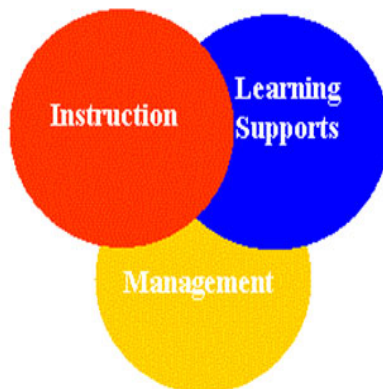

An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports:

**A Month-by-Month Guide for Systemic Change
with Existing Resources**

(2025)

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Given tightening school budgets and scarce extramural support, there may be a tendency to further marginalize student/learning supports in policy and practice. Such a tendency certainly won't help schools address the needs of an increasing number of students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

And it is a recipe for undermining efforts to close the achievement and opportunity gaps.

This document provides

- (1) a brief overview discussion about using whatever resources are available to begin transforming the currently fragmented approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports
- (2) a month-by-month agenda for moving forward.

A companion document *Pursuing the Agenda* offers some details and links to resource aid including a checklist for *monitoring progress*.

Toward a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable Student/Learning Support System

Abstract

This paper proposes a fundamental shift in how student/learning supports are conceived and implemented. It begins by highlighting the limitations of current fragmented approaches to student and learning support and the urgent need for improvement. Then, it explores the characteristics of an improved approach designed to address the diverse needs of all learners and proposes a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports as a central component of school improvement policy and practice.

While some students thrive, many struggle due to systemic barriers. In the face of persistent achievement gaps, rising mental health concerns, and increasing diversity in student populations, schools must move beyond traditional approaches to student and learning supports. Such approaches are fragmented, overspecialized, and marginalized in policy and practice.

An improved student/learning support system cannot be an add-on; it must be a fundamental component of school improvement. It ensures that all students – not just those who are already succeeding – have the opportunity to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

The Problem with the Status Quo

Current student supports are:

- *Fragmented*: leading to redundancy and inefficiency at all levels; at district and state levels, services and programs are siloed across departments (e.g., counseling, school psychology, special education, discipline).
- *Overspecialized*: Staff focus narrowly on specific issues, limiting holistic support.
- *Reactive*: Interventions are triggered mainly after problems escalate.
- *Under-resourced*: Staff are stretched thin, and supports are inconsistently available.
- *Inequitably applied*: Access to resources varies widely, leaving many students underserved.
- *Marginalized*: Supports are treated as auxiliary interventions (e.g., added services), not as integral to school improvement and a primary component of school improvement policy, planning, and decision-making.

This state of affairs inevitably hinders school efforts to address the range of barriers to learning and teaching and close the achievement and opportunity gaps(see Exhibits A and B).

A Vision for Improving Student/Learning Supports

Rather than having so much separate, disconnected activity, an improved approach brings these efforts together under a single, organized component that works along with instruction and management as a primary and essential component of school improvement (see Exhibit C).

Such a component is:

- *Unified*: all student and learning supports are woven together into a cohesive, non-fragmented system that is coordinated across interventions and personnel; aims include facilitating staff work collaboratively with each other and with community stakeholders, avoiding duplication and competition, and enhancing efficient and effective use of resources
- *Comprehensive*: a full range of student and school problems are the focus of
 - o a full **continuum** of proactive interventions (see Exhibit D).
 - o an organized, delimited set of **domains** of student/learning supports (see Exhibit E).

The combined continuum and domains is illustrated in Exhibit F.

- *Equitable*: with the goal of enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school, the system is designed to eliminate discrimination in its application and the aim of developing accessible supports for all students.

Making It Happen

Key steps include adopting a three-component policy for school improvement, mapping existing resources, appointing leadership teams, developing strategic plans, reworking operational infrastructure, continuous capacity building (especially professional development), and monitoring and accountability focused on the direct intended outcomes of the supports provided. (See the agenda for moving forward on the next page.)

Conclusion

Maintaining the status quo is no longer tenable. An improved student/learning support system is essential to improving how schools deal with factors that interfere with learning and teaching. This paper highlights a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports to enable schools to better address barriers to learning, reengage disconnected students, and promote whole child development. Such a transformation of student and learning supports is viewed as essential for enhancing equity of opportunity, improving school climate, and ensuring all students have the opportunity to succeed.

