

Students & Schools: Moving Forward

(August, 2026 Vol. 30 #11) – 40 Years & Counting

Featured

***Everyone Knows that Welcoming Is Important:
Is What's Planned a Good Fit?***

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The new school year is just around the corner. For many students, families, and school staff, it is a time of anticipation, excitement, and, for some, uncertainty. That is why a strong focus on welcoming is so important. The key question is: How good are the local schools' welcoming plans?

Everyone Knows that Welcoming Is Important: Is What's Planned a Good Fit?

Starting a new school year provides an important opportunity to strengthen connections among staff, students, families, and the community.

Districts often begin the year with welcoming activities for teachers and staff. These efforts are much more than routine orientations. They are a critical part of team building and creating a positive school culture. For new personnel, they offer a chance to feel supported, connected, and valued as members of the school community.

As orientation days and the first days of instruction arrive, the focus expands to welcoming families to the school and students to their classrooms.

A warm and organized approach begins the moment a family enters the school to register a child. Every school should designate staff members and/or trained volunteers to greet families and provide needed information in their primary language whenever possible. Families need assistance understanding documentation requirements, such as proof of residence and immunization records, and help accessing missing documentation when necessary.

Registration should be viewed as much more than a paperwork process. It is an opportunity to begin building a relationship. New students and families benefit when someone provides an orientation and tour and introduces them to teachers, administrators, support staff, and others who will play a role in their school experience.

Families should leave with a clear understanding of:

- How the school operates on a day-to-day basis
- Special opportunities and activities for students and parents
- Community resources and services that may be helpful
- Parent-to-parent connections that can ease the transition
- Student peer supports for newcomers
- Ways families can support learning and success at school

Welcoming activities also provide opportunities for teachers and staff to learn about students' interests, strengths, and needs. This helps create meaningful connections and encourages participation in school activities that match a student's interests.

Like any effective intervention, welcoming and engagement efforts require more than good intentions.

They need institutional commitment, thoughtful organization, and ongoing attention. Welcoming must be a school-owned process supported by a mechanism dedicated to planning, implementation, follow-up, and long-term relationship building.

And remember: To improve student attendance, meaningful family engagement is essential.

Efforts to enhance welcoming and involvement must address the factors that make schools feel uninviting while intentionally creating opportunities that make people feel connected, respected, and valued. School improvement and school climate initiatives should ensure that every school has both an effective welcoming program and ways to provide ongoing social support for students and families.

Many families are unsure about how to interact with schools or where to seek help. One essential first step is to:

Ensure that office staff receive the training, resources, and support needed to create a welcoming, helpful, and respectful atmosphere for everyone who enters the school.

Schools also need to recognize that transitions occur throughout a student's educational experience.

Moving to a new school, advancing to a new grade level, or entering a new learning environment can be challenging. Every transition can heighten problems and feelings of alienation, or it can become a natural opportunity to promote belonging, engagement, positive attitudes, and learning success.

Schools that proactively address transitions strengthen both personal and social functioning and help all students feel that they are part of the school community.

A welcoming school is not simply a friendly place. It is a place where every student, family member, and staff person feels that they belong and are valued from the very first contact and throughout the year.

A Few Center Aids for Planning Welcoming and Transition Activities

Kicking off the School Year with a Sense of Exciting Renewal: Generating Hope

Welcoming Strategies for Newly Arrived Students and Their Families

Welcoming and Involving New Students and Families

Transitions to and from Elementary, Middle, and High School

Supports for transitions

Back-to-School Anxiety

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Some people have characterized teaching as they would actually compare it to being an air traffic controller. Especially in the younger grades, you're constantly having to anticipate complex situations. – Rep. Mark Takano

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>Quick Links to Online Resources

- >>Partnership as a “Lever for Transformation”: County-Level Leadership to Advance Systemic Social and Emotional Learning
- >>Exploring Associations Among Identity, Respect, and Teacher Retention
- >>Child and Youth Engagement in Research, Policymaking, Practice
- >>The Value of and Need for School Mental Health Services
- >>Feeling Needed & Useful & Psychological Well-Being in Early to Middle Adolescence
- >>For chronic absenteeism, pandemic recovery is possible but still
- >>Promoting Reading for Pleasure: A Student/Learning Supports Perspective

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“I think we can do a better job as a district of telling our own story in a more transparent way, and frankly, that’s how you build trust, or you really reinforce trust with the community that you serve. It starts and ends with communication, but that communication has to be thoughtful and strategic.”

LAUSD Superintendent Andrés Chait

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Here’s what was discussed in the **Community of Practice** during July

Note: All community of practice editions contain Links to relevant shared resources.

- >Implementing school improvements
- >Does recess play an important role in child/youth development?
- >How well are neighborhood factors being accounted for in addressing barriers?
- >Understanding students’ mental health problems beyond diagnostic labels
- >About AI chatbots use by youth for mental health advice
- >Follow-up question about a recent center report

If you missed the resources and news in previous issues of the Community of Practice, see <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

How did you do on your first day in the new school?

I guess not too well. They said I had to come back tomorrow.



NEW REPORT

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

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

This national report concludes that the next major frontier in school improvement is not adding more programs, services, or initiatives, but fundamentally transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

The report, analyzes major efforts underway across the nation to strengthen supports for students and identifies the lessons, challenges, and policy implications emerging from those initiatives.

Seven major and overlapping initiatives related to strengthening student and learning supports are reviewed. These are:

- Whole-child approaches
- Integrated student supports
- Community Schools Movement
- Comprehensive school mental health initiatives
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS)
- Expansion of student support personnel
- Efforts aimed at transforming student and learning support systems

While acknowledging the contributions of these initiatives, the report stresses that none, by itself, provides a sufficiently comprehensive framework for organizing the wide range of programs, personnel, services, funding streams, and community resources schools use to address barriers to learning and teaching.

