Research for School Improvement and Transformation

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ESSA, Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning*

Abstract

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) recognizes that significant numbers of students require supports to successfully meet challenging state academic standards. This brief (1) analyzes the act to assess how it addresses the nature and scope of supports to address barriers to learning and re-engage disconnected students and (2) presents frameworks and prototypes for improving how schools provide student and learning supports.

The analysis finds the legislation clearly underscores that student and learning supports permeate efforts to enable every student to succeed. At the same time, the act muddies the nature and scope of such supports by scattering references to them throughout the various Titles, Parts, Subparts, and Sections. That is, by addressing barriers to learning in a piecemeal and mostly indirect manner, ESSA conveys a fragmented picture and a lack of coherence with respect to essential supports.

The shift to more local control is discussed as an opportunity for state and local stakeholders to escape the limitations of the federal act and move away from existing fragmented and marginalized approaches for dealing with factors interfering with student success. As aids for systemic change, the brief highlights frameworks and prototypes for developing a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching – with an emphasis on enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond.

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ESSA, Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning

A key facet of enhancing equity of opportunity is for schools to play a major role in addressing barriers to student learning. The passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) raises the question: *How does the act directly address such barriers?* This brief presents an answer to that question and frames the current transition period as an opportunity to move forward in a transformative way.

What does the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) Stress for Directly Addressing Barriers to Learning?

The following are major matters that underscore how the legislation focuses on school efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students and families.[1]

Accountability

The legislation calls for continuing to collect data on school quality and climate including rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, and chronic absenteeism (including both excused and unexcused absences). With the new law, state-designed accountability systems are expected to include at least one additional indicator of school success or student support. Examples offered related to student support include school climate and safety, discipline policies, bullying prevention, and the availability of "Specialized Instructional Support Personnel."

At state, local educational agency, and school levels, assessment results are to be disaggregated by each major racial and ethnic group, economically disadvantaged students as compared to those who are not economically disadvantaged, children with disabilities as compared to children without disabilities, English proficiency status, gender, and migrant status. Disaggregation is not required if the number of students in a subgroup is insufficient to yield statistically reliable information or the results would reveal personally identifiable information about an individual student.

The legislation allows for alternate assessment provisions but with a 1% participation cap; states can be granted a waiver for exceeding the cap. To the extent feasible, alternate assessments are expected to incorporate the principles of "universal design for learning."

Supports for Student Safety and Health

In addition to the possibility of adding accountability indicators related to student support, the legislation specifically notes that schools should consider programs and activities to support safe and healthy students. See Exhibit I and note the range of programs, activities, and types of problems indicated. Also note the emphasis on:

- supporting a healthy, active lifestyle and developing relationship-building skills
- prevention, education, and early identification of problems;
- school-based mental health
- coordinating with other schools and community-based programs and services
- professional development and training for school and specialized instructional support personnel and interested community members.

Exhibit 1

TITLE IV—21ST CENTURY SCHOOLS (Sec. 4001. General provisions)
PART A—STUDENT SUPPORT AND ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT GRANTS
SUBPART 1—STUDENT SUPPORT AND ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT GRANTS

SEC. 4108. ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT SAFE AND HEALTHY STUDENTS

Subject to section 4106(f), each local educational agency, or consortium of such agencies, that receives an allocation under section 4105(a) shall use a portion of such funds to develop, implement, and evaluate comprehensive programs and activities that—

(1) are coordinated with other schools and community-based services and programs;
(2) foster safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free environments that support student academic achievement;
(3) promote the involvement of parents in the activity or program;
(4) may be conducted in partnership with an institution of higher education, business, nonprofit organization, community-based organization, or other public or private entity with a demonstrated record of success in implementing activities described in this section; and
(5) may include, among other programs and activities

(A) drug and violence prevention activities and programs that are evidence-based (to the extent the State, in consultation with local educational agencies in the State, determines that such evidence is reasonably available) including—
(i) programs to educate students against the use of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, smokeless tobacco products, and electronic cigarettes; and
(ii) professional development and training for school and specialized instructional support personnel and interested community members in prevention, education, early identification, intervention mentoring, recovery support services and, where appropriate, rehabilitation referral, as related to drug and violence prevention;

(B) in accordance with sections 4001 and 4111—
(i) school-based mental health services, including early identification of mental health symptoms, drug use, and violence, and appropriate referrals to direct individual or group counseling services, which may be provided by school-based mental health services providers; and
(ii) school-based mental health services partnership programs that—
(I) are conducted in partnership with a public or private mental health entity or health care entity; and
(II) provide comprehensive school-based mental health services and supports and staff development for school and community personnel working in the school that are—
(aa) based on trauma-informed practices that are evidence-based (to the extent the State, in consultation with local educational agencies in the State, determines that such evidence is reasonably available);
(bb) coordinated (where appropriate) with early intervening services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.); and
(cc) provided by qualified mental and behavioral health professionals who are certified or licensed by the State involved and practicing within their area of expertise;

(C) programs or activities that—
(i) integrate health and safety practices into school or athletic programs;
(ii) support a healthy, active lifestyle, including nutritional education and regular, structured physical education activities and programs, that may address chronic disease management with instruction led by school nurses, nurse practitioners, or other appropriate specialists or professionals to help maintain the well-being of students;
(iii) help prevent bullying and harassment

(cont.)

(iv) improve instructional practices for developing relationship-building skills, such as effective communication, and improve safety through the recognition and prevention of coercion, violence, or abuse, including teen and dating violence, stalking, domestic abuse, and sexual violence and harassment;
(v) provide mentoring and school counseling to all students, including children who are at risk of academic failure, dropping out of school, involvement in criminal or delinquent activities, or drug use and abuse;
(vi) establish or improve school dropout and reentry programs; or
(vii) establish learning environments and enhance students' effective learning skills that are essential for school readiness and academic success, such as by providing integrated systems of student and family supports;

(D) high-quality training for school personnel, including specialized instructional support personnel, related to—
(i) suicide prevention;
(ii) effective and trauma-informed practices in classroom management;
(iii) crisis management and conflict resolution techniques;
(iv) human trafficking (defined, for purposes of this subparagraph, as an act or practice described in paragraph (9) or (10) of section 103 of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (22 U.S.C. 7102));
(v) school-based violence prevention strategies;
(vi) drug abuse prevention, including educating children facing substance abuse at home; and
(vii) bullying and harassment prevention;

(E) in accordance with sections 4001 and 4111, child sexual abuse awareness and prevention programs or activities, such as programs or activities designed to provide—
(i) age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate instruction for students in child sexual abuse awareness and prevention, including how to recognize child sexual abuse and how to safely report child sexual abuse; and
(ii) information to parents and guardians of students about child sexual abuse awareness and prevention, including how to recognize child sexual abuse and how to discuss child sexual abuse with a child;

(F) designing and implementing a locally-tailored plan to reduce exclusionary discipline practices in elementary and secondary schools that—
(i) is consistent with best practices;
(ii) includes strategies that are evidence-based (to the extent the State, in consultation with local educational agencies in the State, determines that such evidence is reasonably available); and
(iii) is aligned with the long-term goal of prison reduction through opportunities, mentoring, intervention, support, and other education services, referred to as a 'youth PROMISE plan'; or

(G) implementation of schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports, including through coordination with similar activities carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.), in order to improve academic outcomes and school conditions for student learning;

(H) designating a site resource coordinator at a school or local educational agency to provide a variety of services, such as—
(i) establishing partnerships within the community to provide resources and support for schools;
(ii) ensuring that all service and community partners are aligned with the academic expectations of a community school in order to improve student success; and
(iii) strengthening relationships between schools and communities; or

(I) pay for success initiatives aligned with the purposes of this section.

