Johnston et al., 2024; Somers & Haider, 2017).

The popularity of the community schools' concept reflects a widespread desire to strengthen connections among students, families, schools, and communities. It also indicates an increasing recognition that schools cannot effectively transform student/learning supports on their own. By developing collaborative working relationships with available community resources, community schools endeavor to expand access to essential supports and help.

At the same time, community schools face many of the same challenges encountered by other student support initiatives. Implementation quality varies considerably, partnerships require ongoing leadership and resources, and many efforts focus primarily on coordinating programs, services, and collaborative working relationships rather than transforming how schools systematically address barriers to learning and teaching. In some locations, community school initiatives function primarily as collections of programs, services, and collaborations that remain only partially integrated into the school's overall strategy for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Thus, community schools certainly underscore the value of mobilizing community resources and strengthening school-community collaborations. However, collaboration alone is not system transformation. We suggest that the full potential of community schools will be realized when such efforts operate as part of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice.

Comprehensive School Mental Health Approaches

A fourth major trend is the expansion of comprehensive school mental health approaches. Growing concerns about student mental health, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, have elevated the priority for services and supports to address student's mental health concerns and enhance well-being. Policymakers, educators, health professionals, and families increasingly recognize that such problems are closely connected to misbehavior and poor academic performance.

Research consistently reports that well-designed school mental health programs can contribute to improved social-emotional functioning, reduced behavioral concerns, stronger school engagement, and enhanced academic outcomes (Hoover, 2024; Hoover, et al, 2019; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; Stephan et al., 2023). Increasingly, schools are viewed as one of the most accessible settings for delivering mental health promotion, prevention, and intervention services, particularly for students who might otherwise experience barriers to receiving care (Adelman & Taylor, 2026).

National organizations such as the National Center for School Mental Health, the School-Based Health Alliance, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the Mental Health Technology Transfer Centers have helped frame and advance comprehensive school mental health approaches across the country. As defined by the National Center for School Mental Health:

Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems (CSMHS) provide a full array of tiered supports and services that promote a positive school climate, social and emotional learning, and mental health and well-being, while reducing the prevalence and severity of mental illness and substance use. CSMHSs are built on a strong foundation of district and school professionals, including administrators and educators, specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, school nurses, and other school health professionals), in strategic collaboration with students, families, and community health and mental health partners. These systems also assess and address the social, political, and environmental structures, including public policies and social norms, that influence mental health outcomes.

Although the frameworks vary, most incorporate a multi-tiered approach designed to identify and match a student's needs. This includes school-wide practices for promoting well-being, preventing problems, screening for concerns, and providing increasingly intensive supports as needed. To increase availability of and access to mental health services, there is a strong emphasis on linking students and families with community providers and on securing reimbursement from Medicaid and private insurance.

During the past decade, federal support helped expand school mental health initiatives through grants designed to increase the availability of school-based mental health professionals, strengthen school-community connections, improve mental health training, and expand access to prevention and intervention services. Many states and districts also increased investments in school psychologists, school social workers, counselors, mental health coordinators, and connecting with community mental health agencies. School-based health and wellness centers incorporated behavioral health services, tele-mental health programs expanded access in underserved areas, and numerous districts implemented social-emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, suicide prevention initiatives, and other strategies designed to strengthen supports for student mental health.

More recently, however, shifts in funding priorities and program requirements have created uncertainty about the future of some federal investments. At the same time, growing fiscal pressures, competing demands, staffing shortages, and budget cutbacks are prompting many education agencies to reassess how best to sustain and deploy resources to address mental health considerations.

Analyses of comprehensive school mental health initiatives raise several concerns. For example, such initiatives often remain marginalized as specialized programs rather than being fully integrated into a school's system of student and learning supports. As a result, they may contribute to the

fragmentation of student support services and the inefficient use of sparse resources. Another concern is that many initiatives focus primarily on assessment and treatment services for students with identified mental health problems, resulting in intensive assistance for a relatively small proportion of students while giving less attention to the larger number whose learning and well-being are affected by a broad range of barriers to learning and teaching. In addition, insufficient emphasis is often placed on addressing school climate, student engagement, instructional experiences, family and community influences, and other factors that strongly affect both mental health and learning. Consequently, such opportunities to promote well-being, prevent problems, and enhance learning on a schoolwide basis may be missed (Adelman & Taylor, 2010, 2020).

Comprehensive school mental health initiatives have significantly expanded school-based attention to student well-being and mental health needs. At the same time, improving mental health services is not synonymous with transforming student and learning supports. Mental health initiatives can enhance availability and access, but they are not a substitute for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach to addressing the full range of barriers to learning and teaching.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and Its Evolution

A fifth major trend influencing student and learning supports is the widespread adoption and continuing evolution of Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS). Originally emerging from efforts to integrate Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), MTSS has become one of the most widely used frameworks for organizing academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports in schools.

At its core, MTSS is designed to provide a continuum of supports matched to student needs. Although variations exist across states and districts, MTSS generally frames interventions on a continuum encompassing:

- Universal supports and prevention strategies for all students (Tier 1)
- Targeted early interventions for students who require additional assistance (Tier 2)
- Intensive and individualized interventions for students with significant needs (Tier 3).

In pursuing this continuum, there is an emphasis on:

- Use of data to identify needs and monitor progress
- Continuous improvement and problem-solving processes
- Integration of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports

The framework has been widely promoted by federal and state education agencies as a means of improving student outcomes while reducing reliance on reactive and fragmented intervention practices. MTSS has become a central feature of many school improvement efforts and is frequently used to organize initiatives related to literacy, mathematics, behavior, attendance, social-emotional learning, and school mental health (Adelman & Taylor, 2025. 2026; California Department of Education, 2026).

One of the strengths of the MTSS framework is its emphasis on prevention and early intervention. Rather than waiting until problems become severe, schools are encouraged to identify concerns early and provide increasingly intensive supports as needed. This approach has helped shift attention from a traditional "wait-to-fail" model toward more proactive efforts designed to support student success. In many schools, MTSS has also stimulated greater use of data, strengthened collaboration among educators, and improved the alignment of interventions across grade levels and support programs.

As MTSS has expanded, its focus has broadened considerably. Part of its appeal lies in the simplicity of the three-tier framework and its adaptability to a wide range of school improvement priorities. What began largely as a framework for academic intervention and special education identification has evolved into a school-wide structure for organizing academic instruction, behavior support, attendance initiatives, social-emotional learning, mental health services, and other efforts designed to address barriers to learning and teaching. At the same time, implementing MTSS comprehensively has proven far more complex than the framework itself might suggest. Effective implementation requires substantial organizational infrastructure, including screening and progress-monitoring systems, intervention capacity, collaborative problem-solving teams, ongoing professional learning, and sustained leadership support. As a result, implementation is often uneven across schools and districts.

Analyses of MTSS implementation suggest that concerns generally fall into three interconnected areas: (1) implementation challenges, (2) tendencies toward fragmentation and overemphasis on individual intervention, and (3) limitations in the framework itself as a guide for developing a comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

- *Implementation challenges* – As MTSS has gained popularity, the term increasingly has been adopted as a broad organizing framework for school improvement, often without sufficient specification of how implementation will occur at the school level. While this expansion has increased the framework's relevance, it also has created challenges related to implementation fidelity, role clarity, resource allocation, and sustainability.

- *Fragmentation and overreliance on intensive intervention* – In practice, MTSS implementation often focuses primarily on individual student problems and intervention processes rather than on systematically addressing the conditions that contribute to learning, behavior, engagement, and well-being concerns. Analysts have noted a tendency for attention and resources to become concentrated on students requiring Tier 3 interventions, potentially undermining investment in prevention and early intervention efforts (Sullivan et al., 2024). As schools devote increasing time to Tier 3, relatively less attention may be directed toward strengthening universal supports and addressing the factors that contribute to problems before they become severe. Similarly, concerns have been raised about insufficient attention to the root conditions that affect student outcomes (Fallon, Veiga, & Sugai, 2023).

Schools also frequently struggle to coordinate the many programs, initiatives, and specialized personnel that operate within or alongside MTSS frameworks. As a result, separate systems for behavior, attendance, mental health, school climate, and related concerns may develop in parallel rather than as components of a unified approach. This can contribute to fragmentation and inefficient use of available resources (Balfanz et al, 2024).

- *Limitations in the framework itself* – At its core, MTSS is primarily a framework for organizing interventions according to levels of intensity and need. While this provides an efficient structure for matching supports to student needs, it is less explicit about how schools should organize the full range of resources, collaborative working relationships, programs, personnel, and infrastructure into the type of comprehensive system needed to address barriers to learning and teaching.

In general, MTSS provides a useful framework for organizing interventions across levels of need, but it does not by itself offer a comprehensive blueprint for addressing the range of barriers that interfere with learning and teaching. For example, the framework does not emphasize:

- systematically connecting school and community resources across all levels of intervention intensity
- developing each level as an integrated 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.

Critical functions related to resource coordination, community collaborations, school climate, family engagement, reengaging disconnected students, addressing opportunity gaps, and transforming student support infrastructure are not addressed explicitly within most MTSS frameworks. As a result, MTSS alone cannot serve as a comprehensive framework for organizing and transforming student and learning supports.

MTSS has become one of the most influential frameworks for organizing academic, behavioral, and social-emotional interventions. However, organizing interventions by levels of intensity is not synonymous with transforming student and learning supports. MTSS addresses an important part of the challenge, but it does not by itself provide a comprehensive framework for organizing the full range of programs, personnel, services, school-community partnerships, and infrastructure needed to address barriers to learning and teaching. Its greatest value, when the continuum is fleshed out, lies in functioning as one facet of a broader, transformed system of student/learning supports.

Expansion of the Ranks of Student and Learning Support Personnel

A sixth major trend is the ongoing effort to expand the number and diversity of student and learning support personnel available in schools. Recognizing that academic success is strongly influenced by barriers to learning and teaching, policymakers and educators have invested in personnel whose primary responsibilities involve supporting students beyond classroom instruction (Affrunti, 2025; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024; Pierrottet, 2023; Stephan et al., 2023).