An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports:

A Month-by-Month Guide for Systemic Change with Existing Resources*

This exhibit is intended to provide a structured roadmap for using existing resources to improve student/learning supports. The steps are adaptable for schools, districts, and state agencies, and emphasize collaboration, capacity building, and continuous evaluation

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 workgroup to initiate a process for making the type of systemic changes necessary for fundamentally improving student/learning supports.

Below is an agenda for this school year.* Highlighted are steps for creating readiness and initially moving forward at a school. A parallel approach is adaptable at district and state agency levels, with additional steps related to replication to scale.

At each level, the process is envisioned as beginning with establishment of a *leadership workgroup*.

First Month - Initiating & Planning

Form a Student/Learning Support System *Leadership Workgroup* to pursue the first steps and guide, support, and monitor the progress of and necessary adjustments to the monthly agenda.

The Workgroup

- consumes and discusses the overview materials
- develops a workgroup action plan
- identifies a feeder pattern of schools that would be good trailblazers
- requests that leadership integrate their efforts to improve student/learning supports into school improvement plans
- introduces the intent to improve student/learning supports to staff and other key stakeholders to obtain a critical mass of endorsement

Second Month - Mapping What's in Place

The Workgroup

- maps existing student/learning support activities and personnel
- analyzes map to identify overlaps, gaps, underutilized resources, what's working, what's not, etc.
- maps and analyzes existing operational infrastructure
- identifies priority student/learning support needs

Third Month - Formulating Recommendations for Endorsement

The Workgroup

- develops prioritized recommendations for systemic changes using existing resources
- shares mapping and recommendations with interested staff and other key stakeholders to obtain feedback
- revises recommendations based on relevant feedback
- develops a social marketing campaign to enhance stakeholder awareness and build a critical mass of support
- prepares materials for presentation to school leadership and school board

*See: (1) [*Monthly Checklist*](#) for monitoring the process and [*Pursuing the Agenda*](#) for some details and links to resource aids.

Fourth Month - Eliciting Formal Support and Approval for Moving Forward

The Workgroup

- submits prioritized recommendations for approval by appropriate authorities
- elicits a written supportive policy commitment and sufficient resources for moving forward
- facilitates establishment of a high level steering group for championing, facilitating, and monitoring the student/learning support system improvements

Fifth Month - Reworking the Operational Infrastructure

The Steering Group is empowered to

- pursue and facilitate appointment of a permanent *administrative lead* position for the student/learning support system component at each of the trailblazing feeder schools
- work with administrative leads to establish a *student/learning support leadership team* as a permanent operational infrastructure mechanism led by the administrative lead at each school
- designate temporary mechanisms for facilitating systemic changes (e.g., change agents, coaches)
- formalize job descriptions (e.g., new roles, responsibilities, and functions) for members of the reworked operational infrastructure.
- begin personnel capacity building for new roles and functions

Sixth Month - Preparing a Design Document and Enhancing Feeder Pattern and School-Community Resource Collaboration

The administrative lead working with the leadership team

- drafts a design document for a prototype student/learning support component and shares it with staff and students to obtain feedback
- revises the draft as appropriate
- invites leaders of all potential community collaborators to a meeting to clarify who is interested in weaving resources together to fill gaps and enhance the student/learning system component
- hosts an online forum for families and community stakeholders to review the design document, elicit commitments to weaving in external resources, and offer relevant feedback
- updates mapping
- finishes drafting the design, presents it for ratification, and ensures what is ratified is integrated into overall school improvement plans
- publicizes progress to all stakeholders (e.g., through newsletters, websites, social media, public displays, meetings)
- recognizes contributors and celebrates milestones

Seventh Month - Strategic Planning for Initial Implementation

The administrative lead working with the leadership

- develops a strategic action plan for initial implementation (e.g., capacity building, supports to address system change problems)
- keeps the focus on
 - > redeployment of available resources
 - > using existing resources creatively and efficiently
 - > maintaining visibility and stakeholder engagement
 - > embedding changes into school policy and culture
 - > seeking additional resources as they become available

