Public Education at a Crossroads:
Where do schools need to go from here?

Whatever the impact of the current administration's attempts to alter federal involvement in public education, schools will continue to be confronted with many undermining challenges. In what follows, we address moving forward to better meet the needs of the increasing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems despite inadequate financial support.

It's Not About Throwing Money at Problems

While it's obvious that available resources too often are being used ineffectively, it is equally obvious that efforts to address the problems faced by so many schools, staff, and students are under-supported.

> Bruce D. Baker & David Knight (2025) ask and answer:
> ### *DOES MONEY MATTER IN EDUCATION?*
>
> "A publicly funded, open education system is a cornerstone of a democratic society. To provide equal access to high-quality instruction, school systems require basic resources to support personnel and physical infrastructure. Yet there exists no federally guaranteed fundamental right to an education in the United States. The responsibility for providing equal access to high-quality instruction falls largely to individual states.
>
> The U.S. system of financing schools leaves much of the responsibility to states and local school districts, which, on average, collectively pay for about 90 percent of K-12 funding, with the federal government accounting for the other 10 percent....
>
> Money matters more—and has a more profound impact—for children experiencing poverty and in school districts and communities in which states have historically underinvested. Several studies validate that spending more on schools and communities that have previously been deprived of resources yields greater returns on investment than spending where prior investment has been high and student need relatively lower. These findings validate the importance of promoting funding progressiveness in state school finance systems, with the goal of equal educational opportunity for all...."

As Baker (2025) also points out:

> *Virtually every public school district in the nation receives federal K-12 aid, ranging from a few hundred dollars per pupil to a few thousand. Some states and districts get more than others because most federal aid, like state revenue, is targeted by need.*
> *The negative effects of eliminating that aid on achievement would be unevenly distributed, borne disproportionately by certain states and by districts in all states serving lower-income populations. But no student would be left unharmed.*

For some time, districts across the country have had to cut staff and other resources to balance their budgets. Clearly, this is not a situation that is likely to facilitate school improvement. Indeed, the probability is that it will set back improvement efforts. While money is not the only factor in making schools better, drastic budget cuts certainly are not a tenable path to improvement. As administrators, teachers, support staff, parents and other stakeholders consistently caution: "Wherever you cut, you are going to hurt the kids."

> *But the realities are that school budgets are always tight, and ways must be found so that existing resources can be used to make school improvements.*

Where do schools need to go from here?

A central need remains for schools to transform how they address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. In this respect, many, often contradictory, changes have been advocated. Few, however, focus on *fundamentally transforming* student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

> ### Why Transformation?
> Because offering more tutoring, adding a few more student support staff, adopting MTSS, or adding other limited initiatives just can't meet the demands confronting too many schools as the number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems increase. Meeting the demands is further confounded by funding shortfalls that lead to cut backs of student and learning support personnel.

Using Existing Resources to Begin Transforming Student/Learning Supports

As budgets tighten, the trend often is for "supports" to be among the early cuts and for the cuts to be lopsided. That is, student support staff (as compared to other staff) often are disproportionately laid off. In some instances, the ranks of school counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and other support staff are decimated. Unfortunately, in many instances, budget cuts are decimating the capacity of schools to provide essential student and learning supports. This subverts teachers' efforts to build effective learning connections with their students. It is imperative for policy makers to reverse trends toward lopsided cutbacks that counter efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching.

Furthermore, it is essential to use existing resources in more cost-effective ways by unifying student and learning supports and braiding remaining categorical funding in ways that reduce redundancy and counterproductive competition for sparse resources.

Integrating Funds

The widespread failure related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and the impact of special education encroachment on a district's general operating funds have led to policy backlash. Categorical funding has been designated as too inflexible and as perpetuating a reactive "waiting for failure" approach. There have been increasing calls for waivers from categorical silos and for strategies that can stem the tide of students requiring additional funding. Examples of the latter include calls for an expanded focus on prevention, greater emphasis on early intervening and use of response to intervention, and renewed concern for enhancing classroom/school climate.

While it is illegal simply to ignore categories and blend all incoming funds, it is legitimate and feasible to braid certain resources across categories to achieve better outcomes and enhance cost-effectiveness.