Historically, schools have relied on a relatively limited number of specialized staff such as school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, and school social workers. In recent years, however, growing concerns related to student mental health, chronic absenteeism, behavior challenges, school safety, family needs, and educational equity have led many states and districts to expand these staffing categories while also creating new support positions.

Efforts to expand personnel have included advocacy for:

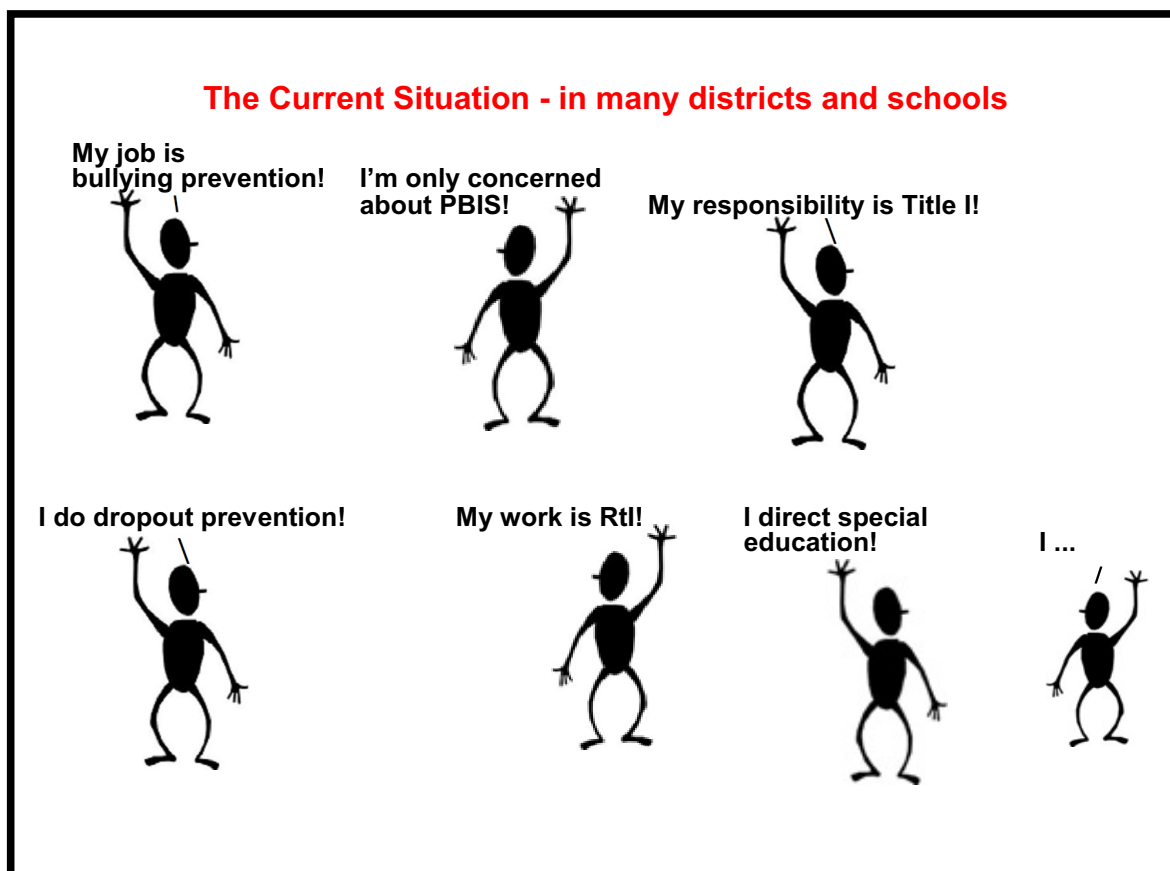
- Increasing the number of school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses
- Expanding access to school-based mental health professionals and wellness coaches
- Adding attendance and truancy specialists
- Employing community school coordinators and family engagement specialists
- Increasing the use of student support coordinators and case managers
- Developing behavioral intervention and restorative practices personnel
- Expanding school-based health center staffing
- Strengthening connections with community-based service providers

Federal, state, and local investments contributed to growth in many of these roles during the past decade. In particular, concerns about student mental health stimulated major efforts to address shortages of school psychologists, counselors, and social workers (e.g., see National Association of School Psychologists, 2025). Many districts also expanded positions focused on attendance improvement, family engagement, school climate, and coordination of integrated student supports.

However, staffing growth has been uneven. Recruitment difficulties, staff turnover, burnout, and funding uncertainties further complicate efforts to build and sustain student support staff. In many locations, staffing increases were supported by temporary pandemic-relief and recovery funds. Loss of these funds and continuing budget constraints have raised concerns about the sustainability of these staffing gains. This is especially the situation in rural communities, high-poverty areas, and underserved regions. National professional organizations continue to document staffing levels that fall far short of recommended ratios.

Calls for expanding support staffing reflect a broader shift in expectations regarding the role of schools. Increasingly, schools are expected not only to provide instruction but also to address factors interfering with student engagement and well-being. This shift has been accompanied with increased role specialization as schools have created new positions designed to address specific concerns such as attendance, behavior, family engagement, student wellness, and school-community coordination.

However, increasing staffing levels and role specialization tends to increase fragmentation and often works against efforts to develop a cohesive and comprehensive support system. In many schools, both longstanding and newly added personnel remain organized through historically separate professional silos, with counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, community school coordinators, attendance specialists, behavioral specialists, and others often operating largely independently. Where staffing has increased, schools frequently experience an expansion of services, initiatives, and programs without a corresponding transformation of the fragmented activity into a system of supports. Staffing growth alone can yield greater complexity rather than greater effectiveness.



Increasing the number and diversity of student and learning support personnel can expand a school's capacity to address barriers to learning and teaching. However, staffing expansion alone is not system transformation. As with the other initiatives discussed, we stress that the full benefit of additional personnel will be realized only when their efforts are organized through a transformed system of student and learning supports.

Transformation of Student and Learning Support Framework

A seventh initiative involves efforts to transform the way schools prioritize and operationalize student and learning supports.

Despite decades of investment in programs, services, personnel, and partnerships, student and learning supports remain largely fragmented, marginalized, and insufficiently integrated into school improvement policy and practice. This movement seeks more fundamental changes in policy, practice, and the infrastructure used to address barriers to learning and teaching. The push for system transformation has emerged from growing recognition that student supports in many schools remain marginalized and fragmented. Over time, schools have accumulated numerous programs, initiatives, funding streams, specialized services, and support personnel designed to address specific problems such as attendance, behavior, mental health, bullying, safety, dropout prevention, substance abuse, family engagement, and academic intervention.

While many of these efforts are individually valuable, they often operate independently of one another, resulting in duplication, gaps in services, competition for limited resources, and difficulties coordinating support for students, their families, and teachers. As a result, much of today's discourse about improving student supports focuses on fragmentation and efforts to integrate – align services and initiatives, coordinate agencies, and reduce duplication.

Transformation leaders point out that, while integration is necessary, it is not sufficient. Fragmentation is not the root problem; it is a symptom. What drives fragmentation is the absence of a policy framework that establishes addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a primary, essential, and unified component of school improvement. Student and learning supports continue to be treated as supplementary and auxiliary rather than as a core responsibility of schooling. This marginalization is the underlying driver of the fragmentation, redundancy, inefficiency, and limited impact that characterize current student/learning support efforts. Without correcting this foundational flaw, other initiatives to improve how schools address barriers to learning and teaching are just layered onto an already fragmented and marginalized subsystem (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a; Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, 2022).

Integration and Transformation Are Not the Same

- Integration seeks to improve coordination among existing initiatives.
- Transformation seeks to redesign the framework that governs those initiatives.
- Integration reduces fragmentation.
- Transformation eliminates the conditions that continually recreate fragmentation.

In practice, efforts to transform student and learning supports focus on moving beyond a fragmented collection of programs toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that is fully woven into school improvement policy and practice. Rather than organizing supports around categorical programs or funding sources, these approaches seek to organize resources around a unifying framework for addressing factors that interfere with learning and teaching while promoting student well-being, engagement, and success. The framework combines classroom and schoolwide supports into (1) an interconnected continuum of subsystems that weaves school and community resources together with (2) organized domains of student and learning supports (Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, 2022).

At their core, transformation initiatives emphasize:

- elevating priority in school improvement policy for addressing barriers to learning and teaching
- operationalizing the policy into a sustainable unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports
- fully integrating the system with instructional practices
- institutionalizing leadership and governance mechanisms that facilitate effective development, implementation, scale-up, and sustainability of the system
- weaving school and community resources together to expand capacity, reduce fragmentation, and improve outcomes