Eighth Month - Initial Implementation

The administrative lead working with the leadership team

- begins the process of creating readiness, commitment, and engagement among a critical mass of personnel
- introduces a district-assigned change agent coach
- initiates capacity building for all personnel (including volunteers)
- ensures personnel are receiving continuous guidance and support for system changes
- ensures that all committed resources (e.g., from the district and community-including families) are woven into the student/learning supports system
- establishes standing and ad hoc workgroups (e.g., to continue development of each domain of supports; to address specific concerns that arise)
- monitors early implementation, gathers feedback, and makes adjustments
- prepares to bring newcomers onboard and incorporate them into the efforts at hand

Ninth Month - Facilitating Collaboration and Planning Next Steps

The administrative lead working with the leadership team

- initiates establishment of the feeder pattern collaborative
- initiates establishment of the school-community collaborative
- initiates formative evaluation as a foundation for summative evaluation and accountability (e.g., using direct indicators of student support interventions such as increased access to student/learning supports, attendance, engagement)
- makes necessary adjustments
- plans next steps for improving the student/learning supports system and its sustainability

* For some details, aids, and lessons learned examples of and links

to available resource aids, see <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/agendaforchange.pdf>

Note: The above agenda highlights steps for creating readiness and moving forward with the *first two* of the *four overlapping phases* of system change (see below). A parallel approach is adaptable for district or state agency levels, with additional steps designed for replication to scale. At each level, the process is envisioned as beginning with establishment of a *leadership workgroup*.

System change can be conceived in terms of four overlapping phases strategically phased-in over several years.

First Phase – Introduction and Creating Readiness, Commitment, & Engagement
(e.g., heightening a climate/culture for change through enhancing the motivation and capacity of a critical mass of stakeholders)

Second Phase – Start-up and Phase-in: Expanding Infrastructure and Capacity, and Pursuing Initial Implementation
(e.g., reworking operational infrastructure to ensure effective leadership, guidance, and support for proposed systemic changes)

Third Phase – Institutionalizing, Replicating to scale, Sustaining, and Evolving to Enhance Outcomes
(e.g., enhancing capacity to ensure quality improvements, adaptive scalability, and sustainability)

Fourth Phase – Ongoing Evolution and Generating Creative Renewal
(e.g., enabling system stakeholders to become a community of learners and expanding accountability to support creative renewal)
>embedding changes into school policy and culture
>seeking additional resources as they become available

Exhibit A

A Fragmented Approach to Student/Learning Supports

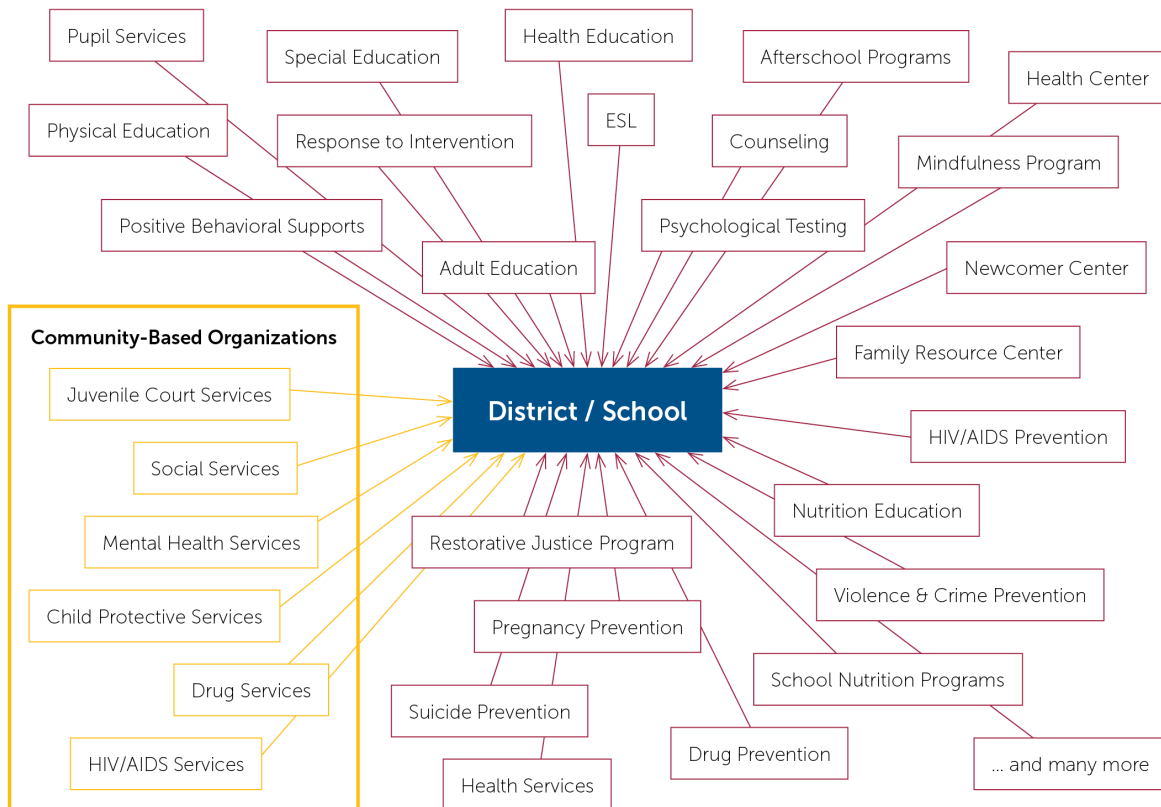
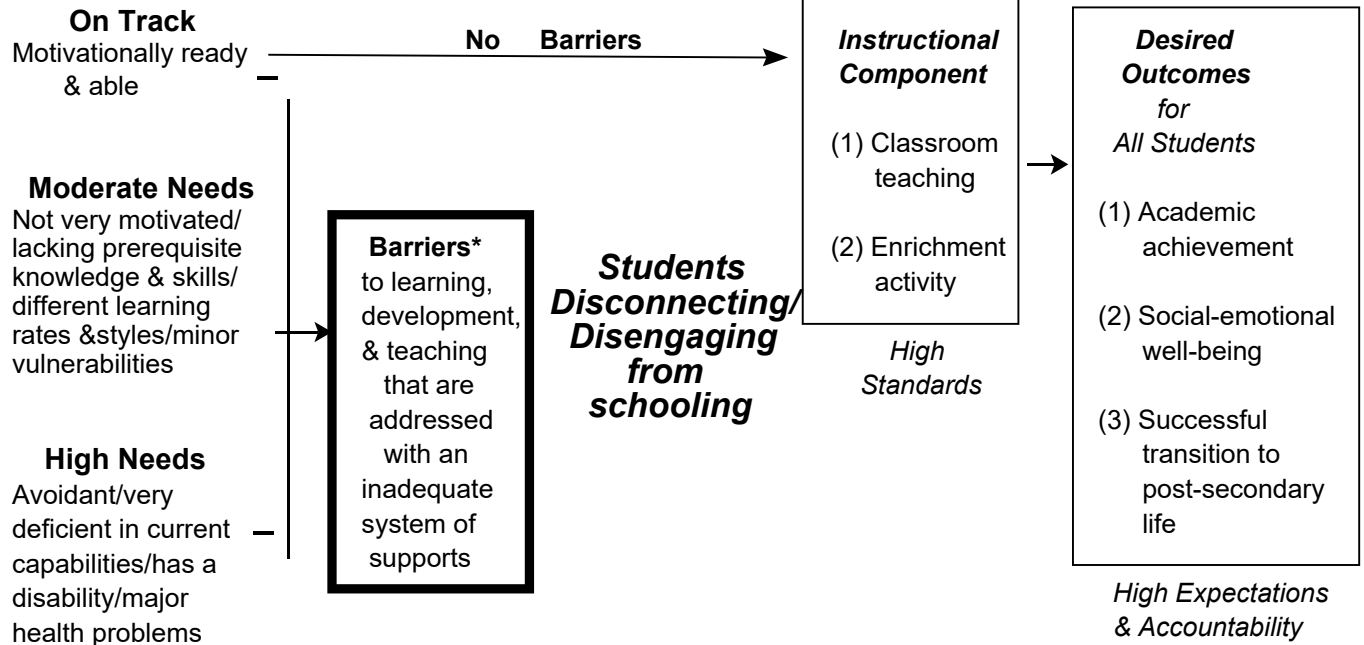


