About the Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports

A Bit of Background

For over 50 years, we have pursued theory, research, practice and training related to improving how schools address mental health, psychosocial, and educational concerns. Our early work was lab-school based. In 1986, we established the School Mental Health Project (SMHP) as a platform for moving from the laboratory setting into public schools.

From 1986-1995, SMHP worked closely with school districts, local and state agencies, special initiatives, and organizations and colleagues across the country. We pursued major implementation projects with federal and foundation funding. These focused our R & D efforts on the processes involved in translating what we had learned in the laboratory into the "real world" (which we often experience as the "surreal world"). The specific arenas of focus were (a) public school approaches to dropout prevention, (b) the MH facets of school-based health centers, and (c) development of comprehensive, school-based approaches for students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

In 1995, under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project and with federal grants, we established the national Center for Mental Health in Schools. And to help us continue moving forward with an expanded national platform, in 2009 we were able to establish for a period of time a unique public-private partnership with Scholastic, Inc.

In 2015, the Center established the National Initiative for Transforming Student and learning Supports – see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html .

In 2017, to more fully underscore the breadth of the work, the Center's name was expanded; the name is now the Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports.

As of July, 2024, our emphasis is on (1) continuing to provide resources to the field at large and (2) advancing efforts to implement and sustain new directions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, with a focus on replication to scale in school districts.

The Focus of Our Continuing and Current Work

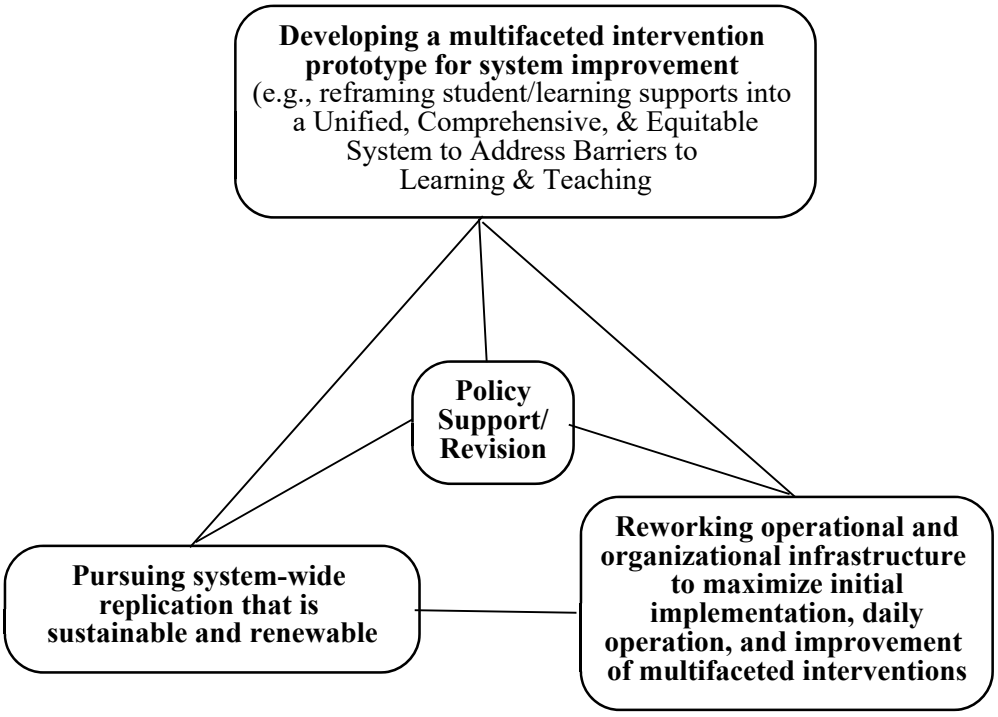
At the outset, it should be noted that our work contrasts markedly with that of many who focus on mental health in schools. Others have perpetuated a focus mainly on individual and small group services (essentially a traditional clinical model) and ideas such as linking with and collocating agency services on school sites and enhancing case management and service coordination. We recognize that such strategies have an important role to play. But given the nature and scope of the learning, behavior, and emotional problems seen at too many schools, such strategies do too little to address the major factors contributing to a great many students not doing well at school (in some schools at least 40% of the student body are doing poorly, with many eventually dropping out). Moreover, given that education is the main mission of schools, we focus on how best to embed the full range of mental health concerns into school improvement policy and accountability.

Recognizing the nature and scope of need, our Center provides a wide range of resources to aid in improving how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. Some resources deal with daily needs; other resources focus on major systemic changes. All of the Center's work addresses factors that produce inequities in opportunity for success at school and future well-being. We outreach each week to a growing listserv of over 120,000 stakeholders.

Our research and development has focused on (1) analyzing systemic factors interfering with the establishment of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable school-community approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students, (2) developing a prototype for such an approach, (3) developing prototypes for reworking the necessary implementation infrastructure at schools, for school complexes, school districts, and regional and state agencies, and (4) reconceiving the school improvement and implementation problem into the broader context of organizational/systemic change.

As illustrated in the Exhibit below, the nature and scope of the work is conceived as continuously wrestling with four interrelated problems.

Exhibit
Four Fundamental, Interrelated Considerations in Making Multifaceted and Complex Systemic Changes*



*Additionally, because of the overemphasis on using extrinsic reinforcers in all aspects of efforts to improve schools, we find it essential to re-introduce a focus on intrinsic motivation in planning related to all four concerns.