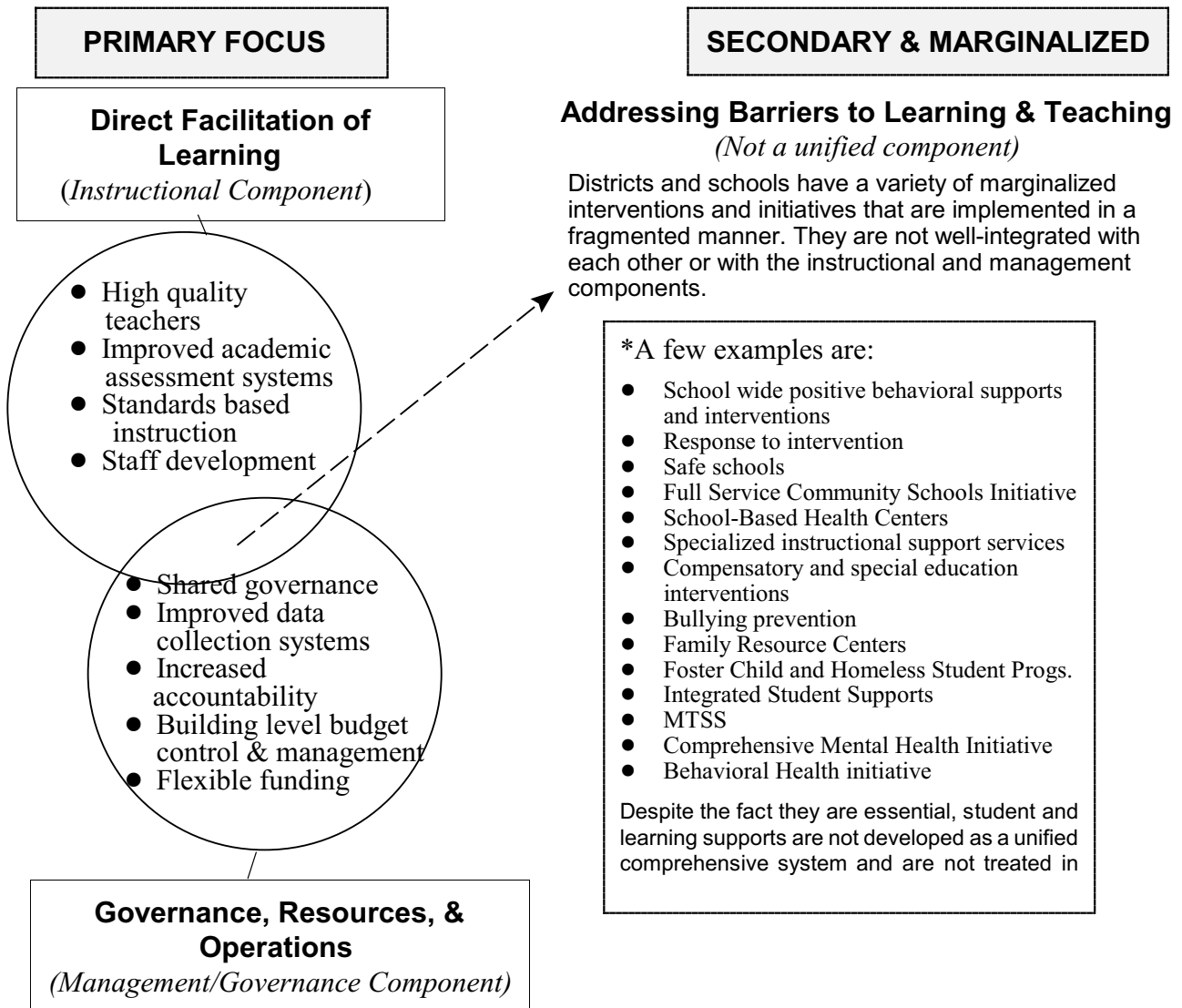
A unified system intentionally organizes all student and learning support resources around common goals. A comprehensive system is designed to weave school and community resources together to address a wide range of barriers to learning and teaching. An equitable system ensures that all students have equity of opportunity to access needed supports.

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. Ending this marginalization rather than focusing just on integrating student supports is essential to effectively improving how schools respond to learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Ending the marginalization requires elevating school improvement policy priority for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

At present, school improvement policy is guided primarily by a two- component framework (see Exhibit 1). Transformation of student/learning supports calls for expanding the school improvement policy framework from a two- to a three-component framework.

Exhibit 1

Prevailing Two-Component Framework Shaping School Improvement Policy



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).

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.

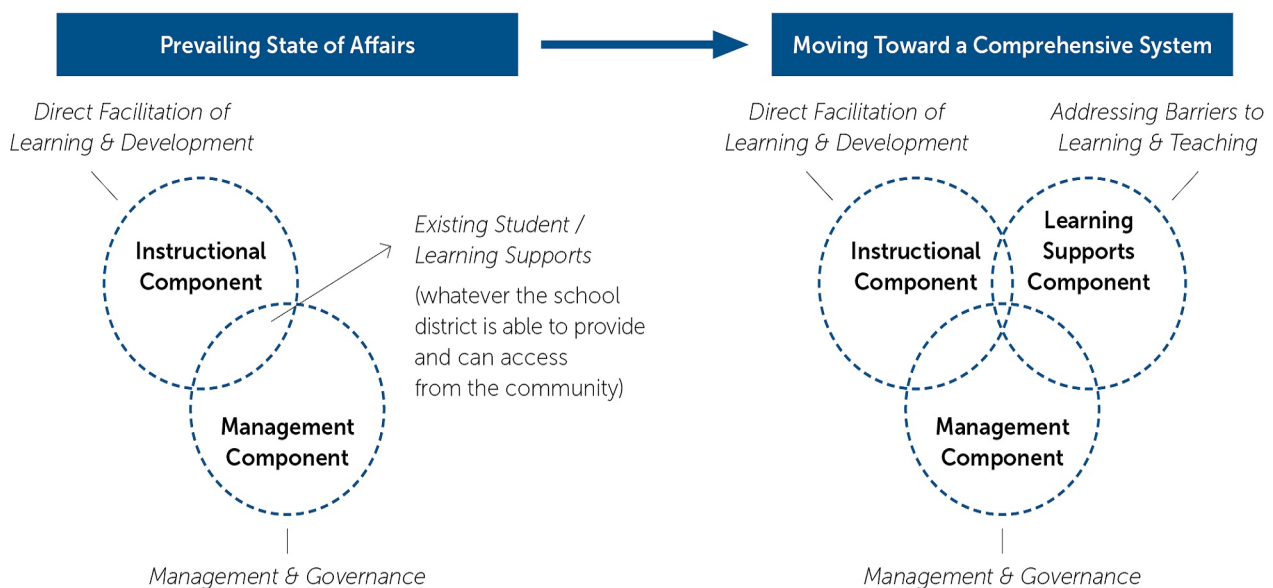
Within this framework, interventions to address learning barriers, reengage disconnected students, and promote well being are given secondary consideration at best. As a result, districts and schools accumulate a wide array of categorical programs, services, and special initiatives – often supported by distinct funding streams and external mandates – that operate in parallel rather than as a coherent system. Even frameworks explicitly intended to promote coherence, such as MTSS, are constrained by this prevailing architecture; they organize interventions without elevating student/learning supports to the level of a primary component of school improvement.

The consequences are predictable and well documented: overlapping roles, competing priorities, inefficient use of scarce resources, compliance driven practices, and limited reach relative to the magnitude of need. Schools may help some students, but they rarely alter the conditions that continue to interfere with learning and teaching for large segments of the student population. As long as student and learning supports remain structurally marginalized, efforts to improve outcomes will remain episodic and inequitable.

Ending fragmentation, therefore, requires more than better coordination or alignment among initiatives. It requires ending the marginalization itself. And ending marginalization requires an explicit policy shift – from a two- component to a three-component framework for school improvement (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2.

Moving to a Three Component Framework



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). As dubbed here, 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.

A three-component framework establishes a “Learning Supports” Component as a primary and essential facet of school improvement, on par with instruction and governance/management. This component is explicitly focused on (1) addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (2) reengaging students in classroom learning. The intent of the transformation is not to add another initiative, another categorical program, another specialized service, another layer of administration; the intent is to unify existing programs, services, and resources into a coherent component that is fully integrated into school improvement planning, daily practice, and accountability systems.

Over time, the unified component must be deliberately developed into a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports – one that prioritizes prevention and early intervention, operates in classrooms and schoolwide, and strategically weaves together school and community owned resources. Given persistent fiscal constraints, such development depends less on new funding than on rethinking, redeploying, and braiding existing resources in service of clearly articulated system goals.

The move to a three-component school improvement framework calls for added mechanisms and restructuring. Exhibit 3 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 the system of student/learning supports.

Unlike most current organizational structures, the prototype establishes leadership, planning, and accountability mechanisms specifically for student and learning supports. The intent is to give the component the same organizational status afforded to instruction and management/governance.

Comparable changes are needed at the district and state-level. And additional mechanisms are needed for effective school-community collaboration that enables “families” of schools to work together to increase efficiency and effectiveness and gain economies of scale.

The central challenge is not whether current initiatives are well intentioned, well resourced, or well implemented. It is whether school improvement policy is willing to authorize and institutionalize a system that treats addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a core function of schooling. Until that shift is made, system transformation will remain the work of a few independent trailblazers.

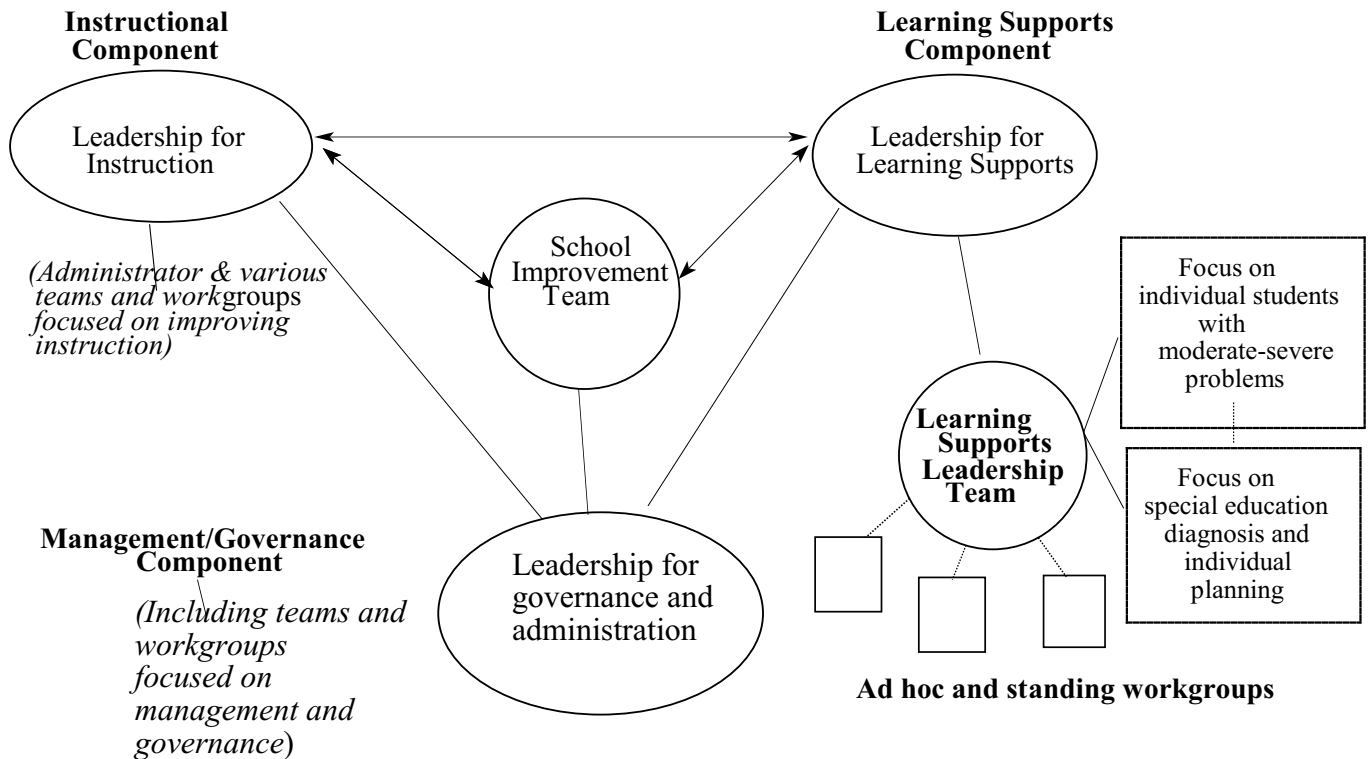
Examples of this initiative can be found in districts and states that pioneered transforming student/learning supports, along with the challenges encountered, and the lessons learned (Adelman & Taylor, 2024). In general, transformation efforts face significant challenges. Policy constraints, fragmented funding streams, competing priorities, organizational traditions, staffing limitations, and leadership turnover.

The future of student and learning supports does not hinge on creating another program, adding another initiative, or simply expanding services. The call at this juncture is to bring these assets together within a coherent and comprehensive system of student and learning supports that is fully integrated with instruction and school improvement. The next major frontier in accomplishing this is in the policy arena (e.g., expanding school improvement policy into a three component framework).

Exhibit 3.

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)



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.

Illustration: The Urban Learning Center Model at Elizabeth Learning Center

One of the earliest large-scale efforts to operationalize a three-component framework for school improvement was developed during the late 1990s as part of the New American Schools initiative. Supported by the New American Schools Development Corporation and endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education, the effort brought together the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the teachers' union, and a broad range of community partners to create what became known as the Urban Learning Center Model. The model was implemented at the Elizabeth Learning Center, a Pre-K–12 school serving more than 2,700 students.

The initiative sought to move beyond traditional school reform by establishing three equally important and integrated components:

- Instruction and curriculum
- Management and governance
- A unified system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching (at that time referred to as an enabling component)

The enabling component was designed to organize student and learning supports into a comprehensive continuum of interventions. Rather than relying on fragmented programs and services, the prototype developed six interconnected domains of learning supports:

- Classroom-focused enabling strategies
- Support for transitions
- Student and family assistance
- Crisis prevention and response
- Home involvement in schooling
- Community outreach and volunteer involvement

A distinguishing feature of the model was the deliberate weaving together of school and community resources. School personnel, specialized services, community agencies, volunteers, and families were organized within a common framework designed to address barriers to learning and teaching while promoting healthy development and student success. Infrastructure was created to coordinate these efforts and ensure ongoing development of the system.

The reform also broadened the school's role as a community learning center. Adult education opportunities expanded substantially through partnerships that offered English-language instruction, citizenship preparation, computer literacy training, parenting education, and leadership development. Parent cooperative childcare programs enabled family participation in these activities.

Over a three-year period, the school reported significant improvements. Enrollment grew to approximately 2,800 students. Achievement scores increased across grade levels. The dropout rate declined to 1.22%, compared with rates exceeding 5% in surrounding schools and nearly 8% districtwide. Attendance averaged approximately 92 percent. Graduation rates for the first two graduating classes reached 100 percent and 98 percent respectively, with most graduates pursuing postsecondary education. Parent and community involvement expanded dramatically, including more than 1,000 adults participating in educational programs and volunteers contributing over 12,000 hours annually.

While no single example can be viewed as a definitive model for all schools, the Urban Learning Center demonstrated the feasibility and potential value of moving beyond fragmented services toward a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports. Its significance lies not simply in specific outcomes, but in illustrating how school improvement can be restructured around three integrated components, with addressing barriers to learning and teaching recognized as a primary and essential function of schooling.

The following Table synthesizes challenges identified across all seven initiatives and highlights why system transformation is needed.

Table 1. Core Challenges Limiting Progress in Transforming Student and Learning Supports

Challenge	How It Manifests in Practice	Consequences
Fragmentation of Programs, Services, and Initiatives	Multiple programs operate independently with separate funding streams, leadership, accountability requirements, and implementation processes.	Duplication of effort, gaps in services, competition for resources, staff confusion, and initiative overload.
Absence of a Comprehensive Framework	Schools address concerns through separate initiatives rather than within a unified structure.	Difficulty establishing priorities, coordinating resources, aligning personnel, and sustaining improvements.
Limited Integration with School Improvement Efforts	Student and learning supports are viewed as supplemental rather than core to school improvement.	Weak connections among supports, instruction, and broader educational goals.
Inefficient Use of Existing Resources	Personnel, partnerships, family resources, and programs operate in isolation.	Resource duplication in some areas and unmet needs in others.
Insufficient Attention to Prevention and Early Intervention	Resources are concentrated on responding to serious problems after they emerge.	Greater demand for intensive interventions and missed preventive opportunities.
Persistent Equity and Access Concerns	Availability and quality of supports vary across schools and communities.	Disparities in opportunities for students to access needed supports.
Leadership and Infrastructure Limitations	Limited mechanisms and dispersed responsibility.	Reduced coherence, weak accountability, and difficulty sustaining reforms.
Replication and Sustainability Challenges	Short-term funding; budget cuts; new leadership and priorities; resistance to proposed changes.	Successful innovations remain localized and fail to produce broad scale improvements.
Marginalization of Student and Learning Supports	Policy and practice continue to focus primarily on instruction and management.	Supports remain underdeveloped, fragmented, and insufficiently integrated.

Summary Conclusion: Across these challenges, a common theme emerges: the major barrier is not a lack of concern, innovation, programs, or personnel. Rather, schools lack a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports that fully integrates these resources into school improvement efforts.

Efforts to transform student and learning supports represent a fundamentally different type of school improvement emphasis. Rather than focusing on a particular program, service, initiative, or professional role, they focus on redesigning how schools organize and develop their overall approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The goal is not simply to improve coordination among existing activities, but to establish a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports as a primary component of school improvement.

From this perspective, whole-child approaches, integrated student supports, community schools, comprehensive school mental health initiatives, MTSS, and expanded support staffing are not competing alternatives. Each contributes important resources and strategies. System transformation provides the framework for bringing these efforts together into a coherent approach for enhancing learning, development, well-being, and equity of opportunity.

Ultimately, the challenge is not simply to improve individual initiatives, but to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

Key Lessons Underscored by Current Initiatives

Although the seven initiatives differ in emphasis and strategy, they point toward a common conclusion: *improving instruction alone is insufficient*. Student and learning supports are a primary responsibility of schools and a central component of school improvement policy and practice. Improving student outcomes requires schools to strengthen their capacity to address barriers to learning and teaching.

In this respect, the initiatives also underscore the following:

- **Fragmentation remains a widespread concern.** The field has accumulated many valuable initiatives, but too often they exist as disconnected activities rather than as an integrated system. Virtually every initiative reviewed in this report has emerged in part because existing student and learning supports are so fragmented. Schools typically operate multiple programs, services, personnel groups, and partnerships that address related concerns but function separately.
- **Fragmentation is a symptom of marginalization.** The concern is not simply fragmentation. Fragmentation persists because student and learning supports continue to be treated as secondary rather than primary responsibilities of schools. School improvement policy and practice focuses mainly on instruction and management-governance and pursue student and learning supports in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner.
- **System development matters more than adding a few more programs, personnel, and services.** The field has demonstrated considerable success in developing promising programs and expanding services. However, adding programs, personnel, and partnerships does not automatically produce better outcomes. Expansion without integration often increases complexity and competition for scarce resources. Sustainable improvement depends less on creating new initiatives and more on building systems capable of connecting and coordinating existing resources. The lesson is not that schools need more initiatives. The lesson is that schools need a framework capable of organizing initiatives into a coherent system.
- **Prevention and early intervention are essential.** Schools achieve greater impact when they address concerns before problems become severe. While intensive interventions are necessary, overreliance on crisis response limits effectiveness and strains resources. The most successful approaches emphasize prevention, early intervention, student engagement, positive school climate, and the timely identification of emerging problems.
- **Working relationships and collaboration are fundamental.** Experience demonstrates that schools cannot address many barriers to learning and teaching on their own. Across all efforts to improve schools, positive relationships emerge as a powerful contributor to student success. Strong connections among students, families, school staff, and community partners foster engagement, belonging, resilience, and learning. Effective collaboration with families and community partners is essential for expanding capacity and improving access to needed supports.
- **Leadership and infrastructure are indispensable.** Successful efforts 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.

The overriding lesson from a system transformation perspective is that

Sustainable Improvement Requires System Transformation.

Taken together, the lessons underscore that the future of student and learning supports lies not in selecting among competing initiatives but in bringing them together within a unified framework.

The nation does not need another isolated initiative. It needs policies and practices that transform fragmented initiatives and supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports that is fully woven into school improvement policy and practice.

Part II

Looking Ahead: New Directions, Next Steps

The developments reviewed in this report demonstrate growing recognition that barriers to learning and teaching must be addressed if students are to have equitable opportunities to succeed at school and beyond. At the same time, the lessons emerging from current school improvement efforts suggest that the next stage of progress will depend on moving in new directions.

All the initiatives discussed in the report have made contributions to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and to enhancing equity of opportunity. While each highlights important strategies and resources, none by itself provides a sufficiently comprehensive framework for organizing the range of programs, personnel, services, and community resources needed to address barriers to learning and teaching systematically. Ironically, they collectively add more fragmented activity,

At the same time, the analyses presented in this report suggest that future progress depends less on creating additional initiatives and more on developing greater coherence among existing efforts

The challenge now is not simply identifying promising practices. It is creating the policy, leadership, infrastructure, and organizational framework needed to transform fragmented efforts into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that is replicable and sustainable.