Addressing a Wide Range of Needs

Note that the other sections of Title IV call for student and learning supports (e.g., activities to support well-rounded learning opportunities). Title I *(Schoolwide Program)* calls for state, LEA, and school plans to address the needs of all children in the school, and particularly the needs of those at risk of not meeting challenging state academic standards. This is to be accomplished through activities which may include – counseling, school-based mental health programs, specialized instructional support services, mentoring services, and other strategies to improve students' skills outside the academic subject areas. Other Titles in the act have sections that focus on the support needs of particular groups of students (e.g., migratory children, children and youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at-risk, English learners and immigrant students, Native Hawaiian and Alaska Native students, homeless children and youths; children with significant cognitive disabilities). And while student and learning supports are not mentioned in the sections on schools designated as needing comprehensive or targeted support and improvement, it is hard to imagine that such supports are not an essential facet of any comprehensive support and improvement plans.

A Tiered Approach

A schoolwide tiered model (also referred to as a multitier system of supports) is referenced for preventing and addressing behavior problems. The tiered model is defined as "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making." The tiered model (including use of early intervening services) and specific approaches such as positive behavioral intervention and supports are presented as strategies for enabling children with disabilities and English learners to meet challenging state academic standards and are to be coordinated with similar activities and services carried out under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.*

The New Block Grant

Title IV consolidates previously separate programs into a block grant that is to provide all students with access to a well-rounded education, improve conditions for learning, and enhance use of technology. Districts must submit an application to the state and conduct a comprehensive needs assessment. No less than 20 percent must be used for activities to improve school conditions for student learning such as drug and violence prevention programs, mental health services, specialized training for school personnel related to suicide prevention or bullying and harassment, child sexual abuse awareness and prevention activities, reducing exclusionary discipline practices, implementing school-wide positive behavioral interventions, and strengthening community services.

With respect to using funds for activities to support effective use of technology, examples mentioned in the act emphasize enhancing learning opportunities for educators, carrying out blended learning projects, offering distance learning programs, and building technological capacity and infrastructure. Technology also should be used to enhance direct efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching, re-engage disconnected students, and for capacity building of student and learning support personnel and organization. (Note that up to 15 percent can go to purchasing technology infrastructure.)

Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

The title "Pupil Personnel Service Provider" has been replaced with "Specialized Instructional Support Personnel." This includes

> "school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists; and (ii) other qualified professional personnel, such as school nurses, speech language pathologists, and school librarians, involved in providing assessment, diagnosis, counseling, educational, therapeutic, and other necessary services (including related services as that term is defined in section 602 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1401)."

Specialized Instructional Support Personnel are referenced at various points related to the development of state and district school improvement plans. For example, Title I state plans are to include explicit language around comprehensive school counseling services, professional development for school counselors, and career counseling services. Such plans must indicate how SEAs and LEAs will support struggling schools and students most at risk of school failure. Furthermore, when developing state/local Title I plans to improve student outcomes and school success (e.g., Schoolwide Program Plans), states and LEAs are required to engage in meaningful consultation with diverse stakeholders, including "if appropriate," specialized instructional support personnel.

Specialized Instructional Support Personnel also are mentioned with respect to such matters as identifying and supporting students most at risk of school failure, improving student literacy, addressing school climate and school safety, supporting the mental and behavioral health of students.

Note that the legislation defines a "school-based mental health services provider" as a state-licensed or state-certified school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker, or other state licensed or certified mental health professional qualified under state law to provide mental health services to children and adolescents.

School Discipline

The legislation focuses on the need to reduce the overuse of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom. To this end, state and LEA plans and charter school funding applications (equity plans) are to provide for ways to support such efforts. State and local funds may be used to implement programs (e.g., PROMISE programs) to reduce exclusionary discipline practices, implement schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports, and expand access to coordinated resources for school-based counseling and mental health programs. Special emphasis is given to identifying and supporting schools with high rates of discipline, disaggregated by subgroups of students.

Underperforming Schools and Student Subgroups

The legislation prioritizes interventions and resources for schools designated as needing comprehensive or targeted support and improvement. For example, high schools where less than two-thirds of students graduate and any school where one or more subgroups of students are underperforming.

At a minimum this includes no less than the lowest-performing 5 percent of all Title I schools in the state and all public high schools in the state failing to graduate one-third or more of their students. Districts must plan ways for schools to improve student outcomes, including identification of resource

inequities, use of school-level needs assessments and evidence-based interventions. Such plans must be approved by the school, district, and state, and monitored and periodically reviewed by the state. (Note: most needs assessments highlight the importance of planning for a range of student and learning supports.)

Stakeholder Empowerment and Development

A basic way that stakeholder empowerment is encouraged is through *consultation* and *development* activity. Forms of consultation are stressed at all stages and with respect to all facets of the work designated by the legislation. For example, for state planning, the legislation indicates that

> "For any State desiring to receive a grant under this part, the State educational agency shall file with the Secretary a plan that is developed by the State educational agency with timely and meaningful consultation with the Governor, members of the State legislature and State board of education (if the State has a State board of education), local educational agencies (including those located in rural areas), representatives of Indian tribes located in the State, teachers, principals, other school leaders, charter school leaders (if the State has charter schools), specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, administrators, other staff, and parents."

As another example, the legislation sites that "School districts must consult with private school officials regarding issues such as:

>Funding, including how the allocation is determined and pooling and consolidating available sources of funding
>How children's needs will be identified, what services will be offered
>How, where, when and by whom the services will be provided
>How the services will be evaluated and improved ESSA implementation begins.

Professional Development

With respect to *professional development*, the legislation defines the term as activities that are "an integral part of school and local educational agency strategies for providing educators (including teachers, principals, other school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, para-professionals, and, as applicable, early childhood educators) with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to succeed in a well-rounded education and to meet the challenging State academic standards."

While a primary emphasis is on teachers and school leaders, it is noteworthy that provision of professional development and training for specialized instructional support personnel and interested community members is mentioned at several points. Mention also is made about giving "teachers of children with disabilities or children with developmental delays, and other teachers and instructional staff, the knowledge and skills to provide instruction and academic support services, to those children, including positive behavioral interventions and supports, multi-tier system of supports, and use of accommodations."

And with respect to in-service training for school personnel, there is an emphasis on –

(i) the techniques and supports needed to help educators understand when and how to refer students affected by trauma, and children with, or at risk of, mental illness;

(ii) the use of referral mechanisms that effectively link such children to appropriate treatment and intervention services in the school and in the community, where appropriate;
(iii) forming partnerships between school-based mental health programs and public or private mental health organizations; and
(iv) addressing issues related to school conditions for student learning, such as safety, peer interaction, drug and alcohol abuse, and chronic absenteeism.

Title II, Part A provides grants to states and districts to improve teacher, principal, and other school leader effectiveness. Given the above, it is not much of a stretch to appreciate that such funds should also be used to improve the effectiveness of specialized instructional support personnel and all school efforts to address barriers to learning.

Literacy Enhancement

Title II, Part B, Subpart 2 is entitled: *Literacy Education for All, Results of the Nation* (LEARN). States are offered a federal competitive grant to develop, implement, and support LEA delivery of comprehensive and high-quality *literacy instruction* as defined in the legislation. Funding must be allocated equitably for state and local programs and activities with not less than 15% for children from birth through kindergarten entry, 40% for kindergarten through grade 5 students, and 40% for grades 6 through 12 students. Innovative approaches to literacy are supported through awards of grants or contracts or through competitive grants and include developing/enhancing school library programs; providing early literacy services; and, providing books to students in low-income communities.

States are encouraged to provide targeted subgrants to early childhood education programs and local educational agencies and their public or private partners to implement evidence-based programs that ensure high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction for students most in need. Tutoring (which is emphasized as a basic student support throughout the legislation) is a facet of this, but clearly addressing barriers to literacy development requires more than tutoring. A range of student and learning supports is essential from the earliest intervention.

Early Childhood Education

The legislation emphasizes the importance of helping ensure smooth preschool-to-kindergarten transitions for children by strengthening state-level collaborations and broadening access to high-quality early learning. As noted, states are encouraged to provide targeted subgrants to early childhood education programs to implement evidence-based programs that ensure high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction for students most in need.

