

# Addressing Barriers

# to Learning

*New ways to think . . .*

*Better ways to link*

Volume 17, Number 4



## Whole Person, Whole School

*Educating the whole child" is a phrase that has been in and out of style for over 100 years, but as the engines rev up for the re-authorization of ESEA ... At the core of the "whole child" concept is the understanding that children grow physically, emotionally, and intellectually; therefore, school should attend to all of these areas of growth.*

Center for Inspired Teaching

**W**e have been pleased to see the American Association of School Administrators and ASCD adopt initiatives respectively for the *total* child and the *whole* child. In great part, the renewed interest in the whole student and *all* students reflects widespread recognition of major gaps related to what schools do in facilitating learning and development and in addressing interfering factors.

One result is greater attention in schools to mental and physical health concerns. This includes a growing interest in social and emotional development as a curriculum consideration, a broadening of interventions for psychosocial and health problems, and a greater emphasis on the needs of specific subgroups of students.

All this is to the good. It expands appreciation of the role schools should play in enabling all students to have an equal opportunity to develop to their fullest. In particular, it highlights what's missing in too many public schools, and it underscores the reality that concern for the whole student requires developing whole schools.

### **Enhancing Equity of Opportunity for All Students Requires a Whole School**

A whole school has three primary, essential, and overlapping primary components: (1) curriculum and teaching, (2) a learning supports system to address factors that interfere with learning and teaching, and (3) school governance/management. While every school pursues functions related to all three, each component continues to be the focus of what often are controversial school improvement efforts.

The *curriculum and teaching component*, for example, currently is enmeshed in the movement for Common Core State Standards for *curriculum*. This movement has generated legislative action in almost every state focusing on adopting some of the initial common core curricula arenas that have been developed.

With respect to *teaching*, the emphasis most prominently and controversially has been on accountability measures. However, a set of

updated model teaching standards have been offered through the Council for Chief State Officers. Relatedly, the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" initiative has emphasized the importance of personalizing instruction.

Attention to the *governance/management component* generally has focused on diversifying types of schools in terms of their governance and management, with a strong emphasis on business and market place models. This has included district-run schools, charter schools, contract schools managed by private for-profit and nonprofit operators, moving away from centralized decision making, and enhancing integration across grades and levels (e.g., K-16, P-16, or P-20 systems).

The *learning supports component* has a long history of marginalization in school improvement policy and practice. Indeed, it has been so neglected that it is not seen as a component. Towards establishing it as such, our Center has designed prototypes to enhance a school's ability to address factors that interfere with enhancing equal opportunity for all students to succeed at school. As conceived and under development by trailblazing states, districts, and schools, the component establishes an umbrella under which fragmented efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching can be unified and then developed into a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of student and learning supports. The component's framework stresses a full continuum of interventions and a delineated set of six content arenas encompassing classroom and school-wide supports to strengthen students, teachers, families, schools, and the surrounding community. Common core standards currently are being proposed for this component.

Any analysis of school improvement plans and proposals underscores how far away most schools are from playing an effective role in enabling equity of opportunity – never mind filling gaps to promote whole student development. And given how many powerful economic and political forces are in pursuit of conflicting agenda for public schools, addressing equity concerns in policy and practice always is an enormous challenge.

## What Can Be Done Now

While continuing to call for policy enhancements that promote equity and a focus on whole student development, some immediate steps related to each of the three components can and need to be taken to move schools forward.

### Enhancing the Instructional Component

The primary role good teaching plays in student outcomes is widely stressed. Moreover, when the media zeroes in on a good teacher, the portrayal often suggests the individual is a world class *soloist*. This has allowed the brunt of criticism for public education's problems to fall on teachers as a group. In doing so, too many critics downplay factors that limit who chooses teaching as a profession and how little is done to enhance the effectiveness of those who become teachers.

Fundamentally, society needs to recruit and retain a substantially greater proportion of the best and brightest college graduates as career teachers and student support staff. Given this is a long-range goal, the immediate need is to enhance teacher and support staff preparation and inservice programs and give up the myth that teachers can do it alone.

The following are immediate steps for enhancing teacher and support staff effectiveness:

- **Revamp personnel preparation and continuing professional development.**

**Process** – provide (a) in-depth opportunities during preservice preparation to apprentice with master practitioners and observe others and (b) systematically build on preservice education by providing personalized inservice professional development for everyone on staff at every school (i.e., focusing on whole school improvements, personalize continuing education and include all staff).

**Content** – enhance emphasis on equity of opportunity for success at school through improving staff motivation and capability for (a) working collaboratively with others, (b) personalizing student instruction (see box below), and (c) using accommodations and special interventions when necessary (and particularly in the classroom).