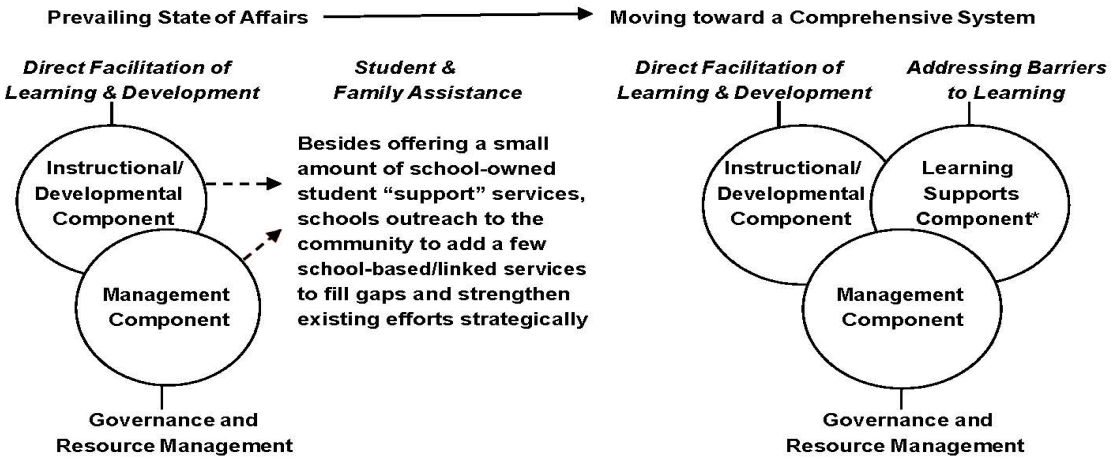
To date, we have developed and worked on implementing

- *an expanded framework for school improvement policy* – moving from a 2- to a 3-component framework
- *an intervention prototype* – providing an intervention framework that unifies and guides development of a comprehensive, equitable, and systemic of student/learning supports
- *reworked operational infrastructures* – ensuring effective leadership at school, complex, and district levels for unifying student/learning support and developing them into a comprehensive and equitable system over time; redefining personnel roles and functions; weaving together school and community resources; and providing effective capacity building
- *a strategic approach to large-scale system change* – enabling effective and sustainable systemic change and replication to scale

About Policy. Our analyses have identified that school improvement policies and practices are based on a two component model and this has seriously limited school improvement by marginalizing student/learning supports. As illustrated in the Exhibit below, to correct this deficit, we have developed an expanded policy and practice framework for school improvement that moves the vision for school improvement from a two- to a three component model. Recognizing the complexity and overlapping nature of factors that interfere with learning, development, parenting, and teaching, the third component is conceived as coalescing school, community, and home efforts to address such factors.

Exhibit

Moving to a Three-Component Policy Framework for School Improvement.



Operationalization of the Third Component. We have developed a prototype for operationalizing the third component. We designate it as an enabling or learning supports component to address barriers and reengage students in classroom instruction.

As seen in the Exhibit on the following page, the prototype we have developed represents a major *transformation* of student/learning supports. It encompasses a delimited set of domains of student/learning supports that range across a *continuum of intervention subsystems.*

Going beyond MTSS and the typically fragmented and piecemeal approach to providing student and learning supports, our research and development efforts conceive and coalesce:

(1) the continuum as encompassing integrated *subsystems* that braid school and community resources for

(a) promoting healthy development & preventing problems,
(b) responding as early after problem onset as is feasible, and
(c) providing for those whose serious, pervasive, and chronic problems require intensive assistance and accommodation.

(2) student and learning supports as six classroom and schoolwide domains. These focus on:

- *enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning* (e.g., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems)
- *supporting transitions* (i.e., assisting students/families/staff in negotiating school and grade changes and many other transitions)

- increasing home and school connections
- responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises
- *increasing community involvement and support* (outreaching to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- *facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed*.

Exhibit

Intervention Framework for a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Supports

		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)***

The intervention framework provides a tool for research, policy, practice, and training. It is being used to map and analyze the status of learning and student supports at all levels of the education system.

Reworking Operational Infrastructure. Our analyses have clarified that the current operational infrastructure at schools, district headquarters, and state education agencies have been developed based on the dominant two component model of school improvement. As a result, the infrastructure works against efforts to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. To address this, we have developed a prototype that fully integrates the third component by establishing a component leader, a leadership team, and workgroups as key operational mechanisms.

Getting From Here to There: The System Change Problem. Some researchers have designated this as the implementation problem and focus heavily on fidelity of implementation. We find such a designation and emphasis fails to recognize the many system and organizational change factors that must be addressed in diffusing/replicating prototypes for school improvement (including the growing emphasis on diffusing empirically-supported interventions), taking them to scale, and sustaining the changes. We have begun to clarify the policy and infrastructure underpinnings of systemic changes, the phases, steps, and tasks, and the variables related to organizational culture that must be accounted for in bringing transformational change to schools.

For schools, discussions of implementation connect mostly to school improvements and transformation. A critical focus is on improvement and transformation with respect to the school's role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. In this context, our Center stresses rethinking student/learning supports and doing so in ways that embed a full range of mental health concerns. We reframe currently marginalized and fragmented student and learning supports into the type of unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that can play a critical role in reducing the opportunity and achievement gaps experienced by too many youngsters. The system design calls for more special assistance provided in classrooms to enhance support and development for teachers.

Here are a sample of some recent more detailed presentations of our work:

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

>*Improving School Improvement*
all three can be accessed at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

>*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf

>*Implementation Science and School Improvement*
https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/implscience.pdf