The legislation authorizes a *preschool development* grant program

(1) to assist States to develop, update, or implement a strategic plan that facilitates collaboration and coordination among existing programs of early childhood care and education in a mixed delivery system across the State designed to prepare low-income and disadvantaged children to enter kindergarten and to improve transitions from such system into the local educational agency or elementary school that enrolls such children, by –

(A) more efficiently using existing Federal, State, local, and non-governmental resources to align and strengthen the delivery of existing programs;
(B) coordinating the delivery models and funding streams existing in the State's mixed delivery system; and
(C) developing recommendations to better use existing resources in order to improve –
(i) the overall participation of children in a mixed delivery system of Federal, State, and local early childhood education programs;
(ii) program quality while maintaining availability of services;
(iii) parental choice among existing programs; and
(iv) school readiness for children from low-income and disadvantaged families, including during such children's transition into elementary school;

(2) to encourage partnerships among Head Start providers, State and local governments, Indian tribes and tribal organizations, private entities (including faith- and community-based entities), and local educational agencies, to improve coordination, program quality, and delivery of services; and
(3) to maximize parental choice among a mixed delivery system of early childhood education program providers

Here, too, a range of student and learning supports is essential.

Support for Parent and Family Engagement

In the legislation, the term parental involvement has been replaced with *parent and family engagement*. Various sections of the legislation mention the importance of parent and family outreach and training activities designed to assist parents and families to become active participants in education planning and in the education of their children. Stress is on both the consultation role and the needs of parents and family members to assist with the learning of their children, including engaging with school personnel and teachers.

Title IV, Part E is devoted to *Family Engagement in Education Programs*. The sections on parent and family engagement largely focus on a consultation role. For example, as key stakeholders, parents and family members are to be involved "in jointly developing the local educational agency plan." Particular attention is to be paid to including "parents who are economically disadvantaged, are disabled, have limited English proficiency, have limited literacy, or are of any racial or ethnic minority background. Communication is to be "in a format and, to the extent practicable, in a language such parents understand."

The legislation authorizes Statewide Family Engagement Centers to support and provide comprehensive training on parent education and family-school partnerships. The emphasis is on engaging families and encouraging family literacy experiences and practices to support literacy development.

The sections on providing supports "necessary to assist and build the capacity of all participating schools within the local educational agency in planning and implementing effective parent and family involvement activities" stress the aim is "to improve student academic achievement and school performance."

Assurances are required that states will collect and disseminate to local educational agencies and schools effective parent and family engagement strategies. Federal funds are to be used to "carry out activities and strategies consistent with the local educational agency's parent and family engagement policy, including not less than 1 of the following:

(i) Supporting schools and nonprofit organizations in providing professional development for local educational agency and school personnel regarding parent and family engagement strategies, which may be provided jointly to teachers, principals, other school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, early childhood educators, and parents and family members.
(ii) Supporting programs that reach parents and family members at home, in the community, and at school.
(iii) Disseminating information on best practices focused on parent and family engagement, especially best practices for increasing the engagement of economically disadvantaged parents and family members.
(iv) Collaborating, or providing subgrants to schools to enable such schools to collaborate, with community-based or other organizations or employers with a record of success in improving and increasing parent and family engagement.
(v) Engaging in any other activities and strategies that the local educational agency determines are appropriate and consistent with such agency's parent and family engagement policy.

Evaluation of the content and effectiveness of the parent and family engagement stresses assessing how well the policy helps improve "the academic quality" of schools. Such evaluation also needs to assess the nature and scope of the supports used to enable engagement and re-engagement.

Connecting with Community Resources for School Success

The act stresses that strategies not only to engage families and but also communities are central to school improvement efforts. Title IV -- 21st Century Schools Subpart 2 – *Community Support for School Success* states its purposes are to "(1) significantly improve the academic and developmental outcomes of children living in the most distressed communities of the United States, including ensuring school readiness, high school graduation, and access to a community-based continuum of high-quality services; and (2) provide support for the planning, implementation, and operation of full-service community schools that improve the coordination and integration, accessibility, and effectiveness of services for children and families, particularly for children attending high-poverty schools, including high-poverty rural schools."

Promise Neighborhoods

Part B Subpart 2 stresses existing initiatives for connecting with *community resources*. One is the *Promise Neighborhoods* initiative which is seen as a resource for "implementation of a comprehensive, effective continuum of coordinated services in neighborhoods with –

(i) high concentrations of low-income individuals;
(ii) multiple signs of distress, which may include high rates of poverty, childhood obesity, academic failure, and juvenile delinquency, adjudication, or incarceration; and
(iii) schools implementing comprehensive support and improvement activities or targeted support and improvement activities."

In this context, the legislation uses the term *pipeline services.* The term is defined as "a continuum of coordinated supports, services, and opportunities for children from birth through entry into and success in postsecondary education, and career attainment." The legislation states that: "Such services shall include, at a minimum, strategies to address through services or programs (including integrated student supports) the following:

(A) High-quality early childhood education programs.
(B) High-quality school and out-of-school-time programs and strategies.
(C) Support for a child's transition to elementary school, from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school into and through postsecondary education and into the workforce, including any comprehensive readiness assessment determined necessary.
(D) Family and community engagement and supports, which may include engaging or supporting families at school or at home.
(E) Activities that support postsecondary and workforce readiness, which may include job training, internship opportunities, and career counseling.
(F) Community-based support for students who have attended the schools in the area served by the pipeline, or students who are members of the community, facilitating their continued connection to the community and success in postsecondary education and the workforce.
(G) Social, health, nutrition, and mental health services and supports.
(H) Juvenile crime prevention and rehabilitation programs."

Full-service Community Schools

There also is a provision of assistance to public elementary schools or secondary schools to function as *full-service community schools*. In the legislation, the term full-service community school designate means a public elementary school or secondary school that (A) participates in a community-based effort to coordinate and integrate educational, developmental, family, health, and other comprehensive services through community- based organizations and public and private partnerships; and (B) provides access to such services in school to students, families, and the community, such as access during the school year (including before- and after-school hours and weekends), as well as during the summer.

Also relevant to addressing barriers to learning, is the emphasis throughout the legislation on:

Coordination with Other Federal Programs – This includes the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.), the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (20 U.S.C. 701 et seq.), the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (20 U.S.C. 2301 et seq.), the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (29 U.S.C. 3101 et seq.), the Head Start Act (42 U.S.C. 9831 et seq.), the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. 9858 et seq.), the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (20 U.S.C. 9501 et seq.), the Education Technical Assistance Act of 2002 (20 U.S.C. 9601 et. seq.), the National Assessment of Educational Progress Authorization Act (20 U.S.C. 9621 et seq.), the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11301 et seq.), and the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (29 U.S.C. 3271 et seq.).

Reducing Fiscal Barriers – State plans must include assurances that "the State educational agency will modify or eliminate State fiscal and accounting barriers so that schools can easily consolidate funds from other Federal, State, and local sources to improve educational opportunities and reduce unnecessary fiscal and accounting requirements."

Opportunities for nonprofit and for-profit entities – There is an emphasis on opportunities for nonprofit and for-profit entities to work with students to improve academic achievement and student engagement, including student safety and health.

How Well Does ESSA Directly Address Barriers to Learning?