Exhibit B

A Learning Supports Component to Address Barriers and Reengage Students

Range of Learners

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



*Examples of Barriers to Learning and Development

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

PERSON FACTORS

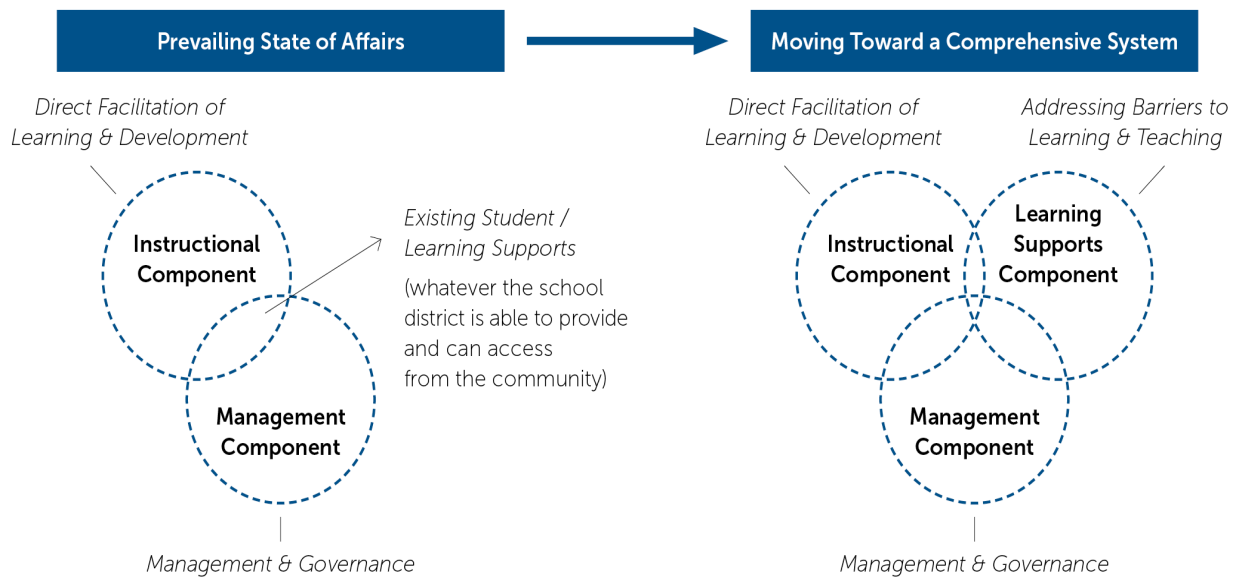
Barriers to Development and Learning (Risk producing conditions)

<i>Neighborhood</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>School & Peers</i>	<i>Individual</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> >extreme economic deprivation >community disorganization, including high levels of mobility >violence, drugs, etc. >minority and/or immigrant status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> >chronic poverty >conflict/disruptions/violence >substance abuse >models problem behavior >abusive caretaking >inadequate provision for quality child care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> >poor quality school >negative encounters with teachers >negative encounters with peers &/or inappropriate peer models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> >medical problems >low birth weight/neurodevelopmental delay >psychophysiological problems >difficult temperament & adjustment problems >inadequate nutrition

