

Addressing Barriers to Learning

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... the Center's quarterly e-journal

Rethinking Student and Learning Supports

Current reports about the status of students lead simultaneously to hopes and fears. The bottom line, of course, is that some students are doing just fine; others are not. We're all glad so many are doing well.

As to the others, our Center continues to emphasize that reducing the achievement gap requires a laser-like focus on closing the opportunity gap. And we see a key facet of this as involving the transformation of the role schools play in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students.

In essence, the need is for fundamental changes in the way student and learning supports are conceived and structured

While we have developed many resources related to the needed changes, at this critical time when there is so much emphasis on supporting students and improving schools, we thought a *brief* guide would be especially useful to stakeholders ready to move forward. It is now online.

About the Guide

>*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>

The guide provides material for helping others understand the need for major changes, offers a blueprint for rethinking student and learning supports, and delineates first steps in making changes. And it provides direct links to online aids for more in-depth details.

Part I highlights the current state of affairs and old ideas that must be escaped. This material is intended as an aid in helping other stakeholders understand why major changes are needed.

Part II provides prototypes for rethinking how districts and schools – working with communities – address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students and families.

Part III outlines major phases in making sustainable systemic changes and first steps to take in making the changes a reality.

Read on for excerpts from the new guide.

Integrating Student and Learning Supports is Not Enough

The problems encountered by students and schools are complex and overlapping. The number of students not doing well at a school can be staggering. For too long, it has been clear that student/learning supports as they currently operate can't meet the need in too many schools.

School budgets always are tight; cost-effectiveness is a constant concern. In some schools, principals report that up to 25% of their budget is consumed in efforts to address barriers to learning. Analyses of current approaches indicate extremely limited results, redundancy in resource use, and counterproductive competition among support staff and with community-based professionals who link with schools.

Efforts to improve student/learning supports have been the focus of policy reports and special initiatives. Of particular concern:

- the work is not guided by an agreed upon vision (e.g., for a unified approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching)
- student/learning support personnel are organized in ways that generate fragmented and overly specialized programs and services and counterproductive competition for sparse resources
- student support staff tend to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with a great deal of the work oriented to discrete problems and with an overreliance on specialized services for individuals and small groups
- while resources are sparse, too little of the available resources are used for systemic improvements
- current policies and practices promoting school-community-home collaboration are limited in focus, benefit a relatively few schools, often exacerbate fragmentation of efforts and competition for sparse resources, and are not designed in ways that facilitate replication to scale

Ending the Marginalization of Student/Learning Supports is Essential

Over many years, increasing concern about fragmented approaches has produced calls for coordination and integration of interventions, often with an emphasis on improving the linkages between school and community services (e.g., full-service schools, wrap around services, "integrated services", and recently "integrated support systems").

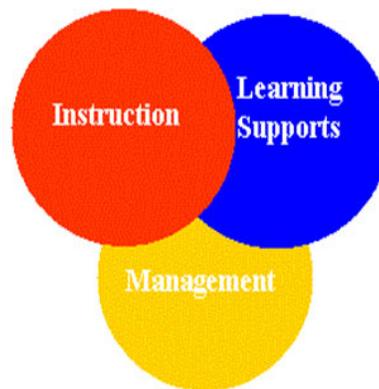
Calls for integrating student/learning supports and increasing school-community-home collaboration are certainly warranted. However, by focusing primarily on fragmentation, policy makers and school improvement advocates fail to deal with a core underlying problem. Our Center's analyses indicate that the emphasis on integrated supports only can have a limited impact on improving equity of opportunity for students because it fails to deal with ending the marginalization in policies related to such supports (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/integpolicy.pdf>).

What drives the fragmentation is the *marginalization* in school improvement policy of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching in a *direct, unified, comprehensive, and equitable way*.

Ending the marginalization rather than focusing just on integrating student supports is essential to effectively improve how schools respond to learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Current school improvement policy and practice is guided primarily by a two-component framework which stresses (a) instruction and (b) governance/management. Interventions for addressing learning barriers and reengaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. This marginalization is a fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports.