As the above analysis of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* indicates, the legislation underscores that student and learning supports permeate efforts to enable every student to succeed. The analysis spotlights that

- there are barriers to participation and achievement of a significant number of students
- direct efforts are essential to enhance student safety and health and improve student disciplinary practices
- student and learning supports are necessary to address the special needs of targeted subgroups of students and families
- student and learning supports are especially needed in underperforming schools
- schools employ a range of specialized instructional support personnel
- school accountability can include such indicators as measures of school climate and safety, discipline policies, bullying prevention, and the availability of specialized instructional support personnel
- a schoolwide tiered model (also referred to as a multitier system of supports) consists of a comprehensive continuum of systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs and includes strategies for early intervening and approaches such as positive behavioral intervention and supports
- student and learning supports are needed to enhance parent and family engagement and literacy and enhance student literacy pre-K through grade 12
- student and learning supports are needed related to activities to enhance literacy
- efforts to provide supports are improved through coordination with similar activities and services carried out under other federal programs
- efforts to provide supports are improved through connecting with community resources
- fiscal barriers need to be reduced so that schools can readily consolidate funds from other federal, state, and local sources to improve opportunities for student success at school
- staff development should include specialized instructional support personnel
- all staff need to gain a wider range of knowledge and skills about what is involved in providing the type of student and learning supports and accommodations necessary to enable students to succeed.

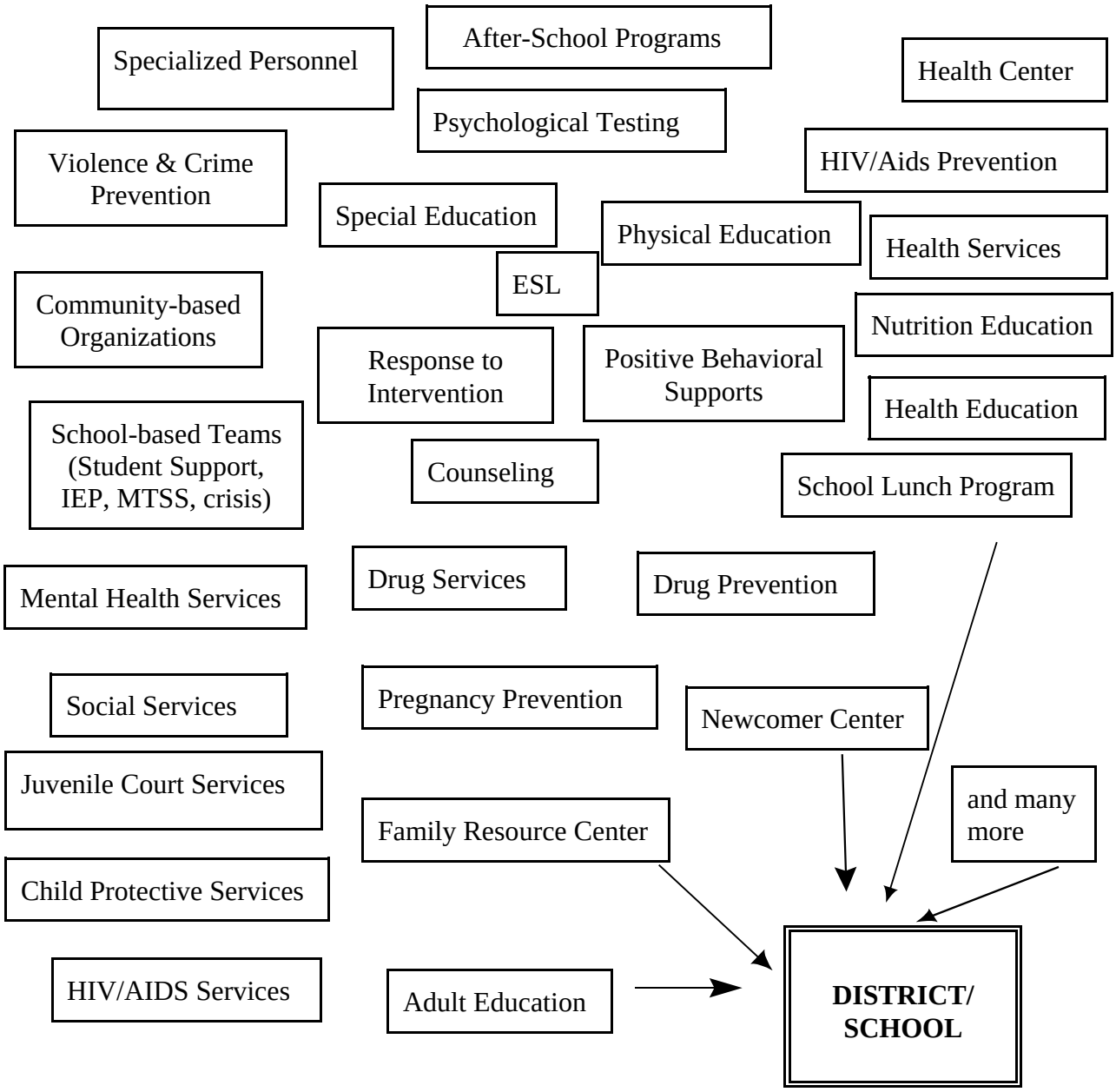
At the same time, the legislation muddies the nature and scope of student and learning supports by scattering references to such supports throughout the various Titles, Parts, Subparts, and Sections. That is, by continuing the trend of previous iterations of ESEA to address barriers to learning in a piecemeal and mostly indirect manner, ESSA conveys a fragmented picture and a lack of coherence with respect to essential supports.

ESSA offers a piecemeal and mostly indirect approach to addressing barriers to learning

Exhibit 2 graphically illustrates the fragmentation that professionals all over the country affirm is characteristic of what transpires in their districts and schools. And this state of affairs will likely be compounded when guidelines are written and when Congress acts on the President's proposed budget (see Appendix A).

We understand that the way the legislation is written reflects political realities. However, our research stresses that, when it comes to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students and families, the reality at schools calls for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning and student supports.[2]

Exhibit 2.
Student and Learning Supports: Much Activity, Much Fragmentation!*



*Learning and student supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that aim at enabling all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school and beyond by directly addressing external and internal barriers to learning and teaching.

Transition = Choice

With enactment of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, the shift to more local control is on the way. As state and local stakeholders play a decisive role in the planning and implementation of the legislation and its guidelines, there is a choice to make related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Planners can just maintain or do a bit of tinkering with the current unsatisfactory status quo, or they can begin the process of transforming student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

Why Transformation is Imperative

Tinkering with changes in how schools respond to learning, behavior, emotional, and physical problems has not proven effective on a large-scale. The opportunity now is to begin planning for replacing the outdated patchwork of programs and services that have emerged over the years.

Federal, state, and local policy makers regularly react to problems experienced at schools, such as bullying, school shootings, substance abuse, disconnected youth, and barriers arising from being raised in poverty, being a newly arrived immigrant, and being homeless. Unfortunately, such reactive policy making has resulted in piecemeal programs that address problems in superficial and ineffective ways and further fragment student and learning supports. Dealing with multiple, interrelated factors that are barriers to learning and teaching requires a proactive, cohesive, comprehensive, and systemic approach.[3]

It is widely recognized that some schools have few learning and student supports, while others have many. There are frequent calls for adding more personnel and services. However, as long as the focus is only on slightly improving professional-student ratios, this is not a promising approach to addressing the many factors interfering with enhancing equity of opportunity for the majority of students who are not doing well at school.

Where feasible, some schools connect with community services (e.g., health and social services, after-school programs). However, given the sparsity of resources in many communities, agencies endeavoring to bring services to schools usually must limit activity to enhancing supports at a couple of schools in the neighborhood.

Moreover, there often is not a good connection between community services and the work of school district employed student support staff (e.g,. school psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, dropout and graduation support staff, special educators). When school and community efforts are poorly connected, community and school personnel may be working with the same students and families with little shared planning or ongoing communication. And there is almost no attention paid to system improvements, except for calls for better coordination.

Not another special initiative; not just a few more services from community providers

In general, then, a focus only on adding personnel, services, and programs to schools is not sufficient. Indeed, it often is a recipe for perpetuating the existing marginalization and fragmentation of learning and student supports.

System transformation is needed to end the marginalization and develop a cohesive, multifaceted, and comprehensive system of learning and student supports. Such a transformation requires wide-based collaboration. In particular, schools, homes, and communities need to work strategically together in pursuing shared goals for enhancing equity of opportunity for *all* students to succeed at school and beyond.