So here are some next steps.

Elevate Student and Learning Supports as a Third Component of School Improvement

The most important next step is to establish addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a primary and permanent component of school improvement policy and practice. For too long, student and learning supports have remained secondary to instruction and management/governance. This marginalization has contributed to the fragmentation that continues to characterize schools' efforts to support learning, development, well-being, and equity of opportunity.

School improvement policy should be expanded from its traditional two-component framework to a three-component framework that operationalizes the third component into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Accomplishing this will reposition addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a primary and essential responsibility of schools rather than as an auxiliary set of functions.

Move From Fragmented Initiatives to a Unified System

A major next step is to organize existing programs, personnel, services, and resources within a common intervention framework. This requires delineating what is in place and recommending system changes. The tasks involved include:

- (a) adopting a comprehensive intervention framework
- (b) using the framework to map existing student support activities and operational infrastructure
- (c) analyzing what has been mapped – assets, redundancies, gaps, needs for alignment
- (d) identifying priorities for and clarifying the benefits of system changes,
- (e) developing recommendations for system changes around shared goals,
- (f) building a critical mass of support for the recommended changes
- (g) submitting recommendations for approval by appropriate authorities and policy makers

Strengthen Leadership and Infrastructure

Sustainable improvement requires more than promising programs and services. It requires leadership and infrastructure capable of and accountable for facilitating and monitoring implementation of system changes and continuous improvement.

Schools and districts should establish and institutionalize leadership mechanisms with explicit responsibility for student and learning supports. This includes establishing

- a permanent administrative position to transform and lead a student/learning supports component of school improvement
- a student/learning support leadership team as a permanent operational infrastructure mechanism to work with the administrative lead
- designating temporary mechanisms for facilitating system changes (e.g., change agents, coaches) and work groups as needed

Tasks involve:

- (a) building staff capacity related to system changes
- (b) implementation of student/learning supports transformation
- (c) formative and summative evaluation and accountability
- (d) ongoing development of new directions

The stronger the operational infrastructure, the greater the likelihood of surviving changes in personnel, funding, or organizational priorities.

Prioritize Development of Key Facets of the Transformed System

In carrying out first steps, it is important to ensure essential facets of the transformed system are effectively implemented. For example:

- **Prevention and Early Intervention** – A stronger prevention and early-intervention orientation can reduce reliance on more intensive and costly interventions while improving outcomes for larger numbers of students. This calls for prioritizing preventing problems and responding early when concerns emerge. Although intensive interventions remain essential, schools can often achieve greater impact by strengthening conditions that promote learning, engagement, healthy development, and well-being for all students. Particular attention should be paid to efforts that enhance attendance and engagement, foster connectedness, build positive relationships among students, educators, and families, strengthen positive school climate, and identify concerns before they become severe.
- **School and Community Collaboration** – In a period of continuing fiscal pressures, it is essential to make strategic and effective use of the resources that already exist. Moreover, no school can independently address every factor that affects learning, development, and well-being. Enhancing school-community collaboration includes mapping existing resources, reducing duplication, weaving together programs and personnel, strengthening collaborative working relationships with families and community partners, and creating mechanisms for coordinated planning and action.
- **Advancing Equity of Opportunity** – Reducing disparities in access to supports is a major goal of transforming student and learning supports. This involves ensuring the system provides equitable availability, access, and outcomes for all students and their families. Particular attention should be given to outreach to those who have become disengaged from school.

Major challenges ahead involve system development and implementation. The next major frontier in school improvement is not program expansion – it is system transformation.

Policy Implications

The developments reviewed in this report suggest that the primary policy challenge is no longer determining whether student and learning supports matter. The evidence is clear that barriers to learning and teaching profoundly affect student engagement, well-being, and academic success. The challenge now is creating a school improvement policy framework that ends the marginalization of the role schools play in addressing such barriers. To this end, future policy must place greater emphasis on system development. This involves:

Expanding School Improvement Policy to Recognize Student and Learning Supports as a Core Function of Schooling

A fundamental policy implication is that addressing barriers to learning and teaching must be treated as a core responsibility of schools rather than as supplementary activity. This requires expanding school improvement policy beyond its traditional focus on instruction and management-governance and establishing student and learning supports as a third primary component of school improvement. Such a policy shift would elevate student and learning supports from a peripheral concern to a central element of school improvement planning, leadership, accountability, and resource allocation.

Future policy should create the conditions necessary for system transformation by institutionalizing student and learning supports as a primary component of school improvement.

Promoting and Facilitating System Transformation

The expansion of the school improvement policy framework would provide a strong foundation for developing transformed systems capable of addressing factors that interfere with learning and teaching while promoting student engagement, well-being, and success.

For decades, policymakers have responded to emerging concerns by creating new initiatives focused on specific problems such as attendance, behavior, mental health, school climate, family engagement, and dropout prevention. While many of these efforts have merit, the cumulative result has often been greater fragmentation rather than greater coherence.

Future policy should place higher priority on helping schools organize existing programs, services, personnel, and resources into unified systems. The goal should not be simply to fund additional activities, but to strengthen the capacity of schools and districts to connect, coordinate, and continuously improve existing efforts.

Supporting a Reworking of Infrastructure for System Transformation

Unified, comprehensive, and equitable systems of student/learning supports require dedicated leadership and mechanisms that bring school and community resources together around common goals. To this end, policy should support the development of an operational infrastructure that can develop and maintain implementation, replication, scaling-up, and sustainability such systems. This includes providing greater flexibility for schools and districts to braid and align existing investments and ensuring capacity building for transformation.

Prioritizing Prevention and Early Intervention

Current policies often direct substantial resources toward responding to problems after they become severe and/or politicized. A stronger prevention and early-intervention orientation can improve outcomes for larger numbers of students while reducing reliance on more intensive and costly interventions. Given the benefits of also prioritizing preventing problems and addressing concerns early, policy should encourage such efforts.

Expanding School Accountability for Student and Learning Supports

Accountability is a policy tool with extraordinary power to reshape schools – for good and for bad. Systems are driven by accountability measures. Currently accountability systems largely emphasize academic outcomes while giving comparatively limited attention to conditions that influence learning and development. As a result, factors affecting students' opportunities to learn often receive insufficient attention in school improvement efforts.

Policy needs to encourage expanded accountability frameworks that include direct indicators of the impact of student/learning supports (e.g., increased attendance, reduced tardies, reduced misbehavior, less bullying and sexual harassment, increased family involvement with child, fewer referrals for specialized assistance, fewer referrals for special education, fewer suspensions and dropouts). Such measures would provide a more complete picture of school effectiveness and help ensure sustained attention to addressing barriers to learning and teaching.²

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

Policy implications for moving in new directions are straightforward: Schools need more than additional programs, services, and initiatives; they need policy frameworks that expand the framework for school improvement and the development of unified, comprehensive, and equitable systems of student/ learning supports.

Ultimately, the policy challenge is not program expansion – it is system transformation.

Concluding Comments

Across the country, growing attention is being given to factors that affect students' ability to engage, learn, and succeed at school. Whole-child approaches, integrated student supports, community schools, comprehensive school mental health systems, MTSS, expanded student support staffing, and related initiatives all reflect a common recognition: improving instruction alone is not enough. Schools also must address barriers to learning and teaching and promote the conditions that enable healthy development and student success.

These developments represent important progress. They have broadened awareness, expanded services and supports, strengthened school-community collaboration, and increased attention to prevention and early intervention. At the same time, a central lesson emerges from this review. The major challenge facing the field is not a lack of promising initiatives. Rather, it is the absence of a unifying framework capable of bringing these efforts together into a coherent and sustainable system.

Too often, 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.

This report has argued that addressing barriers to learning and teaching must be recognized as a primary and essential function of schooling. Doing so requires moving beyond the traditional two-component framework for school improvement and establishing a third component devoted to student and learning supports. The purpose is not to create another initiative or add another layer of programs and services. The purpose is to provide a framework for organizing existing resources into a unified, comprehensive, equitable, and sustainable system.

Ultimately, the future of student and learning supports does not depend on launching one more initiative, creating one more categorical program, or adding one more isolated service. It depends on transforming how schools organize their efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

The central messages of this report are straightforward:

- **Improving instruction and transforming student/learning supports are not competing agendas; together they define a full approach to school improvement.**
- **the next major frontier in school improvement is not program expansion – it is system transformation.**

Notes

¹ Research consistently demonstrates that these factors profoundly influence students' learning, development, and success in school. Findings from developmental science further underscore that academic learning is inseparable from social-emotional development, health, relationships, and well-being. Improving student outcomes therefore requires systematic attention to the many factors that shape learning and development (Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2019; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019, 2023a,b; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

² Current accountability pressures marginalize almost every effort not seen as directly and quickly producing higher achievement scores. This produces a growing disconnect between the realities of what it takes to improve academic performance and the direction in which many policy makers and school reformers are leading the public. The disconnect is especially evident in schools serving students living in poverty. Such students and the staff who work in schools serving them have a clear appreciation of many barriers to learning that must be addressed so students can benefit from the teacher's efforts to teach. An expanded accountability framework will help advance efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching. (See prototype framework at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/account.pdf>.)