Ending the marginalization requires expanding the prevailing school improvement policy framework from a two- to a three-component framework for school improvement. Dubbed a Learning Support Component, the new component focuses directly and systemically on addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The intent is to pursue it as a primary and essential facet of school improvement and develop it into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that (a) plays out in classrooms and schoolwide and (b) takes advantage of the natural opportunities at schools for addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and promoting personal and social growth.



Given sparse budgets, the third component requires rethinking and redeployment of existing resources. This includes strategic collaboration to weave school-owned resources and community-owned resources together.

The bottom line is that continuing with the status quo is a recipe for ensuring necessary supports remain unavailable to students, families, and staff in too many schools.

Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System

After establishing a three component framework, the aim over several years is to develop the unified component into a comprehensive and equitable system. Exhibit 1 graphically emphasizes that the aim of such a system is to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. This necessitates a system that is dedicated directly to (1) addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (2) reengaging disconnected students. Note the emphasis on engagement. Systems that do not ensure students are engaged meaningfully in classroom learning usually are insufficient in sustaining, over time, student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.

Because the multi-tiered support system (MTSS) framework has been widely adopted, Part II of the guide begins with a discussion of the limitations of MTSS. (This is further discussed at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/threetier.pdf>).

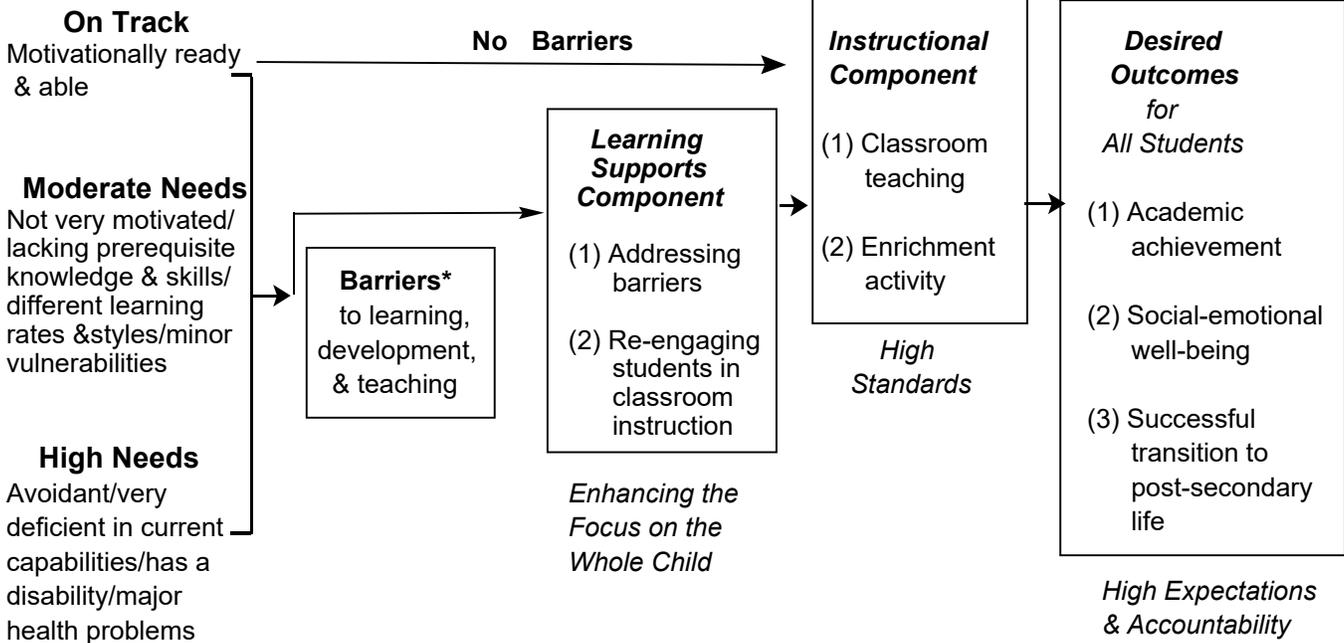
At the same time, it is emphasized that work related to integrated supports and MTSS are moves in the right direction and can readily be built upon. However, they represent only a first step in developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach.

Exhibit 1

A Learning Supports Component to Address Barriers and Reengage Students

Range of Learners

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



***Examples of Barriers to Learning and Development**

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

PERSON FACTORS

Barriers to Development and Learning (Risk producing conditions)

Neighborhood

- >extreme economic deprivation
- >community disorganization, including high levels of mobility
- >violence, drugs, etc.
- >minority and/or immigrant status

Family

- >chronic poverty
- >conflict/disruptions/violence
- >substance abuse
- >models problem behavior
- >abusive caretaking
- >inadequate provision for quality child care

School & Peers

- >poor quality school
- >negative encounters with teachers
- >negative encounters with peers &/or inappropriate peer models

Individual

- >medical problems
- >low birth weight/neurodevelopmental delay
- >psychophysiological problems
- >difficult temperament & adjustment problems
- >inadequate nutrition

Why do you think we'll do better at school this year?



Because I heard that Congress passed a law that says every student will succeed!

A prototype framework for student/learning supports that can guide expansion of MTSS is provided. The framework combines classroom and schoolwide supports into (1) an interconnected *continuum of subsystems* that weaves school and community resources together with (2) organized *domains* of student and learning supports.

As illustrated in Exhibit 2, combining the continuum and the six domains of supports provides an intervention framework that can guide development of a learning supports component as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that weaves together school and community funding (regular and extramural) budgeted for addressing shared agenda.

The matrix framework is used as a tool for mapping existing interventions, identifying strengths and critical intervention gaps, and analyzing resource use with a view to redeploying resources to strengthen the system of student and learning supports. Based on school priorities, the analyses can be used in strategic planning for system improvement, including targeted outreach to bring in community resources that can fill critical gaps.

Exhibit 2

Intervention Framework for the Learning Supports Component

		Integrated Intervention Continuum (levels)		
		Subsystem for promoting healthy development & preventing problems	Subsystem for early intervention	Subsystem for treatment ("system of care")
Categories of Classroom & Schoolwide Student and Learning Support Domains	Classroom-based learning supports	e.g., personalized instruction	e.g., special assistance in the classroom provided as soon as a problem arises	e.g., referral for specialist assistance
	Supports for transitions	e.g., welcoming newcomers and providing social and/or academic supports	e.g., when problems arise, using them as teachable moments to enhance social-emotional development and learning	e.g., personalized supports for students returning to school from incarceration
	Home involvement & engagement	e.g., outreach to attract and facilitate participation of hard-to-reach families	e.g., engaging families in problem-solving	e.g., support services to assist families with addressing basic survival needs
	Community involvement & collaborative engagement	e.g., outreach to recruit volunteers	e.g., developing community links and connections to fill critical intervention gaps	e.g., outreach to reengage disconnected students and families
	Crisis response & prevention	e.g., promoting positive relationships	e.g., immediate response with physical and psychological first aid	e.g., referral for follow-up counseling
	Student & family special assistance	e.g., enhancing coping and problem-solving capability	e.g., providing consultation, triage, and referrals	e.g., ongoing management of care related to specialized services
		<i>Accommodations for differences & disabilities</i>		<i>Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., special education, school-based interventions)</i>

The specific examples inserted in the matrix are just illustrative of those that schools already may be using. As the examples illustrate, the framework embeds a wide range of student/learning supports. It encompasses the work of specialized instructional support personnel, compensatory and special education efforts, programs for English learners and homeless students, and interventions for psychosocial, mental health, and learning problems.

A Intervention Framework for Moving in New Directions

With all the criticism of public schools, policy makers have difficult choices to make about improving schools. Ultimately, the choices made will affect not only students and school staff but the entire society. Choosing to continue with old ways of thinking about student/learning supports is a recipe for maintaining the achievement and opportunity gaps. Unifying available resources and starting a process to develop a comprehensive and equitable system of learning supports over the coming years is an alternative.

Establishing a comprehensive and equitable intervention system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students requires coalescing ad hoc and piecemeal policies and practices. Doing so will help end the fragmentation of student and learning supports and related system disorganization and will provide a foundation for weaving together whatever a school has with whatever a community is doing to confront barriers to learning and teaching.

Effectively designed and developed at a school, a learning supports component increases supports for all students. The emphasis is on

- unifying student and learning supports by grouping the many fragmented approaches experienced at school in ways that reduce the number of separate and sometimes redundant intervention responses to overlapping problems
- addressing barriers to learning and teaching by improving personalized instruction and increasing accommodations and special assistance when necessary
- enhancing 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
- reengaging disconnected students
- adding specialized remediation, treatment, and rehabilitation as necessary, but only as necessary

In doing all this, a learning supports component enhances equity of opportunity, plays a major role in improving student and school performance and promoting whole child development, fosters positive school-community relationships, minimizes the school's reliance on social control practices, and contributes to the emergence of a positive school climate. And it fully embeds interventions to address mental health concerns.

Implementation of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports as a primary school improvement component is essential to the focus on whole child, whole school, and whole community (including fostering safe schools and the emergence of a positive school climate). Properly implemented, the component increases the likelihood that schooling will be experienced as a welcoming, supportive experience that accommodates diversity, prevents problems, enhances youngsters' strengths, and is committed to assuring equity of opportunity for all students to succeed.

Strengthening Operational Infrastructures

Ultimately, improving student and learning supports significantly requires not only a vision for how to better address barriers to learning and teaching, but a way to get there from here. The mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. And the reality is that the current operational infrastructure at all levels require major reworking. To provide prototypes to guide strengthening current operational infrastructures, the last section of Part II draws on a recent report, *Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure* (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/reworkinfra.pdf>).

Since planned improvements mean little if they don't play out at the school level, this section highlighted a prototype for a reworked operational infrastructure at that level. Then, to facilitate and enhance school level efforts, mechanisms are conceived that enable groups or "families" of schools to work together to increase efficiency and effectiveness and garner economies of scale. From this perspective, district level mechanisms must be reconceived with a view to supporting each school and family of schools as they change and develop. Also at the district level, establishment of a school-community collaborative is key to weaving together available resources.

Parts I and II emphasize the importance of helping stakeholders understand

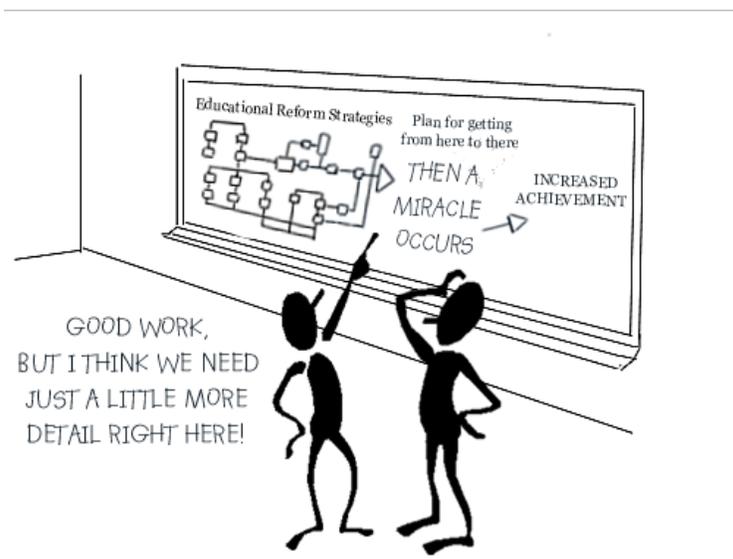
Why are major changes necessary?
and

What changes are needed?

Part III focuses on the matter:

How do we get from here to there?

The emphasis is on outlining the complexities of system change and stresses first steps to take with a focus on developing the essential elements of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.



From Part III:

Making Systemic Changes; Taking First Steps

Guiding stakeholders from here to there requires strategies that address the matter in ways that lead to substantive, scalable, and sustainable system school improvements. Whether the focus is on establishing a prototype at one site or replicating a new approach at many schools, the systemic changes can be conceived in terms of the four overlapping phases as outlined in the following Exhibit.