From our perspective, substantive commitment to every student succeeding requires transforming student and learning supports. We view such transformation as fundamental to enhancing equity of opportunity, enabling civil rights, closing the achievement gap, promoting whole child development, and generating a positive school climate.

Note: Transformation is not about initiating more pilot projects and time limited demonstrations. Such activities often are specially funded and publicized as models to be emulated. When effective, the positive outcomes produced frequently are the result of exceptional conditions that make it unlikely the models can be replicated across a school district (never mind taken to scale in districts across the country).

Moving Forward

Moving forward involves starting a process that (1) coalesces existing student and learning supports into a cohesive component and (2) over a period of several years, develops the component into a comprehensive intervention system that is fully interwoven into instructional efforts. Such a component is key to enabling *all* students to have an equal opportunity to learn at school and *all* teachers to teach effectively. This type of systemic approach is especially important where large numbers of students are not succeeding.

Substantive commitment to every child succeeding requires transforming student/learning supports

Toward these ends, schools first need to map and analyze all resources used for addressing students' learning, behavior, emotional, and physical problems. Such mapping and analysis is the basis for clarifying a broad vision for the future of student and learning supports and for generating a prioritized and strategic set of recommendations for transformation. The mapping is aided through use of a framework that accounts not only for the continuum of interventions (e.g., the tiers), but also for the range of activity schools pursue in addressing problems each day.[4]

As to who should do the mapping and analysis, these initial tasks provide the opportunity to establish a leadership team for transforming learning and student supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system. Such a team consists of an administrative leader and key learning and support staff.[5]

The mapping and analysis will identify gaps and ineffective uses of resources (including redundant efforts). A clear priority is to fill critical gaps. Given sparse resources, one strategy is for a cluster of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern or family of schools) to outreach to a wide range of community stakeholders to access external sources of economic and social capital. The objective is to weave in any available resources that can be connected to local schools to fill the gaps in ways that enhance and do not lead to cuts in schools' learning and student support personnel.[6]

Decisions to move forward should be accompanied by a formal policy commitment to the effort. Such policy must be designed to weather budget cutbacks and the departure of key administrators.

About the term *Learning Supports*

Currently, states and districts are trending toward using the term "Learning Supports" to cover the range of school activity involved in addressing factors interfering with school success. Learning supports are defined as the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school by directly addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Learning supports are designed to (1) directly address interfering factors *and* (2) do so in a way that re-engages students in classroom instruction. Attention to both these matters is essential because, in general, interventions that do not ensure a student's meaningful engagement in classroom learning are insufficient in sustaining student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school. In the classroom and school-wide, such supports encompass efforts to reduce the overemphasis on using extrinsic reinforcers and enhance an emphasis on *intrinsic motivation* to promote engagement and re-engagement.

Guiding Frameworks and Prototypes

Research and development has produced prototypes for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning and student supports. These prototypes already are being used by trailblazers across the country.[7] The prototypes are based on frameworks developed to guide (1) an expansion of education *policy* to ensure development of a unified component for directly addressing barriers to learning, (2) a reformulation of student and learning support *interventions* in classrooms and schoolwide, (3) a reworking of the *operational infrastructure* for daily implementation and ongoing development, and (4) the facilitation of *systemic change* for effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability. Detailed discussions of each of these interrelated matters are available in various reports.[8] Below we recap the (1) policy and (2) intervention frameworks to illustrate their relevance to efforts to enhance equity of opportunity and support efforts for every student to succeed.

Unifying Education Policy for Directly Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Analyses of prevailing school improvement activity indicates planning is guided primarily by a two component framework (i.e., an instructional component and a governance/management component). The result: all interventions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. As already noted, this marginalization is an underlying and fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports.

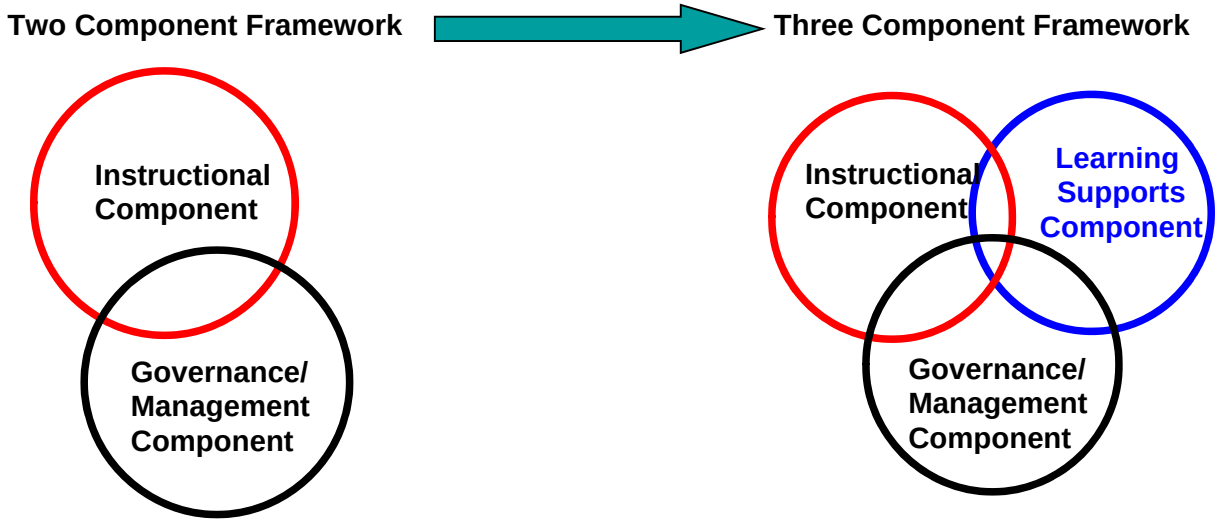
Transforming **rather than just tinkering with student and learning supports requires an expansion of current education policy**

Ending the disorganization and effectively weaving together whatever a school has with whatever a community is doing to confront barriers to equity of opportunity calls for establishing a three component school improvement framework. As illustrated in Exhibit 3, the expanded policy framework is intended to make efforts to directly address barriers a *primary* commitment of school policy.

The illustrated policy expansion already is underway.[7] A large-scale example is the initiative in Alabama where the state education agency has adopted the three component policy framework with plans for statewide implementation. Fifty districts and approximately 300 principals are currently involved.

Exhibit 3. Expanded Policy Prototype:

Expanding school improvement policy and practice from a two to a three component model.



Note: Because policy for improving schools across the country is "standards-based" and accountability driven, expanding the prevailing accountability framework and establishing standards for learning supports are key considerations in effective implementation of a three component policy.[9]