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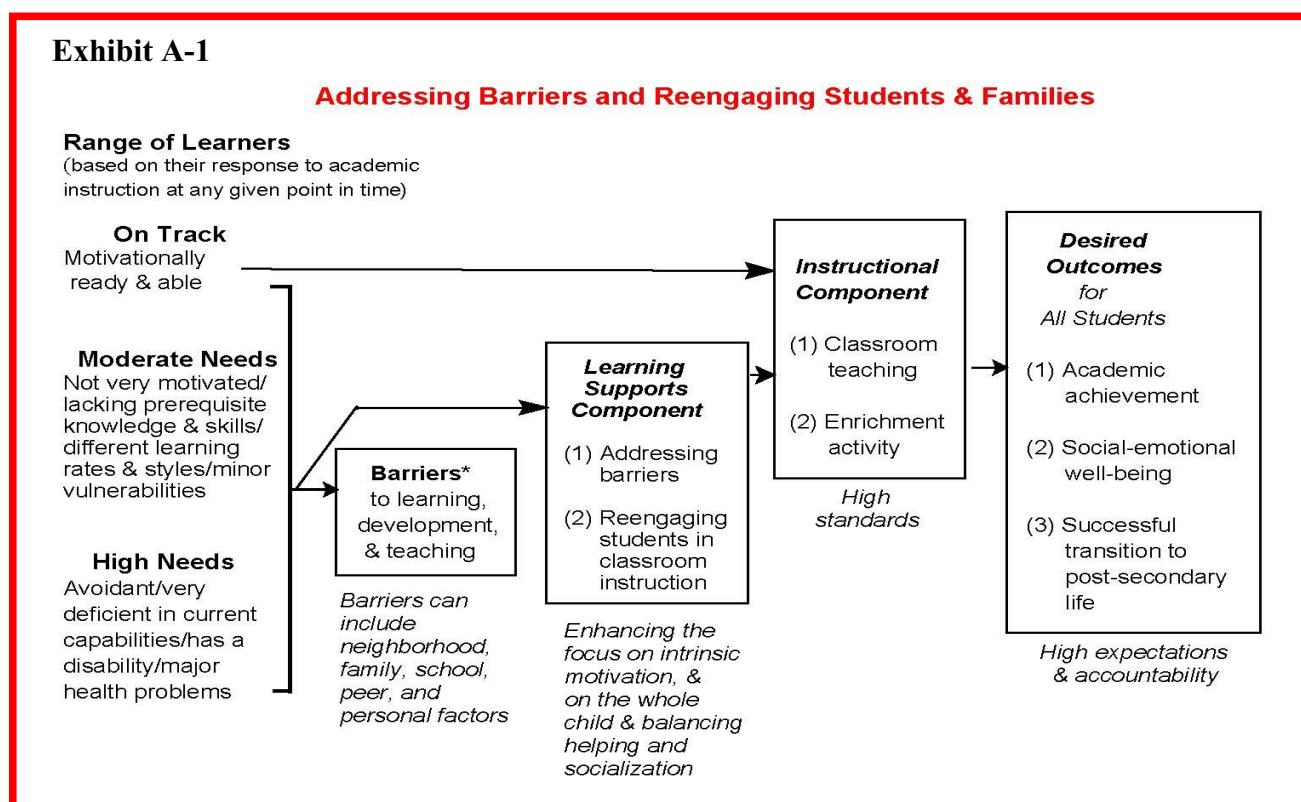
Appendix A

Prototype for Student/Learning Supports Intervention

This appendix describes the intervention framework that underlies the third primary component of school improvement discussed throughout the report.

The following Exhibit graphically emphasizes that the aim of a transformed system of student and learning supports 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.

In developing the intervention prototype for the third component of school improvement, the initial name was an enabling component (i.e., the component was seen as enabling a school to address barriers to learning and teaching.) Over time schools have dubbed it as a Learning Supports Component – operationalized as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.



What follows illustrates the prototype intervention framework for the Learning Supports Component.

The framework operationalizes the third component of school improvement by organizing classroom and schoolwide supports into (1) an interconnected *continuum of subsystems* that weaves school and community resources together and (2) six *domains* of student and learning supports (rather than the current trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level of the continuum).

A Continuum of Interconnected Subsystems

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers a school-wide tiered model (commonly referred to as a multi-tier system of 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 being referred to widely as MTSS and has proven to have considerable appeal for a variety of reasons, including its conceptual simplicity.

While a full continuum of interventions is essential, it is just one facet of a truly *comprehensive intervention system*. So, the prototype for the Learning Supports Component required moving beyond the limitations of the way MTSS generally is conceived. Simply tweaking prevailing views of a multi-tier framework falls far short of developing a transformed system of in-classroom and schoolwide student/learning supports.

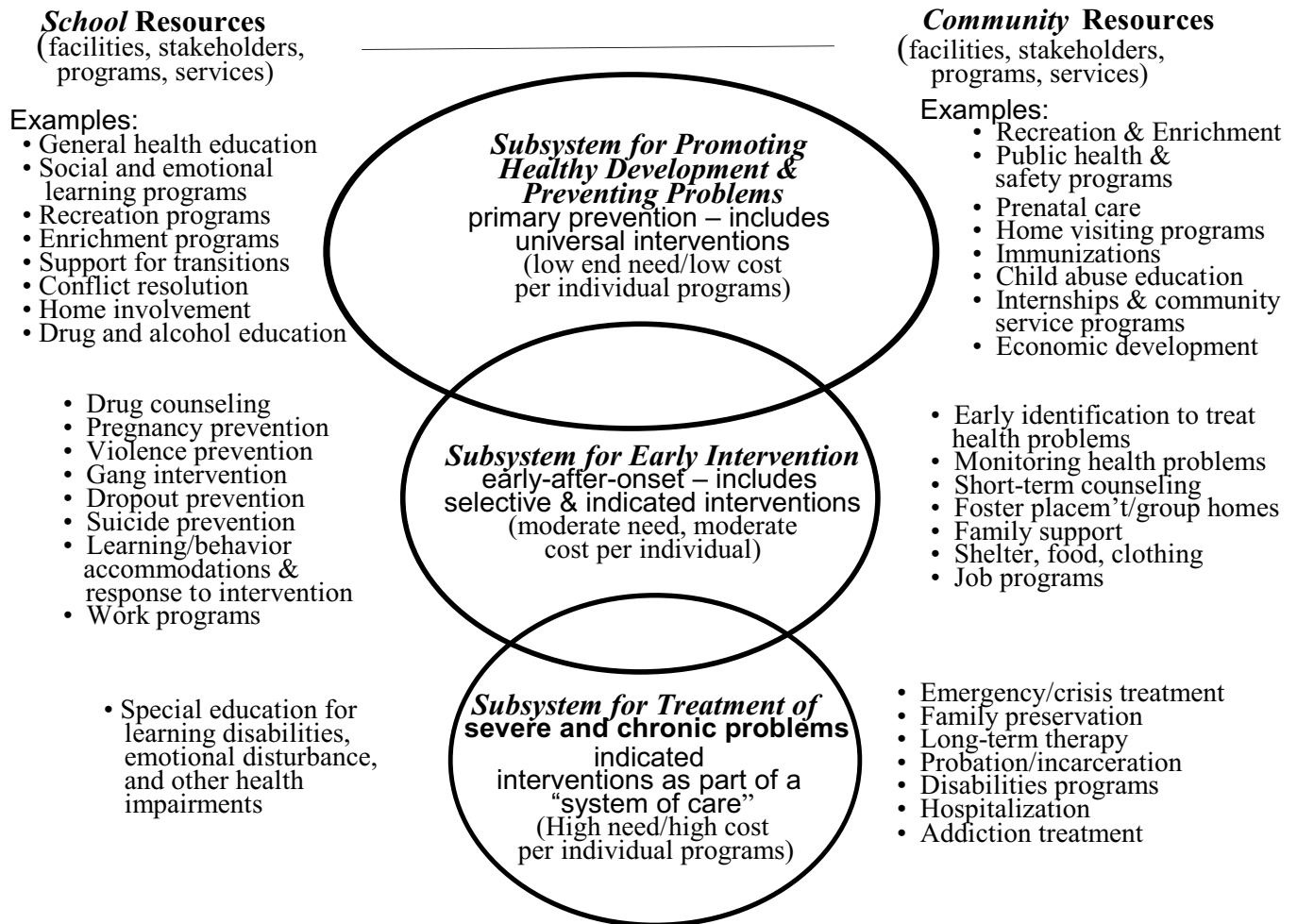
MTSS needs to be reframed as a cohesive, multifaceted, and systemic continuum that weaves together school and community resources.

As illustrated in Exhibit A-2, the continuum levels are conceived as three subsystems. Each subsystem 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.)

Exhibit A-2

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



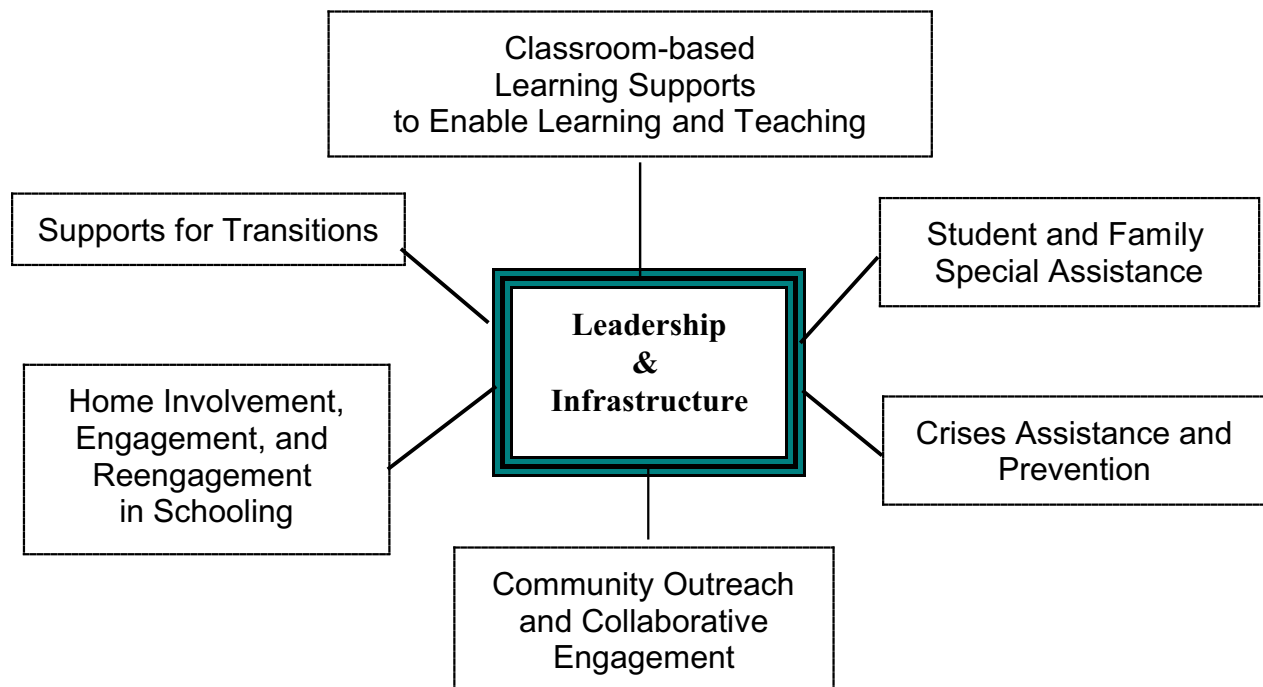
Categorizing Domains of Classroom and Schoolwide Student/Learning Supports

A system of student and learning supports requires more than conceiving a continuum of intervention. It also is necessary to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that reflect a school’s efforts to provide student and learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide.