- **Establish a collaborative approach in the classroom, school-wide, and with the home to enable teacher effectiveness** – enhance emphasis on how to invite in and effectively work with other teachers, student support staff, volunteers, and those at home.

### What is Personalized Learning?

Policy makers have embraced the concept of personalized learning, but personnel preparation and continuing professional development for most school personnel has not included an in-depth focus on this with respect to content or in its processes.

It is commonplace to see references to meeting learners where they are; analyses indicate the emphasis often is on *individualized* approaches that stress matching individual differences in *developmental capabilities*. In contrast, we define *personalization* as the process of accounting for individual differences in both capability and *motivation*.

Furthermore, from a psychological perspective, we stress that it is the learner's perception that determines whether the fit is good or bad. Given this, personalizing learning means ensuring learning opportunities are perceived by learners as good ways to reach their goals. Thus, a basic intervention concern is that of eliciting learners' perceptions of how well what is offered matches both their interests and abilities. This has fundamental implications for all efforts to improve education.

Discussions of personalized learning also often leave the impression that the process is mainly about incorporating technological innovations. Moreover, discussions of personalized learning often fail to place the practices within the context of other conditions that must be improved in classrooms and school-wide to address factors interfering with student learning and performance.

Based on our work over many years, we have detailed a personalized approach for classrooms. It is highlighted in a set of continuing education modules focused on *Personalizing Learning and Addressing Barriers to Learning*. See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/personalize.pdf>

## Enhancing the Learning Supports Component

As a Carnegie task force on education stated some time ago:

*School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.*

Everyone recognizes that a variety of barriers can interfere with learning and teaching. Too often, the tendency is to think about such barriers as located inside the individual (e.g., a deficit view of students, a deficit view of teachers and school administrators). The reality, of course, is that quite often factors interfering with good outcomes in schools are contextual and systemic.

Denoting factors that can be barriers to learning and teaching in no way is meant as an excuse for poor school performance. Indeed, doing so simply underscores common sense. *While schools and districts are moving to high-quality, rigorous, grade-level instruction, their success often will depend on addressing barriers to learning and teaching, including their ability to re-engage disconnected students.*

Given the nature and scope of the many factors interfering with schools achieving their mission, there is a growing movement focused on developing a unified and comprehensive learning supports component. (See the next article in this e-journal/newsletter.)

Establishing such a component at a school involves four overlapping phases (i.e., creating readiness, initial implementation, institutionalization, and ongoing evolution/creative renewal). The following are seven steps principals and school staff can get started with right away:

- ***Create Readiness and School Site Commitment.*** Work with key stakeholders to build commitment to unifying student and learning supports into a Learning Supports Component (i.e., a component that systematically and comprehensively enables learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching). Clarify why the component is essential and ensure that the commitment to its development is fully and realistically integrated into school improvement and other strategic operational planning. Keep in mind that building readiness and commitment is an ongoing process.
- ***Appoint a Lead for System Development.*** Assign an administrative-level *Learning Supports Lead* to begin development of the component (e.g., an assistant principal, a student support staff member). Be sure the leader's job description is revised to reflect the new responsibilities and accountabilities; provide appropriate personnel development. Be sure this leader is at administrative planning and decision making tables and component development is a regular part of the agenda.
- ***Establish a Development Team to Work with the Administrative Lead.*** Assign key staff to a component development team (i.e., a *Learning Supports Leadership Team*) to work with the leader to clarify, analyze, identify priorities, recommend resource redeployment, and establish and guide workgroups for developing each facet of the component over a period of several years.

- **Conduct Indepth and Ongoing Analyses to Determine Gaps, Priorities, and Resource Deployment.** Build on initial listings of current personnel and activities by doing an indepth and structured mapping of all resources the school currently uses to address barriers to learning and teaching. Then, (a) do a gap analysis with respect to available needs assessments, (b) identify immediate priorities for moving forward with improvement and system development, and (c) recommend (re)deployment of resources to meet priorities in a cost-effective manner. Be certain the decisions are reflected in all school improvement plans.
- **Form and Facilitate Needed Workgroups.** Elicit volunteers for workgroups and provide them with relevant professional development and support for pursuing the work. While the component development team will guide and support movement forward in establishing a comprehensive system of learning supports, the work requires the efforts of smaller workgroups to carry out specific tasks.
- **Provide Ongoing Professional and Other Stakeholder Development.** Include a focus on a comprehensive system of learning supports in all planning for continuous learning at the school. Provide on-the-job opportunities and special times for such learning. Delineate what those assigned to develop the component need to learn over time; ensure all others (teachers, student support staff, other staff and volunteers, community stakeholders) are included in learning about how best to address barriers to learning and teaching.
- **Use Formative Evaluation to Support Progress.** Ensure that a formative evaluation process is established. Such a process should encompass data on and analyses of all facets of planning and implementation related to developing a comprehensive system of learning supports. Moreover, the process should be designed to provide guidance and support to foster progress. This means monitoring all factors that facilitate and hinder progress and then ensuring actions are taken to deal with interfering factors and to enhance facilitation. As significant progress is made in developing the system, the monitoring can expand to evaluate the impact on student outcomes that are direct indicators of the effectiveness of learning supports (e.g., increased attendance, reduced misbehavior, improved learning).