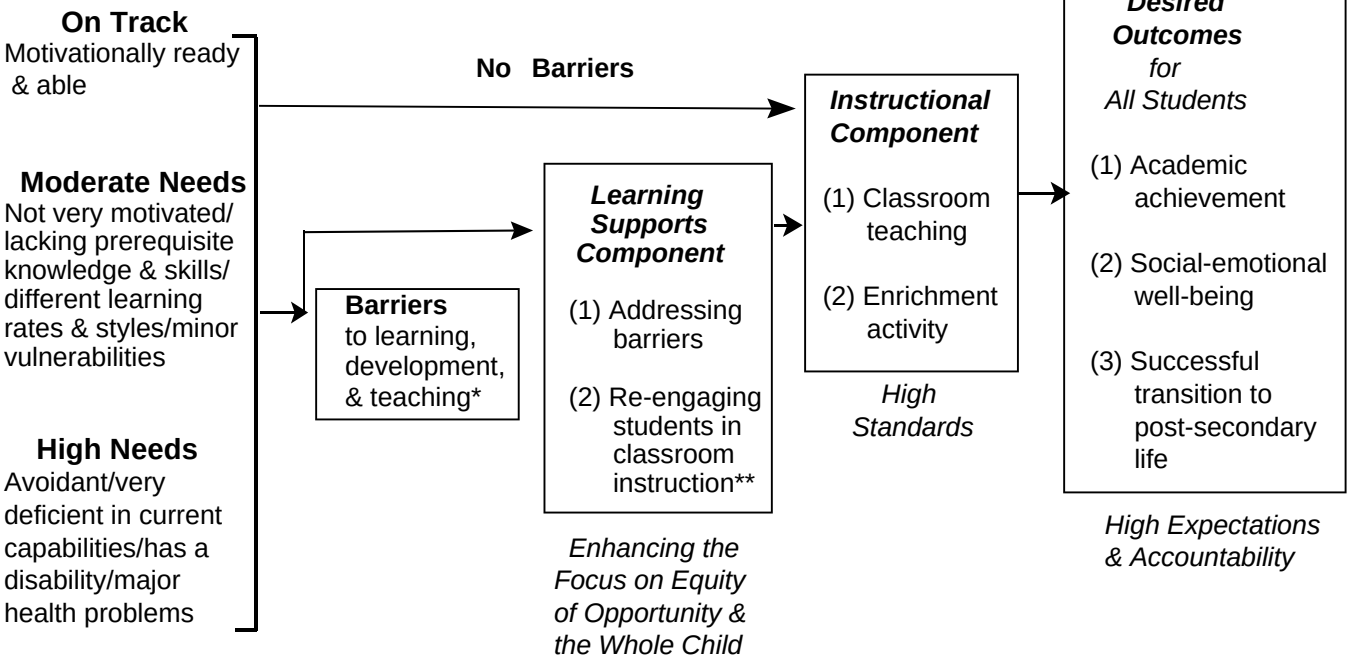
Reframing Intervention for Student and Learning Supports

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* underscores that significant numbers of students require supports to successfully meet challenging state academic standards. What the act doesn't address is the nature and scope of essential learning and student supports.

Minimally, student and learning supports must *address barriers* that are interfering with the learning of a majority of students. However, while addressing barriers is essential, it is not a sufficient approach to enhancing equity of opportunity and enabling learning at school. As noted above, also essential is a potent approach to *re-engaging students in classroom instruction*. Any conceptualization of a learning supports component must encompass both these concerns.

Exhibit 4 is a graphic illustration of a way to frame the problem and highlight the need for a learning supports component to deal with it. With respect to re-engagement of disconnected students, see the note about intrinsic motivation.

Exhibit 4. A Learning Supports Component to Address Barriers and Re-engage Students in Classroom Instruction



*Barriers include both external and internal factors and can be grouped in terms of neighborhood, family, school, peer, and personal conditions.

**In promoting engagement and re-engagement, the component stresses a reduced emphasis on using extrinsic reinforcers and an enhanced focus on intrinsic motivation as a process and outcome consideration. In keeping with public education and public health perspectives, interventions focus on providing physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports in the classroom and schoolwide to enable learning and engagement for all students and especially those manifesting problems.

The intervention prototype developed by our Center for enabling learning has two facets:

- one conceptualizes levels of intervention as a full *continuum of integrated intervention subsystems* that interweave school-community-home resources.
- the second organizes programs, services, and specific activities into a circumscribed set of *content arenas;*

Continuum of Integrated Subsystems

As noted, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* mainly emphasizes use of a schoolwide tiered model (also referred to as a multitier system of supports) as a framework for preventing and addressing behavior problems. The tiered model is defined as "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making."

In schools, student and learning supports increasingly are framed in terms of tiers or levels. This is the result of federal policy guidelines (e.g., related to Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports). As currently conceived, however, the schoolwide multitier student support model is an insufficient organizing framework for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

The simplicity of the tiered presentation as widely adopted is appealing and helps underscore differences in levels of intervention. However, while focusing on levels of intervention is essential, multitier formulations as commonly used are insufficient. Three basic concerns about such formulations are that they mainly stress levels of intensity, do not address the problem of systematically connecting interventions that fall into and across each level, and do not address the need to connect school and community interventions. As a result, they have done little to promote the type of intervention framework that policy and practice analyses indicate is needed to guide schools in transforming student and learning supports into a unified and comprehensive system.

Expand the schoolwide multitiered model

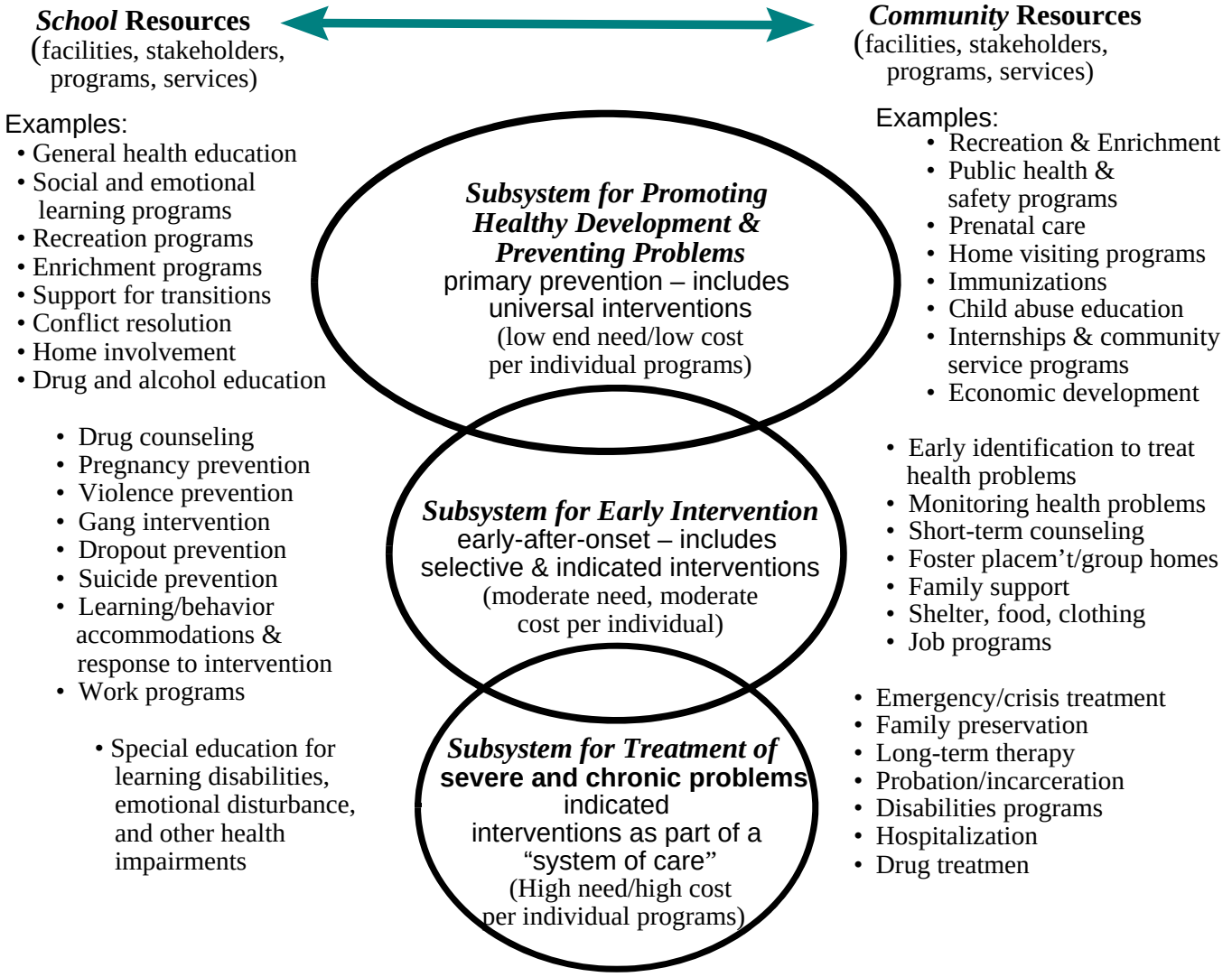
Because a continuum of interventions is a basic facet of any comprehensive intervention system, states and districts now have the opportunity to fill gaps in the multitier framework. The aim is to develop and implement an overlapping and intertwined continuum of interventions.