At this critical juncture for schools, administrators and staff must take time to pursue strategies for (a) integrating existing resources designated for student/learning supports, (b) weaving them together with available community resources, and (c) deploying them in ways that rebuild student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

Pioneering work undertaken by the Louisiana Department of Education after Hurricane Katrina provides an example. As they stated:

We must put aside our "turfs" and our "purse-strings," in order to overcome the challenges that dwindling resources present for school improvement planning. It is critical for all leaders at the district level to support this effort, in order to empower all personnel to collaborate in new and effective ways. Leaders must remain engaged in this new way of planning and allow personnel the flexibility to think outside of the box to transform the way we do business. ... Managing change is difficult and to be successful, we have to meet the needs of all children, regardless of the ways we choose to fund programs. Far too often, in our silos we have said, "No, we can't do that because..," rather than working together to eliminate the silos. We are [too] comfortable with the inflexibility we have created.

See *About Funding Stream Integration*

Despite cuts, resources will continue to be deployed to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems, especially in schools serving low income families. Currently, such resources are implemented in ways that are unsatisfactory. Over the coming years, districts and their schools need to redeploy existing resources to improve the situation.

Our work over the years calls for pursuing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. This can be accomplished by

- balancing cuts
- mapping and analyzing all resources used to address barriers to learning and teaching (e.g., resources deployed for special education, dropout prevention, family and home involvement, crisis response and prevention, support for transitions, community outreach, assistance for students and families with social and emotional needs, and more)
- dropping ineffective practices, eliminating redundancies, and unifying and redeploying how available resources are used
- as feasible, braiding categorical resources associated with overlapping goals and blending them into the resources pool
- strategically weaving in community resources to fill gaps
- re framing the roles and functions of remaining student support staff
- implementing *Response to Intervention* (RTI) in ways that appropriately reduce the need for out-of-classroom referrals and the related overemphasis on expensive services.

About Building a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Student/learning Supports

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

Over the last five years, a variety of concerns have arisen across the country about how well MTSS is meeting teachers' needs for student/learning supports. Some concerns have emphasized implementation problems. Our concern has stressed that MTSS is not doing much to end the fragmentation and marginalization that has long characterized the ways that schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. We suggest that it is essential to realize that more is involved in building a truly comprehensive system of student/learning supports than the emphasis on a continuum of interventions. That is, while a full continuum is essential, it is just one facet of a comprehensive intervention system.

Given this, we view schools using MTSS as their intervention framework continue to limit understanding of why school improvement policy marginalizes student/learning supports. It is time to (1) end the maginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and (2) evolve MTSS into an intervention framework that guides development of student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

To these ends, every school improvement plan needs a substantial focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. The aim should be to unify current ad hoc, piecemeal activity and redeploy sufficient resources to begin the process of developing a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports.

Those adopting the prevailing MTSS framework have made a start, as have the initiatives for community schools, integrated student supports, and school-based health centers. Given the growing challenges, however, schools need to develop and implement a more transformative and comprehensive approach.

Hopefully, the following resources will be helpful. They offer detailed discussion and prototypes that have been developed to guide transformative school improvement for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

> >*Building on MTSS to Enhance How Schools Address Barriers to Learning*
>
> >*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
>
> >*Improving School Improvement*
>
> >*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
>
> And go to https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html for information about the
>
> **National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports**

Concluding Comments

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

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

Effectively designed and developed at a school, a learning supports component increases supports for all students. The emphasis is on
- unifying student and learning supports by grouping the many fragmented approaches experienced at school in ways that reduce the number of separate and sometimes redundant intervention responses to overlapping problems
- addressing barriers to learning and teaching by improving personalized instruction and increasing accommodations and special assistance when necessary
- enhancing the focus on motivational considerations with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation as it relates to individual readiness and ongoing involvement and with the intent of fostering intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome
- reengaging disconnected students
- adding specialized remediation, treatment, and rehabilitation as necessary, but only as necessary

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

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

We know from experience how hard it is to achieve the outlined policy and practice changes in a district. And, given the scale of public education, the degree of transformative system change proposed here gives rise to many complications. For example, the approach calls for a major reworking of the operational and organizational infrastructure for the school, the family of schools, and the district, as well as for school-family-community collaboration. It also calls for enhancing in-classroom supports by retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., student and learning support personnel – psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, Title I staff, special educators, dropout/graduation support staff, etc.). In particular, the jobs of these personnel

need to be modified to include working collaboratively with regular teachers in classrooms (in person and online) for part of each day. Improving student and learning supports in classrooms requires such collaboration, which is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

Certainly, the challenges are daunting, especially when folks are caught up in the day-by-day pressures of their current roles and functions. Everyone is so busy "doing" that there seems no time to introduce better ways.

One is reminded of Winnie-the-Pooh who was always going down the stairs, bump, bump, bump, on his head behind Christopher Robin. He has come to think it is the only way to go down stairs. Still, he wonders whether there might be a better way if he could only stop bumping long enough to figure it out.