Analysis of typical “laundry lists” of district programs and services used to address barriers to learning and teaching indicates they can be grouped into six domains reflecting basic concerns that schools confront regularly. In organizing the activity, it becomes clearer what supports are needed in and out of the classroom to enable the learning of all students, and it promotes efforts to reduce fragmentation and redundancy. The six domains are illustrated in Exhibit A-3 and briefly described on the following page.

Exhibit A-3

Prototype for Six Domains of Support – In Classrooms and Schoolwide



Note: All categorical programs can be integrated into these six domains. Examples include initiatives, programs, and services that focus on positive behavioral supports, responses to intervention, programs for safe and drug free schools, programs for social and emotional development and learning, full service community schools, family resource centers, and school based health centers, CDC's approach to school health, bilingual, cultural, and other diversity programs, compensatory education programs, special education programs, mandates stemming from education legislation, and many more.

Clearly, the intervention domains can be conceived in other ways. The points for emphasis here are that the many activities that schools pursue along the intervention continuum can and need to be further organized.

Over the last decade, versions of the six basic domains have been incorporated in a variety of venues across the country (for examples and lessons learned, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>).

The six domains capture the substance of the multifaceted ways schools are trying to address barriers to learning. As indicated in the next section, combining the domains across each level of the continuum illustrated in the previous section provides the framework for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.

Brief Description of Six Domains of Support

- In-classroom supports. Embedding student and learning supports into regular classroom strategies to enable learning and teaching (e.g., teachers working collaboratively with each other and with student support staff to ensure instruction is personalized with an emphasis on enhancing intrinsic motivation and social-emotional development for all students, especially those experiencing mild to moderate learning and behavior problems; reengaging those who have become disengaged from instruction; providing learning accommodations and supports as necessary; using response to intervention in applying special assistance; addressing external barriers with a focus on prevention and early intervention)
- Supports for transitions. Supporting transitions that occur daily and over the year (e.g., supporting daily transitions before, during, and after school; assisting students and families as they negotiate the many hurdles related to reentry or initial entry into school; school and grade changes; program transitions; accessing special assistance)
- Supports to increase home connections and engagement with the school. Supporting the involvement of those with student caretaking responsibilities including those providing foster care and those outreaching to the homeless (e.g., addressing barriers to home involvement; helping those in the home enhance supports for their children; strengthening home and school communication; increasing home support for the school)
- Crises responding and prevention (e.g., preparing for emergencies; implementing plans when an event occurs; countering the impact of traumatic events; providing follow-up assistance; implementing prevention strategies; creating a caring and safe learning environment)
- Supports to increase community involvement and collaborative engagement with schools (e.g., outreach to develop greater community connection and support from a wide range of resources – including enhanced use of volunteers and developing a school-community collaborative infrastructure)
- Facilitating student and family access to special assistance (e.g., in the regular program first and then, as needed, through referral for specialized services on and off campus).

Each of these domains is discussed in detail in *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>. As aids for system planning, priority setting, and development, a set of self-study surveys is available for each domain, as well as for a general overview of student and learning supports activity, processes, and mechanisms – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/surveys/set1.pdf>.

Framing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System

As illustrated in Exhibit A-4, 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 A-4

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 transformed system of student/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.

Appendix B

Integrating and Weaving Funding Streams to Transform Student/Learning Supports

*System transformation may require redeploying existing funds
before seeking additional resources.*

A persistent challenge confronting schools is how to finance efforts that address barriers to learning and teaching. This is especially so with respect to making student/learning supports a primary component of school improvement. As long as funds are organized around fragmented programs rather than a unified system, financing practices will tend to reproduce fragmentation.

Discussions about improving student and learning supports often focus on obtaining additional grants, securing new funding streams, or adding specialized personnel. However, given sparse budgets, the primary challenge is how to rethink use of available resources and the fragmentation created by categorical and programmatic funding.

As emphasized throughout this report, fragmentation remains a major obstacle to improving how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. Funding fragmentation persists because student/learning supports generally are not treated as a primary component of school improvement. As long as funds are organized around fragmented programs rather than a unifying component, financing practices will tend to reproduce fragmentation.

Programs often are administered through separate departments, funded through categorical streams, and implemented independently of one another. As a result, schools frequently experience duplication of effort, service gaps, competition for resources, and limited coordination among initiatives intended to achieve similar outcomes (Adelman & Taylor, 2024; Moore et al., 2017; Johnston et al., 2024).

The purpose of this appendix is to present a framework for rethinking how resources are organized and financed in support of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Rather than focusing primarily on acquiring new money, the emphasis is on strategically organizing and weaving together existing federal, state, local, school, and community resources in ways that strengthen coherence, effectiveness, and sustainability (Adelman & Taylor, 2024; Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, 2023).

The Funding Problem Is a System Problem

Whenever schools attempt to improve student and learning supports, discussion quickly turns to funding. Questions commonly include:

Where will the money come from? What new grants are available?

How can additional personnel be funded? What federal programs can be accessed?

These questions are understandable. However, they can unintentionally divert attention from a more fundamental concern. Many districts already devote substantial fiscal, personnel, and community resources to addressing attendance problems, behavior concerns, school climate, mental health, family engagement, dropout prevention, special education needs, health services, and other barriers that interfere with learning and teaching (Adelman & Taylor, 2024; Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, 2023; Children's Funding Project, 2026).

Typically, these resources are:

- Distributed across multiple departments
- Tied to categorical programs
- Managed through separate administrative structures
- Evaluated independently
- Coordinated inconsistently

The result often is a collection of initiatives, programs, and services, rather than a cohesive system. Schools tend to lack a unified framework capable of ensuring that resources are strategically aligned around the shared goals of prevention, early intervention, student engagement, healthy development, and equitable opportunity (Adelman & Taylor, 2024).

From this perspective, the funding challenge is fundamentally a system-development challenge. The primary issue is not simply how to acquire additional resources, but how to organize available resources so they function as an integrated system rather than as disconnected activities.

From Program Financing to System Financing

Note that the difference between financing programs and financing system improvement is highlighted by how student support staff are used. In most schools, such personnel are used to provide specific programs and services. Involving them in system improvement generally requires designated funds to enable their participation in such efforts.

Here's a brief chart contrasting the two approaches:

Program Financing	System Financing
Funds individual initiatives, programs, services	Funds a unified system
Emphasizes categorical compliance	Emphasizes braiding & coherence
Supports adding more	Supports coordination & integration
Focuses on immediate implementation of interventions	Focuses on ensuring an effective infrastructure
Can increase fragmentation	Can reduce fragmentation

Historically, education funding has emphasized financing individual programs, initiatives, and services. While such investments remain important, sustainable improvement increasingly depends on financing the infrastructure that enables programs and personnel to function as part of a coherent system.

This means investing not only in direct services, but also in:

- Resource coordination
- Leadership and governance mechanisms
- School-community collaboration
- Prevention and early intervention systems
- Data-informed planning
- Continuous improvement processes
- Resource mapping and gap analysis
- Capacity-building and professional learning

Such investments strengthen the effectiveness of existing programs and often produce greater long-term returns than simply creating additional initiatives.

An important strategy is the use of braided funding (Sherman & Suffren, 2026; Stopani, 2024). Braiding preserves separate accounting and reporting requirements while aligning expenditures around common goals. By contrast, blended funding combines resources into a common pool when regulations permit. Both approaches can support system development; however, braiding is often the more feasible strategy because it allows districts to remain compliant with funding requirements while simultaneously improving coordination across initiatives (Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, 2023).

The objective is not to eliminate categorical funding streams. The objective is to align them around a common framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and promoting student success and that encompasses shared priorities.

Braiding refers specifically to aligning separate funding streams while maintaining distinct fiscal accountability requirements.

Blending funds combines resources into a common pool when regulations permit.

Weaving refers more broadly to organizing all available fiscal, personnel, and community resources into a unified system.

Braiding funding is not the same as system transformation. Funding strategies can reduce fragmentation, but transformation requires a unifying framework, leadership, infrastructure, accountability, and continuous system development.

The following tables illustrate the range of major sources of funding resources that can support a comprehensive system of student/learning supports.

**Table B-1. Examples of Federal Funding Sources That Can Support
a Comprehensive System of Student/Learning Supports**

Federal Funding Source	Potential Support Includes
ESSA – Title I (Every Student Succeeds Act)	• Attendance initiatives • Parent and family engagement • Academic support services • Prevention programs • Student success teams • Transition supports
ESSA – Title II	• Professional development • Capacity building • Leadership development • Staff training
ESSA – Title III	• Family outreach • Language-access services • Transition support for multilingual learners
ESSA – Title IV-A	• Safe and healthy schools • School climate initiatives • Student wellness activities • Mental health promotion • Student engagement programs
IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)	• Early intervention • Consultation • Student assessment • Transition planning • Collaboration with general education personnel
Medicaid	• Nursing services • Counseling • Behavioral health interventions • School health services

Note. The funding sources listed in this table are examples rather than a comprehensive inventory of federal resources that may be used to support a comprehensive system of student/learning supports. Schools and districts may also braid or blend funds from programs administered through a variety of federal agencies. Depending on state and local policies, additional resources may be available through programs of the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Justice, Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and other federal agencies. Examples include McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance, Head Start, Child Care and Development Block Grants, Community Mental Health Services programs, SAMHSA grants, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs, juvenile justice initiatives, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and school nutrition programs.