As graphically portrayed in Exhibit 6, the levels are designed to

- promote healthy development and prevent problems
- intervene early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible
- assist with chronic and severe problems.

Each level represents a subsystem. The three subsystems overlap. All three are conceived as an interconnected system that strives to weave together school and community resources.

Exhibit 6.
Intervention *Continuum:* Interconnected *Subsystems*



Content Arenas of Activity

To escape the trend to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level, it is necessary also to group them into a circumscribed set of arenas reflecting the *content purpose* of the activity. In doing so, a core concern is enhancing a range of supports in the classroom, as well as expanding those outside the classroom so that teachers can enable the learning of students who are not doing well.

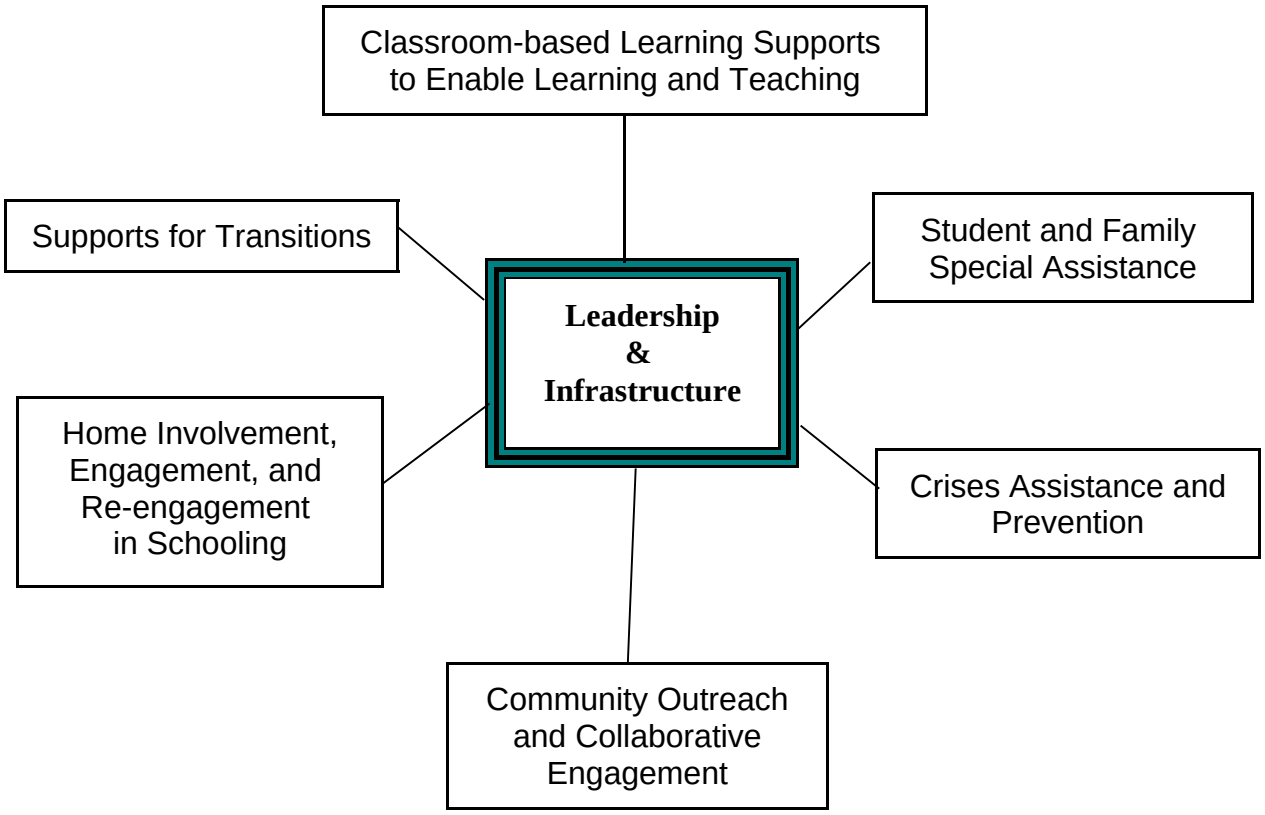
Research over many years stresses that the content of student and learning supports clusters usefully into six arenas.[10] (We think of these arenas as the curriculum of learning supports.) As Exhibit 7 highlights, the arenas encompass efforts to

- *enhance strategies in regular classroom to enable learning* (e.g., working collaboratively with other teachers and student support staff to ensure instruction is personalized with an emphasis on enhancing intrinsic motivation for all students and especially those manifesting mild-moderate learning and behavior problems; re-engaging those who have become disengaged from learning at school; 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 intervening)
- *support transitions* (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate the many hurdles encountered during school and grade changes, daily transitions, program transitions, accessing supports, and so forth)
- *increase home and school connections and engagement* (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 of the school)
- *increase community involvement and collaborative engagement* (e.g., outreach to develop greater community connection and support from a wide range of entities, including enhanced use of volunteers and other community resources, establishing a school-community collaborative)
- *respond to, and where feasible, prevent school and personal crises* (e.g., preparing for emergencies, implementing plans when an event occurs, countering the impact of traumatic events, implementing prevention strategies; creating a caring and safe learning environment)
- *facilitate student and family access to special assistance* (including specialized services on- and off-campus) as needed

The six arenas:

- unify student and learning supports by grouping the many fragmented approaches experienced at school in ways that reduce responding to overlapping problems with separate and sometimes redundant interventions
- address barriers to learning and teaching through improving personalized instruction, increasing accommodations, and providing in-classroom supports and special assistance as soon as problems arise
- enhance 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
- add specialized remediation, treatment, and rehabilitation as necessary, but only as necessary.

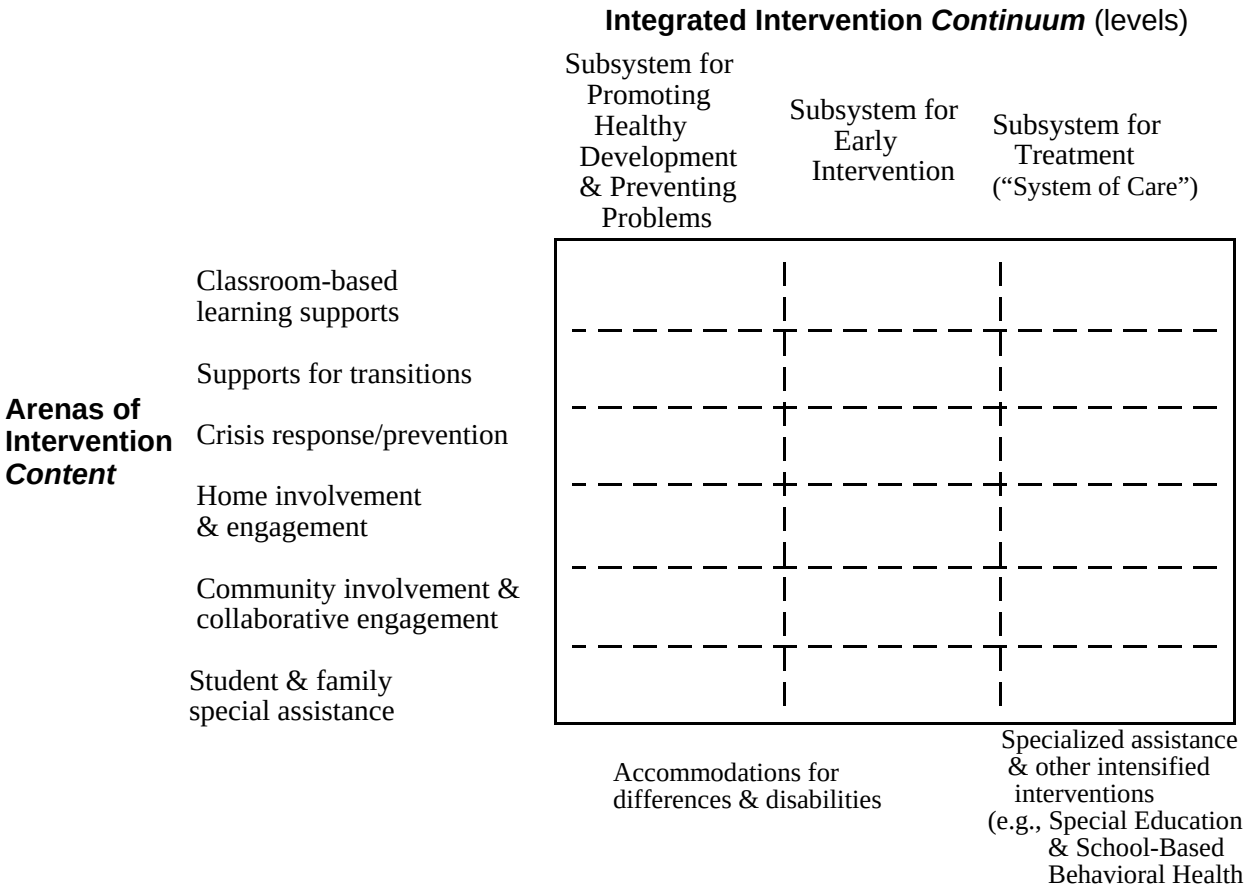
Exhibit 7.
Prototype for Six Content Arenas