Exhibit 3

Four Phases of Transforming How Schools Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Transforming student and learning supports involves major systemic changes that are phased in strategically over several years. The major phases are as follows:

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

Second Phase – *Start-up and Phase-in: Building Infrastructure, Capacity, and Pursuing Initial Implementation*
(i.e., reworking operational infrastructure to ensure effective leadership, guidance, and support)

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

Fourth Phase – *Ongoing Evolution and Generating Creative Renewal*
(i.e., enabling system stakeholders to become a community of learners and expanding accountability to support creative renewal)

Each phase has a host of strategic tasks (e.g., see Chapters 16 and 17 in *Improving School Improvement* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improve.pdf>).

Getting Started

In our experience, there always are stakeholders who want to make major improvements in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. Below are some first steps that can be adapted at any level. A list of aides for accomplishing these steps is provided at the end.

Step 1. *Establish the interested stakeholders as a workgroup and proceed to*

- (a) *map existing resources being used to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students*
- (b) *with respect to available data on needs, analyze what's working, what requires strengthening, and what critical gaps exist*
- (c) *identify immediate priorities for moving forward with improvement and system development*

- (d) *develop a set of prioritized recommendations for moving toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports* (emphasizing redeployment of resources to meet priorities in a cost-effective manner)
- (e) *develop and implement a plan to build readiness and commitment among key stakeholders for moving forward*

Step 2: *Have prioritized recommendations approved by appropriate authorities.*

Step 3: *Appoint a high level steering group to champion and monitor the work.* Establish an official Steering Group of *high level* power leaders to steer, champion, problem solve, clear barriers to moving forward, and provide essential guidance to keep the work flowing.

Step 4: *Appoint an administrative leader for system development.* Assign an administrative-level *Student/Learning Supports Lead* to begin development of the component. Be sure the leader's job description is revised to reflect the new responsibilities and accountabilities and provide appropriate professional development. Be sure this leader is at administrative planning and decision making tables and the system's development is a regular part of the agenda.

Step 5: *Establish a development team to work with the administrative lead.* Assign key staff to a system development team (i.e., a *Learning Supports Leadership Team*) to work with the leader to prepare a *design "document"* and a *strategic plan* for unifying interventions and then developing the system. In the process, the team helps clarify, analyze, identify priorities, recommend resource redeployment, and establish and guide workgroups for developing each facet of the system over a period of several years. Be sure the strategic plan for the system is fully integrated into the overall strategic plan.

Step 6: *Establish an operational infrastructure designed to ensure effective planning, initial implementation, capacity building, formative evaluation, and ongoing development.* As noted in Part II, the mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. And the reality is that the current operational infrastructure at all levels requires major reworking in order to facilitate the desired system changes.

Step 7: *Expand formative evaluation and accountability indicators.* Initial data gathering 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, outcome monitoring and accountability measures should evaluate the impact on student outcomes with respect to *direct* indicators of the effectiveness of student/learning supports (e.g., increased attendance, reduced misbehavior, improved learning).

Here are two first step resource aids for use in situations where administrators are ready to lead the way:

>*First Steps for Superintendents Who Want to Get Started*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/superstart.pdf>

>*Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf>

Links to Resources to Aid in the Work

For Workgroup and Other Stakeholder Big Picture Preparation & Capacity Building

>Examples of State and District Design Documents <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb1a.htm>

>Q & A Talking Points <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita2.htm>

>Recent books to browse

>Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide

>Improving School Improvement

>Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change

all three can be accessed at

http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

For Mapping Existing Resources

>Mapping & Analyzing Learning Supports

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf>

For Reworking Operational Infrastructure

>Review Part two, Section D of this guide

>What is a learning supports leadership team?