Since maintaining the status quo is untenable, and just doing more tinkering will not meet the need, we hope this brief guide helps folks who are ready to stop "bumping their heads." The key is to set some time aside for taking first steps to move in new directions. And remember that our Center continues to provide free online mentoring, coaching, & technical assistance.
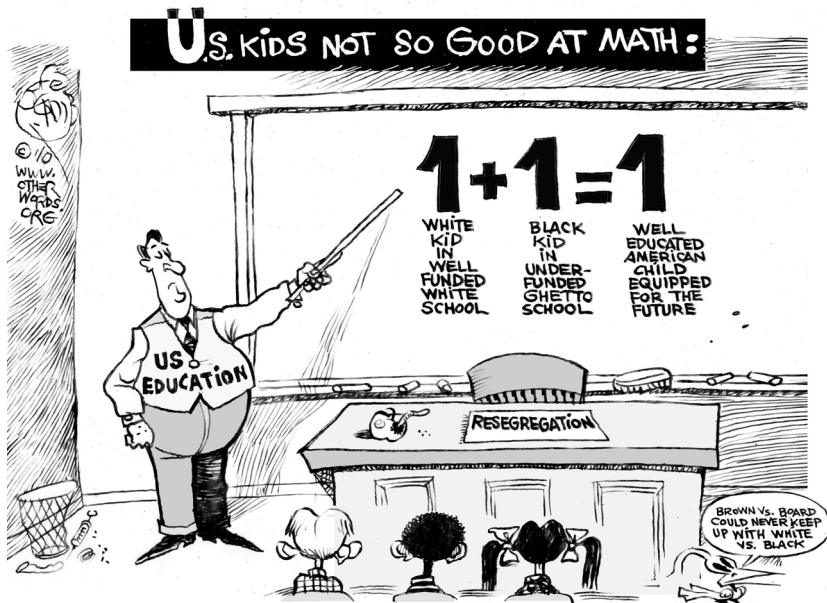
For those ready to move forward, see the appended resource on taking some first steps.

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Invitation to Readers

Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and mental health. This is a critical time for action. Send this on to others to encourage moving forward.

AND let us know about what you have to say about related matters.

Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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If you're not directly receiving our resources such as this quarterly e-journal, our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS), our weekly Practitioners' community of practice interchange, and other free resources, send a request to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

The *Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports* operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

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. . . and a host of students

Appendix

Taking Some First Steps

In our experience, there always are stakeholders who want to make major improvements in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. And some can be mobilized as a *student/learning supports workgroup* to initiate a process for making the type of systemic changes discussed here.

First Steps in Transforming Student/Learning Supports

The assigned leadership workgroup pursues tasks related to Steps 1-3.

Step 1. mapping and analyzing existing student support activities and infrastructure, developing prioritized recommendations for systemic changes, and building a critical mass of support

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

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

> Once established, the Steering Group pursues tasks related to Steps 4-7. These involve reworking the existing operational infrastructure to ensure effective planning, initial implementation, capacity building, formative evaluation, and ongoing development of the proposed transformation of student/learning supports and initiation of *temporary mechanisms* for facilitating systemic changes (e.g., change agents, coaches) and *permanent mechanisms* for system development/improvement (i.e., an administrative leader and a leadership team for student/learning supports.

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

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

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

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

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*This document outlines a monthly schedule and provides links to resource aids for pursuing them. We also offer a few cautions about potential pitfalls.

Getting Started

The intended aim is to make *significant improvements* in how barriers to learning and teaching are addressed at least at some schools and better yet at all schools in a district. The process can be started at the grassroots level or with a decision made by education leaders (e.g., at a school, LEA, SEA).

In what follows, the first steps are discussed with specific respect to *school level* activity. However, keep in mind that the steps can readily be adapted at the district and state agency levels.

The first steps are designed to be carried out over a period of months.*

The initial mechanism for moving forward is
a *student/learning supports workgroup*.

Such a group can be initiated with relatively few people as long as they are motivated and able to carry out the necessary tasks. The group might include an administrator, a school board member, a couple of student/learning support representatives, a teacher, a designated system change facilitator, and as appropriate and feasible, a student.

> The workgroup is a temporary system change mechanism that is replaced once it facilitates establishment of a Steering Group (Step 3).

> In carrying out its tasks, the group can draw on many resources that the Center has developed and placed online (e.g., see the ***System Change Toolkit***), and we also provide free distance **coaching and technical assistance.**

*We suggest beginning the process by doing several steps during the summer and pursuing the remaining steps after the school year begins.

If summer work is infeasible, begin the process early in the school year using about a month to do Step 1.

STEP 1

Step 1. There are five major tasks involved in Step 1. The focus is on

>mapping existing student support activities and infrastructure

>analyzing what has been mapped

>identifying priorities and benefits of systemic changes to improve student/learning supports

>developing prioritized recommendations for proposed systemic changes

>planning how to build a critical mass of supporters for the needed changes

a) Mapping.* The focus is on

>all current school activities used for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students(including those accessed at the district and those the community brings to the school)

>clarifying the names, roles, functions, and schedule of student and learning support staff working at and with the school

>delineating the current leadership and operational infrastructure for student/learning supports

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Mapping is best done using a template. In this respect, there is a tendency simply to use a multi-tiered framework (e.g., MTSS). However, given the limitations of such a framework, we suggest a more comprehensive intervention framework, as well as a three component framework for mapping the operational infrastructure. See the following aids.

>>*Mapping Learning Supports*

>>*An Aid for Initial Listing of Current Resources Used at a School*

>>*Leadership Infrastructure: Is What We Have What We Need?*

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*The information produced by the mapping is essential for undertaking the next task (i.e., making analyses). And the mapping alone is useful as information that can be shared in various ways with different stakeholder groups. Products can be developed to facilitate planning, to clarify available resources and how to access them, and to publicize school efforts to enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. Some schools simply reproduce their mapping products and post and distribute them to staff and other stakeholders. Others expand the process to ensure there is greater awareness and enhanced appreciation of the work by including major, strategically placed public displays (e.g., in halls and staff rooms) and highlight the work in newsletters provided to a wide range of stakeholders.

b) Analyzing. 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

>*gaps* – identifying current gaps with specific reference to pressing needs

>*fragmentation* – degree to which the approach is coordinated, redundancies

>*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.

c) Identifying priorities and benefits of systemic changes. The focus is on

>*clarifying immediate priorities for moving forward* – schools differ in terms of pressing needs and priorities; these must be identified and accounted for. Examples of priorities include delineating what supports and resources are available for schools to reduce absenteeism, maintain the well-being and connection of engaged students, ensure special education IEPs are met, help teachers and families quickly when they identify students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems, help all staff address barriers to learning and teaching, and outreach to disengaged students in ways designed to re-engage them in instruction. **At the same time** – since immediate needs at a school often are mainly discussed in terms of reacting to student and teaching problems, it is important to add in a focus on practices that can prevent problems. And with respect to system transformation, consideration must be given to organizational changes that enable effective pursuit of student/learning supports.

>*delineating benefits of making improvements* – an extensive and growing body of literature underscores the need for a potent system of student/learning supports at schools, especially those with a significant number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems and high teacher turnover. Current approaches have been grossly inadequate. Our research emphasizes the need to move toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that directly addresses barriers to learning and teaching. Such a system is essential for schools to play their role inclosing the opportunity and achievement gaps and preparing students to be effective citizens.

> See:
> >>*Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure*
>
> >>*Eight Points to Consider about Why Schools Need to Transform Student and Learning Supports*
> >>*Moving Prevention From the Fringes into the Fabric of School Improvement*

d) **Developing prioritized recommendations for proposed systemic changes.** The focus is on

> *addressing a school's/district's priorities* – Major systemic changes usually have to be made over several years beginning with addressing priorities. Some priorities may only involve operational changes that can be made administratively; others can be implemented by redeploying resources and/or integrating funding streams*

> *highlighting ways existing resources can underwrite improvements* – Given how limited funds are for schools, major systemic changes initially must rely on existing resources to underwrite the work. This includes redeploying funds from ineffective and redundant practices, reframing the roles and functions of existing student support staff, reducing fragmentation and redundancy, weaving together resources from different funding streams, achieving economies of scale by working with a family of schools, integrating school and community resources related to overlapping concerns, using professionals-in-training, expanding the roles of volunteers, and eventually making savings as the need for expensive services is reduced.

See:
>>***What will it cost? – No New Dollars!***
>>***About Funding Stream Integration***
Also see:
>> ***Lessons Learned from Trailblazing and Pioneer Initiatives***

*In making recommendations, the tendency usually is to propose

> adding a few more personnel to help address learning loss and MH problems
> simply embracing the MTSS framework
> adopting/adapting the Full Service Community Schools model
> enhancing coordination and integration of services

Such approaches clearly are relevant and can be built upon, but they are insufficient in meeting the needs at too many schools for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families. And by themselves these efforts ignore and too often impede making essential changes in school improvement policy and guiding transformative systemic improvement in student/learning supports.

Included in the recommendations and highly prioritized should be the type of systemic changes that are needed to make a significant dent in the increasing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems schools encounter every day.

For an example of a transformative approach, see
>>***Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions***

Systemically conceived and implemented, such a transformative approach can
• enable teachers, support staff, administrators, and all other personnel at a school to work together to reduce learning, behavior, and emotional problems
• develop classroom, school-wide, and community interventions that enhance efforts to personalize learning and address student problems, promote a safe and nurturing school climate, and promote academic success and general well-being
• facilitate school, home, and community collaboration to weave together resources (including human and social capital) in order to enhance system development, coordination, and cohesion, garner economies of scale, and enhance outcomes
• reverse the unrealistic and often inappropriate trend toward more and more one-on-one direct services by schools.

(e) **Developing a plan to build a critical mass of support for the recommendations among key stakeholders.** The focus is on

>*introducing key stakeholders* (at school, community, district levels) *to why major changes are essential and what is involved* (e.g., benefits, basic ideas, relevant research, costs). To these ends, a brief introductory overview can be prepared. It is particularly helpful if a prototype design document has been adopted or adapted (e.g., see the "brochures" and design documents developed by pioneering efforts across the country https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaidsA.htm).

>*providing opportunities for interchange & additional in-depth presentations*

>*ongoing assessment until a critical mass of stakeholders indicate readiness/commitment to move forward*

About Creating readiness

In the rush to implement innovations, it is all too common to give short shrift to enhancing readiness. Any move toward substantive systemic change calls for devoting sufficient time to building a critical mass of support among key stakeholders. Too often, proposed changes are thrust upon school staff and other stakeholders with little attention to ensuring readiness among key stakeholders.

Creating a climate of readiness requires taking time to develop substantive understanding of and commitment to the recommended systemic changes. Such support begins with key stakeholders putting aside old ideas and committing to moving forward. And keep in mind that enhancing understanding and commitment are ongoing concerns.

Note: In many ways, this task involves the use of "social marketing" strategies. Social marketing is an important tool for fostering a critical mass of stakeholder support for efforts to change programs and systems. This form of marketing draws on concepts developed for commercial marketing. But in the context of school and community change, we are not talking about selling products. We are trying to build a consensus for ideas and new approaches that can strengthen youngsters, families, and neighborhoods. So think about the concept in terms of influencing action by key stakeholders. See: *Social Marketing as a Spiraling Facet of Program and Systemic Change* .

Use a second month to pursue Steps 2 and 3.

STEP 2

Step 2: Have prioritized recommendations approved by appropriate authorities and policy makers with a written supportive policy commitment. The focus is on

>presenting the recommendations for approval and asking that the systemic changes be written into policy and given high level commitment and support (e.g., ensuring that there is leadership, staff, space, budget, time, capacity building)

>stressing the importance of developing regulations that ensure the improvements are planned in ways that phase in changes using a realistic time line and with clear incentives for change (e.g., intrinsically valued outcomes, expectations for success, recognitions, rewards, protections)*

*For recommendations to be acted upon, school decision makers have to adopt regulations and take steps to ensure there are positive incentives and accountability. When the recommendations are for transformative system changes, decisions have to take the form of high level policy acts and assurance of leadership commitment for sustainability and scale-up. To these ends, approval of the recommendations should be accompanied by a directive for them to be translated into detailed and realistic multi-year (e.g., 3-5) year strategic and action plans that are fully integrated into the overall plan for school improvements. As highlighted by Steps 3-7, such plans need to delineate how necessary changes will be accomplished, who will steer and lead the development of the work, what the new staff responsibilities are, and what will be used as accountability indicators.

See:
>*Board Policy– a Unified, Comprehensive, & Equitable System of Learning Supports*
>*General Guide for Strategic Planning Related to Developing a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*

Note: If the decision is to "pilot" the improvements, we recommend against having the work referred to as a pilot, project, or demonstration.