Note: *All student and learning supports programs, services, and special initiatives can be embedded into these six content arenas.* Examples include positive behavioral and instructional supports, programs for safe and drug free schools, programs for social and emotional development and learning, school-based mental health, full service community schools, family resource and engagement centers, school-based health and wellness centers, CDC's Coordinated School Health Program, bi-lingual, cultural, and other diversity programs, compensatory education programs, special education programs, legislative mandates, and so forth.

As illustrated in Exhibit 8, the six *arenas* and the *continuum* constitute the prototype intervention framework for a comprehensive system of learning supports. Such a framework is meant to guide and unify development of a learning supports component as part of efforts to improve schools. The matrix provides a framework for mapping what is in place and analyzing gaps.

Exhibit 8.
Intervention Prototype Framework for a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports



In doing all this, a learning supports component is meant to enhance equity of opportunity and whole child development and play a major role in improving student and school performance. Effective implementation also should foster productive school-community relationships and promote a positive school climate.

Concluding Comments

While the *Every Student Succeeds Act* recognizes that significant numbers of students require supports to successfully meet challenging state academic standards, the legislation doesn't account for the nature and scope of the necessary supports. Given this, the likelihood is that guidelines and plans will be developed in ways that mirror the act's limitations.

With the transition to state and local planning, the opportunity arises for escaping the weaknesses of the federal legislation and the limitations of the various initiatives that mainly continue to emphasize improving coordination and integration of support services and connecting schools with sparse community resources.[11] With a direct focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching, the opportunity is to unify student and learning supports and then develop a comprehensive and equitable system. To do less, is to maintain an unsatisfactory status quo while adopting rhetoric that promises every student will succeed.

Notes

[1]The legislation is online at– https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-114s1177enr/pdf/BILLS-114s1177enr.pdf.)

[2]See *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf

[3]See *Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream* (2015). American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and the Brookings Institution. http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/reports/2015/12/aei-brookings-poverty-report/full-report.pdf

[4]See the Center's *Tool for Mapping and Analyzing Learning Supports* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf .

[5]See *Key Leadership Infrastructure Mechanisms for Enhancing Student & Learning Supports* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf .

[6]Some policy makers have developed the false impression that community resources are ready and able to meet the multifaceted needs of students and their families. In the struggle to balance tight school budgets, this impression has contributed to serious cuts related to student supports (e.g., districts laying off student support personnel). Such cuts further reduce the amount of resources available for schools to deal with problems interfering with student and school success.

[7]See examples and lessons learned in *Where's it Happening?* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/nind7.htm .

[8]See Center policy and program reports and briefs – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/materials/policyprogram.htm

[9]For an accountability prototype that focuses not only on achievement, but on personal and social development and on improvements that directly address barriers to learning and teaching, see"Expanding the Accountability Framework for Schools" Appendix A in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf

For a prototype of standards and indicators for a learning supports component, see *Standards & Quality Indicators for an Enabling or Learning Supports Component* (2014). Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/qualityindicators.pdf .

[10]A brief discussion of and examples related to each of the six content arenas is offered in Part II of *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf

[11]*Making the Grade: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports* (2014). Child Trends. http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-07ISSPaper.pdf

Developing Structure and Process Standards for Systems of Care Serving Children and Youth withSpecial Health Care Needs (2014). Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs (AMCHP) and the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health.http://cshcn.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Developing-Structure-and-Process-Standards-White-Paper.pdf

CDC's Coordinated School Health Program. http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/cshp/schools.htm

Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools. (2016). Center for Popular Democracy, Coalition for Community Schools, Southern Education Foundation https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Community-Schools-Layout_e.pdf

Appendix A

President's Proposed 2017 Budget Related to Pre-K-12: Key Education Investments Emphasized by the Administration

http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/president-obamas-2017-budget-seeks-expand-educational-opportunity-all-students?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=

Increasing Equity and Excellence

$15.4 billion for Title I Grants to school districts—the cornerstone of federal efforts to ensure that all students, including poor and minority students, students with disabilities, and English learners, graduate from high school prepared for college and careers

A commitment to early learning as a path to opportunity anchored by President Obama's Preschool for All proposal, which would provide mandatory funding for universal high-quality preschool programs for all 4-year-olds from low- and moderate-income families, along with a total increase of $80 million for IDEA Preschool and IDEA Grants for Infants and Families, and an increase of $100 million to the Department of Health and Human Services for the jointly administered Preschool Development Grants program

$120 million for a new Stronger Together Grants program, which would encourage the development of innovative, ambitious plans to increase socioeconomic diversity in schools through voluntary, community-supported strategies and expand existing efforts in states and communities

$4 billion in mandatory funding over three years for the new Computer Science for All program, which would support state efforts to expand access for all students to computer science instruction and programs of study. And $100 million in discretionary Computer Science for All Development Grants program for school districts, which would promote innovative strategies to provide high-quality instruction and other learning opportunities in computer science

$138 million for more vigorous enforcement of our nation's civil rights laws by the Department's Office for Civil Rights, which ensures equal access to education

Providing Support for Teachers and School Leaders

A new RESPECT: Best Job in the World program that would make a $1 billion mandatory investment to support a nationwide effort to attract and retain effective teachers in high-need schools by increasing compensation and paths for advancement, implementing teacher-led development opportunities to improve instruction, and creating working conditions and school climates conducive to student success

$125 million for the proposed Teacher and Principal Pathways program for grants to institutions of higher education and nonprofit organizations, working closely with school districts, to create or expand high-quality pathways into the teaching profession, particularly into high-needs schools and high-need subjects such as science, technology, engineering and math (STEM)

$10 million for Teach to Lead grants to build on the promising work at the Department's "Teach to Lead" gatherings with direct support to teachers that develop innovative reforms with the potential for wider impact on improving student outcomes

Appendix B

Resources to Aid Moving Forward In Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Start by browsing the introductory resources the Center has developed:

(1) See the 30 minute introductory power point with narration and an accompanying set of handouts.
>The introductory presentation is online at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/powerpoint/briefintroslidesrec.pptx
>The accompanying handouts are at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/intropphandouts.pdf

(2) Then, if you want a brief overview document, download
>*Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf

(3) When you are ready for an in-depth presentation, see
>*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf

(4) For more, go to the
>*National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html
On the initiative's webpage, there are links to *Where It's Happening*, the *System Change Toolkit*, and more.

(5) And feel free to let us know what else would be useful.
Contact adelman@psych.ucla.edu or Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Note: For those ready to move forward, the Center provides distance coaching and technical assistance.