Exhibit C

Moving to a Three Component Framework

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

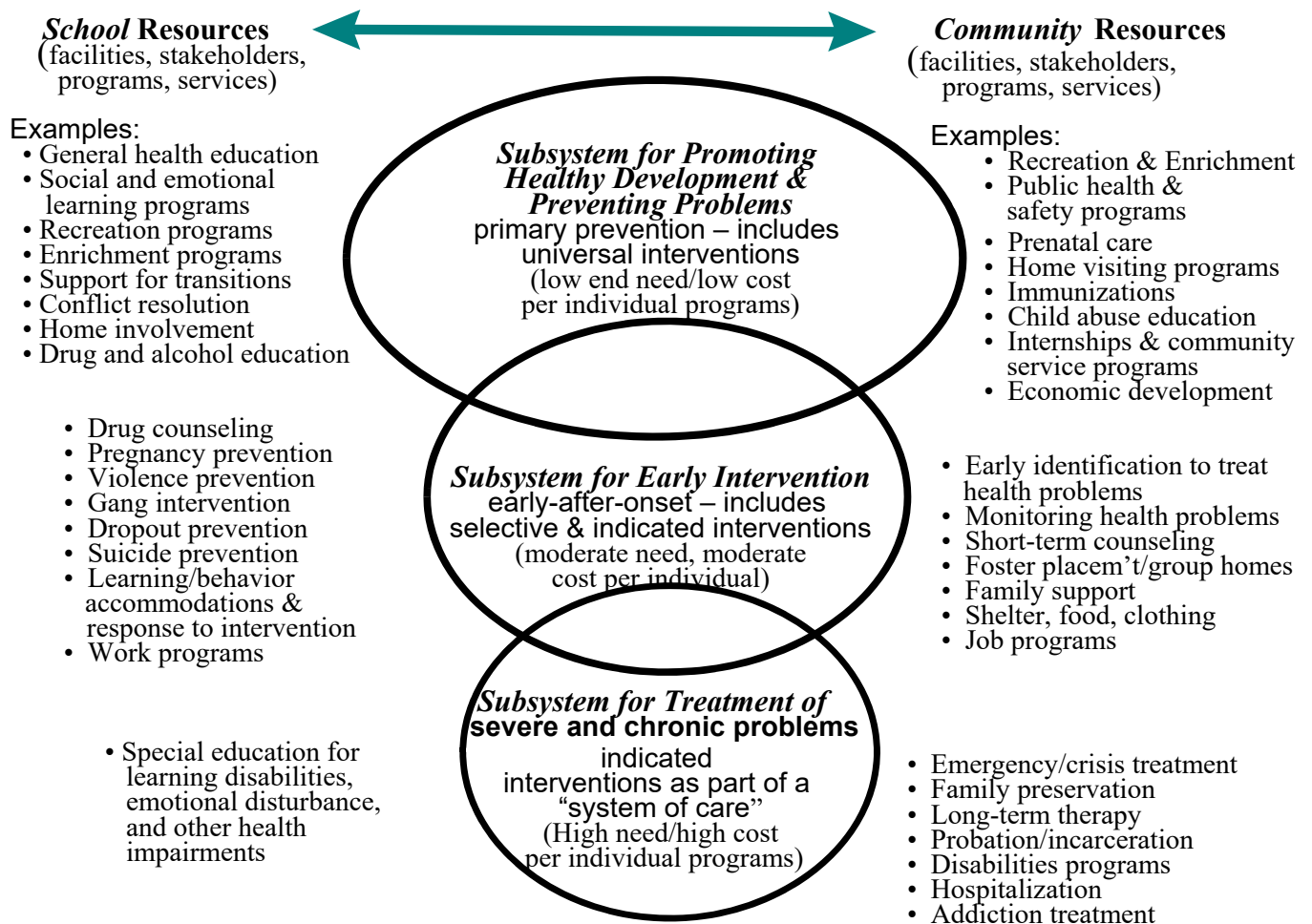


Ending the marginalization of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching requires policy action that establishes and institutionalizes a component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a primary and essential facet of school improvement (on a par with the components for instruction and governance/management). The Learning Supports Component aims at enabling learning by (1) addressing factors that interfere with learning, development, and teaching and (2) reengaging students in classroom instruction.

Exhibit D

A School-Community Intervention *Continuum of Interconnected Subsystems*

While a great deal of attention has been given MTSS, transforming student/learning supports involves moving beyond the limitations of MTSS to develop a cohesive, multifaceted, and systemic approach. Such an approach involves (1) as illustrated below, a continuum that conceives each level as *subsystems* that are interconnected and that *weaves together* school and community resources **and** (2) as illustrated in Exhibit E, student and learning supports that are organized cohesively into a circumscribed set of domains (rather than the current trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level).



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

Exhibit E

Six Domains of Support – In Classrooms 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:

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

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/barriersbook.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>

Exhibit F

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)