School staff involved in piloting improvements commonly think about their work as a time limited demonstration. And, other school stakeholders also tend to perceive the work as temporary (e.g., "I've seen so many reforms come and go; this too shall pass."). This mind set (often referred to as "projectitis") adds to the widespread view that new activities will be fleeting, and it contributes to fragmented approaches and the marginalization of initiatives. It also works against the type of systemic changes needed to sustain and expand major school improvements. For more on this, see: *Turning a Project or Pilot into a Catalyst for Systemic Change and Sustainability*

STEP 3

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

>ensuring that decision makers have convened an official Steering Group of *high level* power leaders to champion, steer/guide, problem solve, clear barriers, and overcome indifference or resistance to the work. The aim is to ensure that personnel making the improvements maintain a big picture perspective, have sufficient capacity (support and guidance), and make appropriate progress.*

> *As noted, the steering group is a *temporary* mechanism that replaces the workgroup that initiated the process. At a school level, the group might consist of a school board member, a district administrator, the principal, a member of the leadership workgroup, the administrative lead for student/learning supports, a community leader, a system change facilitator, and as appropriate and feasible, a student.
>
> It is essential that group members are up-to-date on all relevant information related to what needs to be done and how to make it happen.
>
> Initially, the group probably needs to meet formally once a week, with informal contacts as needed. To work against the perception that it is a closed, elite group, it can host "focus groups" to elicit input and feedback, provide information, and problem solve.
>
> The Steering Group pursues the following steps related to reworking the existing operational infrastructure to ensure effective planning, initial implementation, capacity building, formative evaluation, and ongoing development of the proposed improvements. It ensures the initiation of *temporary mechanisms* for facilitating systemic changes (e.g., change agents, coaches) and *permanent mechanisms* for system ongoing development/improvement (i.e., an administrative leader and a leadership team for student/learning supports).

> As discussed in the system change literature, the support of such a group makes an invaluable contribution to innovation success.
>
> See: ***Change Agent Mechanisms for School Improvement: Infrastructure not Individuals***

The Steering Group pursues Step 4 to ensure appointment of an administrative leader for student/learning supports in the school's (district's) permanent operational infrastructure. Once appointed, the administrative leader joins the Steering Group and proceeds to form a leadership team (Step 5). Step 6 adds *temporary* mechanisms for facilitating proposed systemic changes.

Use a third month to pursue Steps 4-6.

<h2 style="color:red; text-align:center">STEP 4</h2>

Step 4: Establishment of a permanent administrative position to transform and lead a student/learning supports component of school improvement. The Steering Group focus is on

>facilitating assignment of an administrative-level *Student/Learning Supports Lead* and ensuring this leader is at administrative planning and decision making tables so that the system's ongoing improvement and effectiveness is a regular part of the agenda*

*The person chosen must be someone who sees this as an opportunity for the school (district) to move from mainly reacting to student problems and who understands the aim is to develop a transformative system of student/learning supports. Small schools (districts) may not have enough administrative personnel and will need to assign a lead from the staff who focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

The leader's job description must reflect the responsibilities and accountabilities associated with the proposed system changes and appropriate professional development and resources must be provided for accomplishing the work.

> See: ***Leadership at a School Site for Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports***

<h2 style="color:red; text-align:center">STEP 5</h2>

Step 5: Establishment of a student/learning support leadership team as a permanent operational infrastructure mechanism to work with the administrative lead. The focus is on

>identifying members for the team and having the assignments approved

>working with team to develop a ***system design document and strategic and action plans***, have them approved and fully integrated into the school improvement plan

>helping others to understand what is involved in the planned systemic changes

>guiding the ongoing development and implementation of the transformed student/learning supports

> See: ***What is a learning supports leadership team?***

*Members of the initial workgroup who want to continue are a natural core members of a student/learning support leadership team; other key staff can be assigned. Team members' job descriptions must reflect the responsibilities and accountabilities associated with the proposed system changes and must be provided appropriate professional development and resources to do the job.

Critical first tasks involve adopting/adapting the system design "document," preparing the strategic and action plans, ensuring that the work is fully integrated into the school's (district"s) overall strategic plan. As the work proceeds, the team helps clarify, analyze, identify priorities; recommends resource redeployment; establishes and guides workgroups for developing each facet of the system over a period of several years.

Each year, based on updated resource mapping and analyses with respect to critical needs, a set of realistic developmental priorities must be formulated. The priorities are essential guides for yearly planning and budgeting to improve how the school (district) addresses barriers to learning and teaching.

Eventually, a representative from the school's development team can meet with others in the geographic locale to form a family of schools (e.g., a high school and its feeders) to do cross-school analyses in order to coordinate and integrate interventions and capacity building and braid resources with a view to enhancing effectiveness and garnering economies of scale.

> Note: Establishing an administrative-level lead for and a leadership team as key mechanisms for driving the development and implementation of a transformed system involves a significant reworking of the school's(district's) operational infrastructure. See Part II of *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*.
>
> For a more detailed discussion, see *Key Leadership Infrastructure Mechanisms for Enhancing Student & Learning Supports*.

STEP 6

Step 6. designating additional *temporary* mechanisms for facilitating systemic changes (e.g., change agents, coaches to carry out the many tasks involved in the first and second phases of making systemic changes). The focus is first on working with the steering group and then the leadership team to

>introduce and create readiness, commitment, and engagement among a critical mass of stakeholders (e.g., heightening a climate/culture for change through enhancing stakeholder motivation and capacity)

>expand operational infrastructure and pursuing initial implementation (e.g., reworking operational infrastructure to ensure effective leadership, guidance, and support for the systemic changes)

> The many tasks involved here are outlined in Chapters 16 and17 in
> >>*Improving School Improvement* .
>
> As an example of a specific change agent role and functions, see
> >>*Organization Facilitators: A Key Change Agent for Systemic School and Community Changes*
> About coachingand mentoring, see
> >>*Guide for Planning Coaching for SEAs/LEAs to Establish a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*
>
> For a overview discussion of major systemic changes, see
> *Implementation Science and School Improvement*.

Use a fourth month to pursue Step 7.

STEP 7

Step 7. Facilitate formative evaluation & accountability of the above steps. The focus is on

>ensuring regular gathering of data on progress and challenges and taking any needed actions*
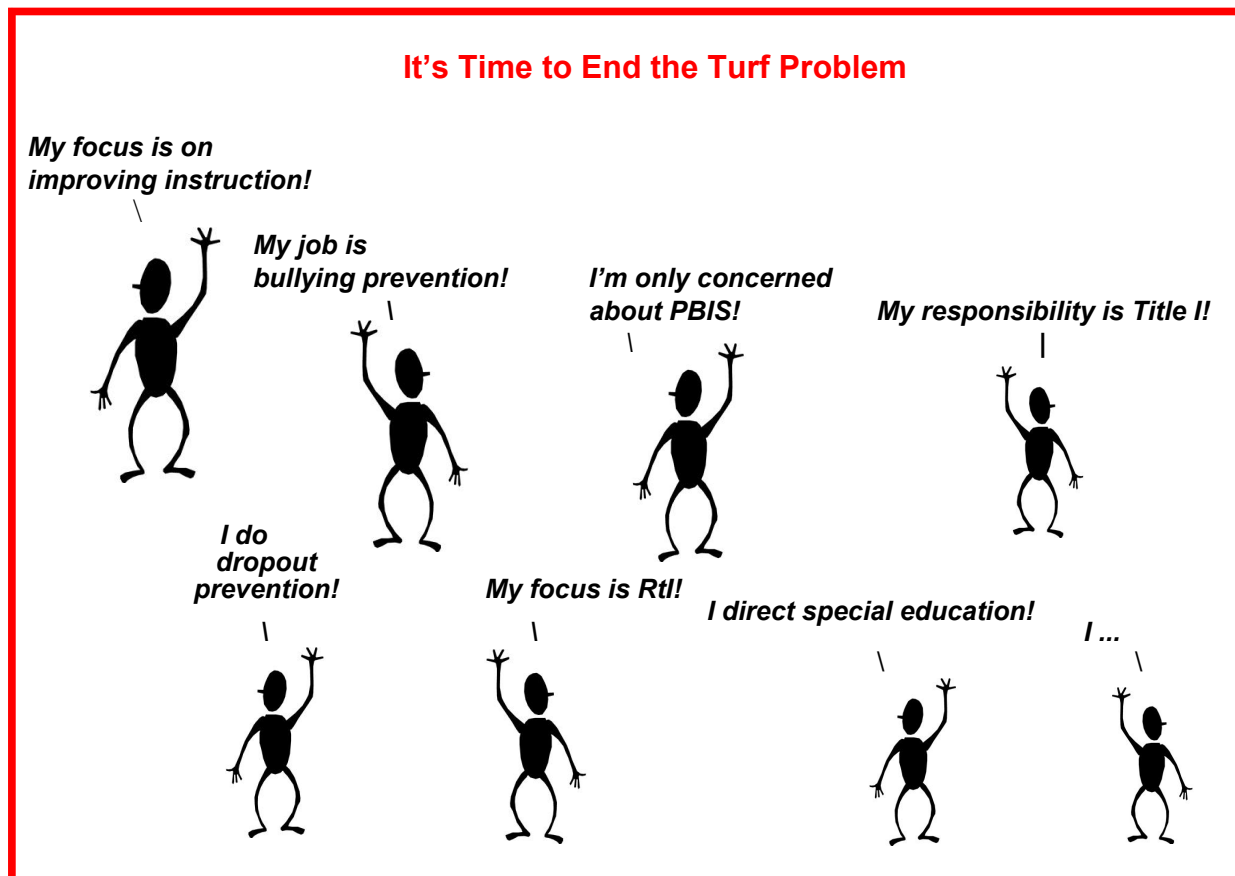
> On the next page, see
> *Assessing Readiness -- Key Examples of Benchmark Indicators for First Steps*.