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/resource%20coord%20team.pdf>

About Expanded Accountability

>Rethinking School Evaluation and Accountability

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rethaccount.pdf>

Building Readiness

>Creating Readiness and Commitment for Developing a Unified and Comprehensive Learning Supports System <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/readiness.pdf>

Other Aids and Guides related to getting started

>social marketing and public relations

>personnel development

>job descriptions

>reframing roles and functions of support staff

>blending funding streams

>benchmarks and monitoring

Links to these at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb4.htm>

Preparing Design and Strategic Plan Documents

>Preparing a Design Document <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

>General Guide for Strategic Planning <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/genguide.pdf>

For more aids, see the System Change Toolkit

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

Finally, note that the UCLA Center offers free online mentoring, coaching, & technical assistance <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>

Concluding Comments

The COVID-19 pandemic and growing concerns about social justice mark a turning point for how schools, families, and communities address student and learning supports. Those adopting the prevailing MTSS framework have made a start, as have the initiatives for community schools, integrated student supports, and school-based health centers. Given the growing challenges, however, schools need to develop and implement a more transformative and comprehensive approach. Hopefully, this brief guide will be helpful.

We know from experience how hard it is to achieve the outlined policy and practice changes in a district. And, given the scale of public education, the degree of transformative system change proposed here gives rise to many complications. For example, the approach calls for a major reworking of the operational and organizational infrastructure for the school, the family of schools, and the district, as well as for school-family-community collaboration. It also calls for enhancing in-classroom supports by retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., student and learning support personnel – psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, Title I staff, special educators, dropout/graduation support staff, etc.). In particular, the jobs of these personnel need to be modified to include working collaboratively with regular teachers in classrooms (in person and online) for part of each day. Improving student and learning supports in classrooms requires such collaboration, which is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

Certainly, the challenges are daunting, especially when folks are caught up in the day-by-day pressures of their current roles and functions. Everyone is so busy "doing" that there seems no time to introduce better ways.

One is reminded of Winnie-the-Pooh who was always going down the stairs, bump, bump, bump, on his head behind Christopher Robin. He has come to think it is the only way to go down stairs. Still, he wonders whether there might be a better way if he could only stop bumping long enough to figure it out.

Since maintaining the status quo is untenable, and just doing more tinkering will not meet the need, we hope this brief guide helps folks who are ready to stop “bumping their heads.” The key is to set some time aside for taking first steps to move in new directions. And remember that our Center continues to provide free online mentoring, coaching, & technical assistance (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>).

For information about the

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to
promoting whole child development, advancing social justice,
and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.

What are the Feds Saying about How Schools are Providing Student/Learning Supports?

The U.S. Department of Education recently released a document entitled:

>*Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health*
<https://www2.ed.gov/documents/students/supporting-child-student-social-emotional-behavioral-mental-health.pdf>.

The document offers much to consider about how schools pursue student/learning supports. And we note the document concurs with many of the concerns our Center continues to raise.

Examples of shared concerns are reflected in statements such as:

"The current system is not working for many children, students, families, and staff, with notable problems that existed before the pandemic made much worse during the pandemic."

"Current systems focus on individual level needs, leaving out community supports."

"There is increasing recognition of the need to (a) move away from co located programs involving ad hoc involvement of mental health system staff in schools or programs and (b) move toward approaches that clearly integrate education and mental health systems."

The document cites our Center's work when it notes that "...within schools, those providing direct services to children and students, including teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and social workers, are often siloed and work in relative isolation from one another affecting all children and students ..."

It stresses the importance of starting to improve the focus on mental health by establishing "positive, nurturing environments where all children, students, and staff thrive; and layer on additional supports to address the unique needs of some." And it stresses that "Children and students learn more, report feeling safer, and develop more authentic trusting relationship with peers and adults if the learning and social environments of the school are positive. Educators foster safe and supportive environments by maximizing child and student connections, arranging engaging and successful learning, and being positively constructive in responding to the needs of children and students."

In recommending development of an integrated framework, it recognizes the problem of fragmented approaches and discusses blending funding, developing policy, changing job descriptions, etc.

Detailed discussion about all these matters and more can be found in resources developed by our Center that are online for free access. We have listed some of the resources in our recent brief commentary on

>*Mental Health in Schools: Taking Stock, Moving Ahead*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/5-19-22.pdf>

If you share our concerns, please share this with others.

And as always, we hope you will send us for sharing what you think others might find related and relevant. Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Also, note that our Center offers free technical assistance and coaching; see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>

The Center for Mental Health in Schools operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

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... and a host of students