Expanding School Improvement Policy to More Effectively Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Most policy makers and administrators know that good instruction delivered by highly qualified teachers is insufficient for ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. As a result, schools districts, regional units, and state departments allocate considerable resources to address barriers to learning and teaching. Unfortunately, the resources are allocated in ways that accomplish too little.

Needed: New Directions

Student supports as they currently operate can't meet the needs of the many who are not doing well at school.

ESSA Opens the Door to Transforming Student/Learning Supports

Student/learning supports as they currently operate can't meet the needs of the many students whose problems are affecting their learning and performance at school. And, the straight forward psychometric reality is that in schools where a large proportion of students encounter major barriers to learning, test score averages are unlikely to increase adequately until such barriers are effectively addressed.

In some schools, principals have reported that up to 25% of their school budget is used to address barriers to learning and teaching; furthermore, they are concerned about poor cost-effectiveness. Analyses indicate that the resources are used in fragmented, limited, and sometimes redundant ways. Moreover, counterproductive competition is common among support staff and with community-based professionals who link with schools. And each new initiative potentially compounds these problems.

At the root of all this is the *marginalization* of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and planning. Due to the marginalization, most school improvement plans give short shrift to the type of capacity building (including pre- and in-service staff development) that can yield fundamental rethinking about how schools can better address the many barriers to learning and teaching. Such capacity building is essential to efforts to unify student/learning supports and develop a comprehensive approach to addressing factors interfering with learning.

Limitations of current approaches for providing student/learning supports prevent schools from playing a significant role in stemming the tide with respect to low achievement, delinquent behavior, student and teacher dropouts, and a host of other serious problems. The realities are that the problems are complex and overlap and require a *unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach*.

At this critical juncture in the history of public education, an overriding planning concern before states and districts is how to use the immediate press of ESSA planning to enhance the school's role in addressing factors that interfere with learning. We suggest that school policy makers and administrators must move forward by making supports for learning a primary component designed to directly address barriers to learning and teaching *and* re-engage disconnected students. Such a component is essential to enabling *all* students to have an equal opportunity to learn at school.
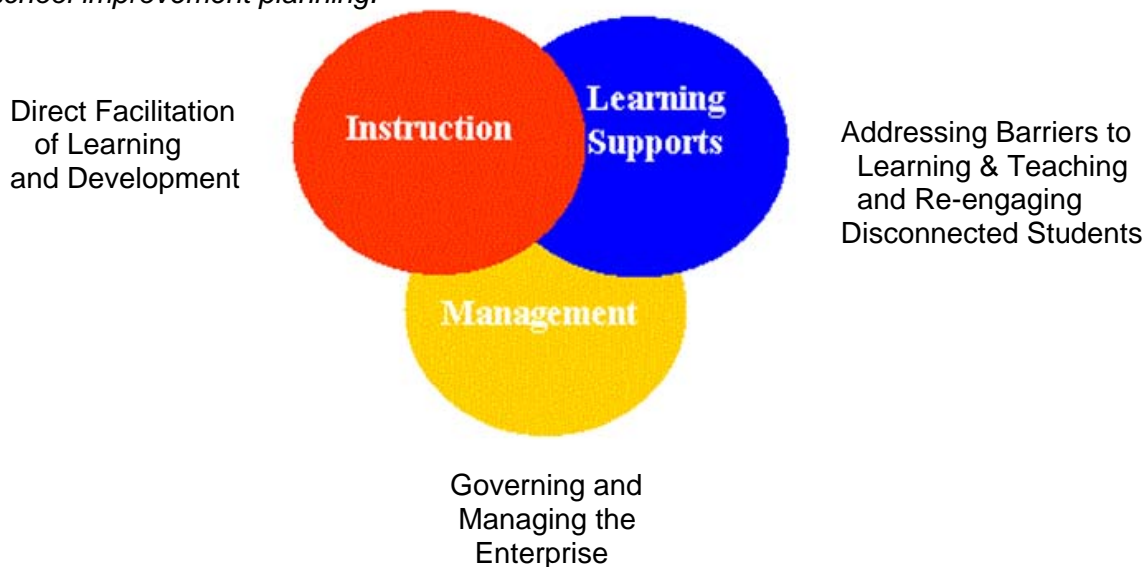
Note the emphasis on *re-engaging* students in classroom learning Over time, interventions that only focus on addressing factors interfering with learning are insufficient in sustaining student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school. In this connection, our approach to transforming student/learning supports embraces a commitment to an enhanced focus on the role of intrinsic motivation.

A Three Component Framework for School Improvement Policy and Practice*

Unfortunately, current school improvement planning is guided primarily by a two component school improvement framework; that is, the focus primarily is on (1) instruction and (2) governance/management. The result: *All interventions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. This marginalization is an underlying and fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student/learning supports. And it is reflected in the way ESSA and the U.S. Congress ignore the need for transformation and have reduced funding for such essential supports.*

Transformation requires adopting a three component framework. The third component establishes efforts to directly address barriers as a primary component (e.g., a learning supports component). This policy shift is essential for elevating the status of the work in school improvement planning.

Direct Facilitation of Learning and Development

Instruction

Learning Supports

Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching and Re-engaging Disconnected Students

Management

Governing and Managing the Enterprise

*For a brief overview of prototypes to guide operationalization of the third component into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports, see the brief article: *Every Student Succeeds Act: Planning is an Immediate Task, But . . . Addressing Barriers to Learning is the Pressing Imperative –* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/Winter17.pdf .

A fuller presentation is covered in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2017) by Adelman and Taylor and published by Cognella.

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

Carnegie Task Force on Education

Feel free to share this with concerned others.