*Initial data gathering should focus on benchmarks and be designed to provide guidance and support to foster progress. This means monitoring and analyzing all factors that facilitate and hinder progress and then ensuring actions are taken to deal with interfering factors and to enhance progress.

Once significant progress is made in developing the system, the monitoring can be expanded to evaluate *direct* student outcomes indicators of the effectiveness of learning supports (e.g., increased attendance, reduced misbehavior, improved learning).

Note: ***About celebrating progress.*** While it seems obvious that progress should be publicized and celebrated, every day demands make it all too easy to ignore this matter. Celebrations of progress with recognition of those who produced it should be a regular agenda and calendar item. And as improvements are made, they should be shared with all concerned stakeholders in highly visible ways.

Assessing Readiness – Key Examples of Benchmark Indicators for First Steps

Location:	Date Started	Date Completed	Current Status

Step 1. *Mapping, Analyses, Recommendations, Readiness* –
Documents providing
  >a listing of all student and learning support staff and what they do
  >an indepth and structured map of all school resources currently used and that the community adds to address barriers to learning and teaching
  >an analysis of general system status, intervention effectiveness, efforts needing improvement, critical gaps, and current redundant efforts and wasted resources
  >a listing of current priorities for improving the system
  >a set of specific & feasible recommendations for resource allocation
  >several indicators of how the system is being made visible
  >a plan (e.g., schedule, process) for updating the analyses
  >basic ideas and relevant research base have been introduced to key stakeholders using "social marketing" strategies
>opportunities for interchange have been provided, with additional in-depth presentations made to build a critical mass of consensus for improving student and learning supports
  >an indication that a critical mass of key stakeholders understands as an imperative and ratifies the necessity for the systemic improvements			

Step 2. *Recommendations approved with policy commitment* – Documentation that
  >indicates that recommendations were approved by appropriate authorities with a written policy and committed supports (e.g., for leadership, staff, space, budget, time, capacity building)
  >incentives for change are in place (e.g., intrinsically valued outcomes, expectations for success, recognitions, rewards, protections)
			Continued

Step 3. *Steering group –*
Documentation that
>a Steering Group is in place that is
  advocating for, guiding, and supporting
  efforts for system improvements

Steps 4, 5, & 6. *Operational Infrastructure –*
  Documentation that
>an administrative-level lead for the
  improvement effort is in place
>a job description for the roles and functions
  of the administrative lead has been
  established
>The lead has a general understanding of the
  intended improvements and is familiar with
  resources for preparing others to understand
  what is involved
>the lead is a member of the school's decision
  making and planning teams, and the work is
  on the agenda regularly
>the lead has established and is leading a
  permanent leadership team to guide the work
>team members have a broad understanding of
  the intended improvements and their specific
  functions
>team has prepared a design document
>team has prepared strategic and action plans
  designed to ensure effective planning, initial
  implementation, capacity building, formative
  evaluation, and ongoing development of the
  proposed improvements
>the action plans includes procedural options
  that reflect stakeholder strengths and from
  which those expected to implement change
  can select strategies they see as workable
>proposed student/learning supports
  improvements are fully integrated into the
  school improvement plan and any other
  strategic operational plans (with a realistic
  developmental timeline)
>the agency's operational infrastructure has
  been reworked to include the administrative
  lead and the leadership team for
  student/learning supports
>the team is establishing workgroups to carry
  out facets of the strategic and actions plans
>temporary infrastructure mechanisms for
  facilitating systemic changes are in place and
  effective (e.g., change agents, coaches,
  continuous technical assistance)

Continued

Step 7. *Using Formative Evaluation to Support Progress* –
Documentation that
>mechanisms are in place for conducting formative evaluation
>data related to key benchmarks are regularly gathered and analyzed
>actions are taken to provide guidance and support in ways that counter interfering factors and enhance facilitation of progress
>progress is publicized to interested stakeholders and celebrated in ways that commend those responsible

The staff is completely overwhelmed by how many kids need special assistance!

That's why it's time to go upstream and fix what's causing so many to have problems.