**Table B-2. Examples of State and Local Funding Sources That Can Support
a Comprehensive System of Student/Learning Supports**

Funding Source	Potential Support Includes
State Funding Sources	• Student wellness initiatives • School climate improvement efforts • Mental health programs and services • Attendance improvement initiatives • Community school development • School safety efforts • Expanded learning opportunities Many states also provide opportunities to support system infrastructure, cross-sector coordination, and related capacity-building activities.
Local Funding Sources	• General district funds • Site-based budgets • Student services allocations • Local tax revenues • Flexible discretionary funds These resources frequently provide the greatest flexibility for planning, coordination, implementation, and continuous improvement activities associated with a comprehensive system of student/learning supports.

Note. State and local funding structures vary considerably. The examples listed in this table are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Schools and districts may also use a variety of categorical, formula-based, competitive grant, and discretionary funding sources to support student and learning supports, depending on state laws, local policies, and funding priorities.

Table B-3. Examples of Community Resources That Can Support a Comprehensive System of Student/Learning Supports

Community Resources	Potential Contributions
Health Departments	Health promotion, prevention programs, public health services, health education
Mental Health Agencies	Counseling, mental health services, early intervention, crisis response
Social Service Organizations	Family assistance, case management, basic needs support, referral services
Universities and Community Colleges	Research, technical assistance, professional development, internships, tutoring, evaluation support
Youth Organizations	Positive youth development, mentoring, leadership opportunities, after-school programs
Parks and Recreation Programs	Enrichment activities, physical activity programs, summer and out-of-school learning opportunities
Businesses	Mentoring, internships, career exploration, financial and in-kind support
Faith Communities	Volunteer support, family outreach, community engagement, meeting space
Volunteer Organizations	Tutoring, mentoring, family support, service-learning opportunities
Philanthropic Foundations	Grants, capacity-building support, innovation funding, partnership development

Note. Community resources often represent a major but underutilized source of support. When effectively mobilized through strategic partnerships and collaborative planning, community resources can substantially expand system capacity, enhance service coordination, and increase the range of supports available to students and families.

Resource Mapping and Analysis: An Essential First Step

Before seeking additional resources, schools and districts should systematically identify and analyze the resources they already possess. Resource mapping has emerged as a critical strategy for reducing fragmentation, identifying duplication, uncovering gaps, and strengthening coordination (Adelman & Taylor, 2024; Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003; Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, 2023; Education Commission of the States, 2025).

Resource mapping begins by clarifying what is happening and then doing an analysis that is guided by a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Key questions include:

- What personnel (including volunteers) are currently providing student and learning supports?
- What programs and initiatives are addressing barriers to learning and teaching?
- What funding streams support these activities? Facilities/space?
- What community organizations and partners contribute resources or services?
- Where are efforts duplicated?
- What priority needs are not being addressed?
- What infrastructure mechanisms are used for student and learning supports?
- How can existing resources be woven together and redeployed to improve outcomes?

Resource mapping shifts planning from a deficit perspective ("What resources are missing?") toward a strategic perspective ("How can existing resources be organized more effectively?").

Use the worksheet (Exhibit B-1) as a Guide for Resource Mapping and Analysis

Exhibit B-1.

Resource Mapping Worksheet*

Resource Category	Existing Resources	Primary Functions/ Services	Target Population	Funding Source	Duplication Concerns	Gaps/Unmet Needs	Opportunities for Integration
Personnel							
Programs/Services							
School Initiatives							
Funding Streams							
Community Partners							

*Additional aids for mapping relevant resources from the Center at UCLA are online at:

><https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fundinginteg.pdf>

><https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/resourcemapping/resourcemappingandmanagement.pdf>

><https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/budgetmapping.pdf>

Analysis Summary

Major Strengths Identified --

Areas of Duplication –

Significant Gaps –

Opportunities for Resource Integration –

Priority Actions –

The completed resource map should provide a clear picture of available supports.

The analyses should guide decisions about reallocating, coordinating, and integrating existing resources before pursuing additional funding or creating new programs. This approach maximizes efficiency, reduces fragmentation, and strengthens the overall system of student and learning supports.

The focus is on

- what's working – accessing available "data" on effectiveness of current interventions, general system status, and infrastructure for leadership and operations
- what's not working – clarifying which are worth improving and which are wasted resources (including redundancies)
- gaps – identifying current gaps with specific reference to pressing needs
- fragmentation – degree to which the approach is uncoordinated
- policy support – Is the emphasis on student/learning supports marginalized in school improvement policy? How much is being spent on addressing barriers to learning and teaching?
- implications for intervention improvements – which are and are not worth keeping; which are worth taking steps to improve; which gaps need immediate attention; what is needed to increase cohesion and enhance policy support
- needed operational infrastructure changes – identifying weaknesses in the operational infrastructure for student/learning supports

Done properly, mapping and analyses of resources provide a foundation for making decisions about how to move forward in improving student/learning supports. The objectives are to (a) clarify gaps with respect to assessed needs, (b) identify immediate priorities for improvement and system development, and (c) recommend (re)deployment of resources to best meet priorities and to do so in a cost-effective manner.

Funding System Infrastructure

A common mistake is to focus funding primarily on direct-service programs while underinvesting in the infrastructure necessary to coordinate those programs. Yet analyses of community schools, integrated student supports initiatives, MTSS, and student support system transformation consistently indicate that leadership and infrastructure play decisive roles in determining the success or failure of an initiative (Adelman & Taylor, 2024; Bryk, et al., 2015; Johnston et al., 2024; Maier et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2017).

Examples of infrastructure investments include:

- Leadership teams that guide development of the student/learning supports system
- Resource mapping and analysis activities
- Coordination of school and community collaborations
- Data systems used to monitor needs, services, and outcomes
- Professional learning that builds capacity for collaboration and integrated practice
- Staff positions responsible for facilitation, coordination, and continuous improvement
- Planning processes that align multiple initiatives within a common framework
- Communication mechanisms that connect schools, families, and community partners

Programs and services help students directly. Infrastructure helps programs work together.

The expiration of temporary pandemic-era funding underscores the importance of developing permanent operational infrastructure and sustainable resource-integration strategies rather than relying on short-term program expansion. Without effective operational infrastructure, programs generally remain isolated and fragmented. With a strong and dedicated infrastructure, schools can create a sustainable, comprehensive system that reduces duplication, strengthens prevention and early intervention, improves access to supports, and increases equity of opportunity.

Table B-4. Examples of Infrastructure Investments for a Comprehensive System of Student/Learning Supports

Infrastructure Function	Examples
Leadership and Governance	District and school leadership teams, steering groups
Resource Coordination	Support coordinators, partnership facilitators
Data and Accountability	Tracking systems, needs assessments, outcome monitoring
Professional Learning	Cross-training, coaching, collaborative planning
Community Engagement	Partnership development, family engagement infrastructure
Continuous Improvement	Evaluation, resource mapping, strategic planning

***Programs help students; infrastructure helps programs work together.
System transformation requires investment in both.***

A Common Mistake

Districts often increase counseling, attendance, behavior, and mental health services without investing in the leadership and coordination infrastructure needed to integrate them. The result is more services but not necessarily a more effective system.

Illustrative Example:

Reorganizing Existing Funding Around a Unified System*

A midsized district recognized that substantial resources already were being invested in attendance improvement, behavior support, family engagement, mental health services, dropout prevention, and community partnerships. However, these activities were distributed across multiple departments and funded through separate streams with limited coordination.

Rather than creating additional programs, district leaders conducted a comprehensive resource-mapping process and established a Student/Learning Supports Leadership Team. Existing resources – including Title I, Title IV-A, IDEA, local district funds, and community partnerships – were aligned around a unified framework while maintaining separate fiscal accountability requirements.

Over time, the district reported:

- Teams for separate initiatives merged to form a leadership team for a unified approach
- Duplication of services was reduced
- Equity in accessing supports increased
- Communication across student/learning supports improved
- School-community collaboration was strengthened
- Prevention and early intervention activity expanded

The primary change was not the acquisition of new funding. The change was the creation of an organizational infrastructure that enabled existing resources to operate as a coherent system.

*This example illustrates a central lesson of system transformation: meaningful improvement often begins not with new money, but with strategic efforts to organize, coordinate, and weave together existing resources around common goals. It is intended as a composite illustration drawn from experiences reported in school improvement, community school, integrated student support, and student/learning support system initiatives.

Concluding Comments

Transforming student and learning supports is not primarily a matter of creating new programs or securing entirely new funding streams. Schools and communities already devote substantial resources to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The challenge is organizing those resources more effectively (Adelman & Taylor, 2024; Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, 2023).

System development begins with resource mapping, strategic planning, leadership development, school-community collaboration, and the strategic braiding of available federal, state, local, and community resources. When these assets are aligned within a unified framework, schools can reduce fragmentation, strengthen prevention and early intervention, improve access to supports, and increase equity of opportunity for all students.

The fundamental funding challenge is not resource scarcity alone.

It is the absence of a framework that organizes existing resources into a coherent system. New funding can strengthen student/learning supports, but without system development it often adds another layer of fragmentation.

The central lesson is straightforward:

The primary task is not finding more resources – it is weaving existing resources into a unified component that is developed as a comprehensive, equitable, and sustainable system of student and learning supports. In this way, funding becomes a means for system transformation rather than an end in itself.

So, we conclude:

New directions for student and learning supports is not about funding one more program, one more position, or one more initiative. Substantive and sustainable improvements depend on rethinking the school improvement policy framework to ensure that addressing barriers to learning and teaching is a primary component. They call for weaving together and redeploying available resources. They require reorganizing student and learning supports through financing and developing a unified system of student/learning supports. Ultimately, the financing challenge is to use what's available as a catalyst for system transformation.