### Enhancing the Governance and Management Component

*This component remains a minefield.* Issues of privatization and control are inextricably tied to political and economic considerations. Such factors have shaped the dominant policies for practice and accountability that are pushing the instructional component in many public schools to a narrow and test-driven curriculum and that keep learning supports marginalized.

Despite all this, schools and districts can immediately do the following:

- **Rethink their governance and management efforts in terms of a three-component framework.**
- **Include all three components as part of school improvement and strategic planning.**
- **Avoid treating major innovations as yet another project or pilot.**
- **Ensure that capacity building is strategically planned at every school in ways that systemically implement and sustain whole school development.**

## Whole School, Whole Community

Given available findings, the consensus is that schools are more effective and caring places when they have family engagement and are an integral and positive part of the community. State and local education agencies all over the country have recognized the importance of school, family, and community collaboration. The aim is to sustain formal connections and strong engagement over time.

The frequent calls for enhancing parent and community engagement with schools, however, often are not accompanied by effective action. This undercuts efforts to focus on whole student and whole school development.

*Promoting full development and well-being of students, families, and schools calls for effective collaboration with the community.* An optimal approach involves formally blending together resources of at least one school – and sometimes a group of schools or an entire school district – with local family and community resources. And, the range of community resources is not limited to agencies and organizations. Families are the core resources in a community; other resources encompass individuals, businesses, community-based organizations, postsecondary institutions, religious and civic groups, programs at parks and libraries, and any other facilities that can be used for recreation, learning, enrichment, and support. Strong family-school-community connections are critical in impoverished communities where schools often are the largest pieces of public real estate and also may be the single largest employer.

*While it is relatively simple to make informal links to accomplish specific tasks (e.g., linking with a few service agencies or after school program providers), it is much more difficult to establish major long-term collaborative partnerships.* Bringing together stakeholders is not the same as establishing an effective collaboration for developing and evolving formal and institutionalized sharing of a wide spectrum of responsibilities and resources. While relationships frequently are referred to as partnerships, too often this is a premature characterization. Some don't even constitute a meaningful collaboration. Developing partnerships involves more than articulating a complementary vision, it requires significant policy, accountability, and systemic changes that are codified in formalized contract-like agreements.

*Schools that pursue comprehensive school, family, and community collaboration represent a promising direction for strengthening students, families, schools, and neighborhoods.* Collaboration enables improving and expanding interventions to enhance learning and healthy development and address barriers to learning and teaching. Building such collaboration requires stakeholder readiness and relentless commitment, an enlightened vision, creative leadership, and new and multifaceted roles for professionals who work in schools and communities, as well as for family and other community members who are willing to make the commitment.

**Tyack and Cuban**  
describe school reform  
as *Tinkering toward Utopia*



In this age of social media, it seems  
more like *Twittering toward Utopia*.



**Whole Student,  
Whole School,  
Whole Community:  
Emergent Qualities**

The ideals that are proposed for public education must be understood as emergent qualities. Great teachers, whole students, world-class outcomes, increasingly positive school climates, community schools, etc. etc. all will only emerge from attending to and providing adequate support for a myriad of whole school and whole community every day capacity building.

It is not enough to say we want to educate the total child, ensure equity of opportunity for all students, reduce the achievement gap, increase graduation rates, have safe and drug free schools, turn all schools into community schools, and all the other ideals set forth for public education. It's good for society to have high aspirations for public education. It's not fair, however, to demand that the staff at a school be accountable for achieving those aspirations without ensuring they have sufficient economic and political support to make it so. Whatever one's agenda for transforming schools, complex systemic changes are involved and require comprehensive intervention strategies. As the 2002 mission statement of the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) stated so well

"It is not enough to say that all children can learn or that no child will be left behind; the work involves . . . *achieving the vision of an American education system that enables all children to succeed in school, work, and life.*"

For guidance in moving forward with whole school development, see the following Center resources:

- > *Personalizing Learning and Addressing Barriers to Learning*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/personalizeI.pdf>
- > *Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagei.pdf>
- > *RTI and Classroom & Schoolwide Learning Supports*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/dbsimple2.asp?primary=2311&number=9897>
- > *Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf>
- > *Fostering School, Family, and Community Involvement.*  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/44\\_guide\\_7\\_fostering\\_school\\_family\\_and\\_community\\_involvement.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/44_guide_7_fostering_school_family_and_community_involvement.pdf)