A central theme of the report is that fragmentation of student and learning supports is widespread and the focus of many reform initiatives. But, fragmentation is a symptom. The deeper concern is that addressing barriers to learning and teaching has never been established as a primary component of school improvement. As long as these essential supports remain secondary, fragmentation will continue.

The report calls for reframing the prevailing school improvement framework from its traditional two-component focus on (1) *Instruction* and (2) *Management-Governance* and expanding it into a three-component framework that encompasses (3) *Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* as essential and primary. This third component is operationalized as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

The report also highlights that now is a unique opportunity for transformation. The growing convergence of whole-child initiatives, MTSS implementation, community schools, school mental health efforts, chronic absenteeism initiatives, and equity-focused reforms means that many of the building blocks for change are already in place. The challenge now is bringing those efforts together within a coherent and sustainable system.

Among its recommendations, the report calls for:

- Elevating student and learning supports as a primary component of school improvement policy
- Organizing fragmented initiatives within a unified intervention framework
- Strengthening leadership and infrastructure dedicated to student and learning supports
- Prioritizing prevention and early intervention
- Expanding school-community collaboration
- Developing accountability measures directly related to student supports as well as academics

The report concludes that improving instruction and transforming student and learning supports are not competing agendas. Together they define a full approach to school improvement. the authors write. "The future of student and learning supports depends not on launching one more initiative, but on transforming how schools organize efforts to address the barriers to learning and teaching that hamper success at school for too many students and staff."

>For more resources in general, see our website
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

>For info on the status of upcoming conferences
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upconf.htm>

>For info on webinars
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

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The myth [of service-resistant youth] basically promotes this idea that it's the responsibility of the youth to seek out and obtain services. While there's personal agency that might be associated with it, a 14-year-old who is having to deal with all the other developmental and educational challenges they're confronted with won't have the capacity to navigate their way through the system. And even for adult these systems are extraordinarily intimidating. Jason Willis at WestEd

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>Calls for grant proposals
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upcall.htm>

> job and training opportunities
when available
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/job.htm>

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Our Center emphasizes the opportunity to start now to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

Let Us Know about what ideas are being proposed for moving in new directions for transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

And if anyone is thinking about increasing the capacity of a district or school with respect to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help. Send all info to ltaylor@ucla.edu

>A Few News Stories (excerpted from various news sources)

A Great Year For New High School. In a partnership between Moore County Schools (NC) and Sandhills Community College, the two educational institutions developed a new school. The Moore Innovative High School launched with a \$25 million grant from the state and a mission that accelerates high school learning in the first two years. It then introduces students in the second two years to college-level study and vocational fields to fill jobs in rapidly growing fields like advanced manufacturing, architecture and construction, health sciences and science, technology, engineering and math.

A Maryland district renovated 48 school libraries in 1 year. Prince George's County Public Schools worked with partners that provided new furniture, lighting, books and tech devices. The library makeovers in Prince George's County schools were a joint effort among the school district, Heart of America and the Pull Up Fund. Heart of America, a nonprofit that works to transform learning spaces for underserved students, helped plan and manage the renovations, while Pull Up Fund, a local philanthropy, donated \$5 million. In addition, the renovated schools got a collective 25,000 new books, as well as 1,500 tech devices and tools like smart TVs, projectors, computer stations, 3D printers, and robotics kits.

A free monthly book for your Oregon child under 5? A new state law guarantees it. The Imagination Library has rapidly expanded in the state, with 4 million books mailed out in total as of this February, according to Oregon's statewide director of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. She said that she expects that number to reach 5 million by 2027 due to partnerships with Oregon officials.

How Florida students are uniting to aid Venezuela after earthquakes. Venezuela is on the hearts of many Central Floridians, including teens and young adults who've spent the last several days collecting donations and funds to send overseas after two earthquakes shook the nation. Each box of donated items contains handwritten messages for people to see once supplies arrive to Venezuela.

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About 90% of students in this country attend public schools. Students have the right to equal access without discrimination and students with disabilities have the right to a free and appropriate education. I will not stand by and let [the administration] destroy the federal programs, funding, and research that are critical to public schools and the millions of students they serve. — Rep. Suzanne Bonamici

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>Comments and sharing from the field

Here's a response to the question, *What are the biggest barriers to learning and teaching at schools and how are schools building a stronger system of student and learning supports to address them?* (see <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7-16-26.pdf>)

“As a veteran educator, I see a huge shift in family dynamics. So many more families need support with mental health and proper jobs. There is a greater loss of motivation to interact at home and foster learning in their home. This translates to high truancy as well. We cannot overcome all of those factors which need to be addressed somehow. School districts can plan for better curriculum initiatives but it will not trump the prior. Without dumping more on teachers (Another side issue-Fewer capable young adults are choosing to become teachers), support for community development and more mental health counselors coordinated through the schools might give the best positive options.”

To Listserv Participants

- **Please share this resource with others.** (Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and this is a critical time for action.)
- **Let us know what's going on** to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 130,000 on our listserv.)
- **For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly,** send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu
- **Looking for information?** (We usually can help.)
- **Have a suggestion for improving our efforts?** (We welcome your feedback.)

We look forward to hearing from you!

Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF ENEWS

Who Are We? Recently renamed the Center for MH in Schools and Student/Learning Supports, our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor.

For more information about the Center and its many resources, go to the website at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> or email Ltaylor@ucla.edu or adelman@psych.ucla.edu

Send info to share with others or ask for specific resources by email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu