

Moving Forward

Addressing Barriers to Learning

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The Next Frontier in School Improvement: Transforming Student/Learning Supports

Contents

- >About the Next Frontier in School Improvement**
- >What Might a Transformed System Look Like?**
- >Interest is Growing**
- >Here's a Discussion Guide**
- >Designated Leadership is Essential**
- >Closing Achievement Gaps? Not While Student Supports is an Afterthought**



Historically, efforts to improve student supports have focused on creating new interventions, increasing services, or expanding specialized staff. When new concerns arise, schools typically respond by adding another initiative, another grant-funded project, or another specialized program.

While such efforts may address specific problems, they seldom alter how schools are organized to address barriers to learning and teaching. As a result, supports often remain fragmented, unevenly accessed, and difficult to sustain.

System transformation begins with a different question. Rather than asking, "What additional program do we need?" the question becomes:

How do we organize all available resources into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students?

This shift moves attention away from isolated interventions and toward creating the infrastructure necessary to ensure that all supports work together as parts of a coherent whole.

Transforming student/learning supports begins with recognizing that addressing barriers to learning and teaching is not peripheral to the educational mission.

It is central to ensuring that all students have an equitable opportunity to succeed.

The next frontier in school improvement is the full establishment of a third primary component of school improvement policy and practice.

Traditionally, school improvement has focused on two major components:

- Instruction
- Management and governance

A third component, focused on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students, must be developed into a well-organized and fully integrated system of student and learning supports. (Our prototype calls this a *Learning Supports component*.)

This is more than an organizational adjustment. It is a fundamental redesign of how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and represents a fundamental reframing of how schools define their mission and how school improvement is conceptualized.

In a transformed system, counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, attendance personnel, community partners, and other specialized staff are not viewed primarily as providers of discrete interventions. Their expertise is mobilized as part of a coordinated effort to strengthen the school's overall capacity to address barriers to learning and teaching. This broadens the impact of these professionals beyond directly helping a relatively few students, families, and staff. By contributing to the development and implementation of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports, they strengthen the capacity of all school personnel to identify, prevent, and address learning, behavior, attendance, and emotional problems, thereby improving outcomes for many more students and enhancing the effectiveness of the school as a whole.

By systematically weaving community resources into the school's student and learning supports component, the goal is not simply to expand available services. The intent is to ensure that these resources are fully integrated into a cohesive, comprehensive, and accountable system of supports.

The articles in this issue explore why a growing number of educators are recognizing the need to transform student and learning supports and what steps districts and schools can take to move from fragmented programs and services to a potent system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching..

About the Next Frontier in School Improvement

For more than two decades, schools across the country have expanded programs, services, initiatives, and personnel intended to address barriers to learning and teaching. New efforts have improved access to mental health services, strengthened family engagement, promoted positive school climate, responded to chronic absenteeism, expanded prevention strategies, and increased collaboration with community agencies. These developments represent important progress.

Yet a fundamental problem persists.

In most schools and districts, student and learning supports remain fragmented, marginalized, and insufficiently connected to the core mission of education. Programs often operate in parallel rather than as part of a coherent whole. Personnel frequently work in specialized silos. Funding streams are disconnected. Initiatives come and go. New projects are layered on top of old ones. As a result, schools struggle to use resources strategically, sustain improvements over time, and ensure that all students have equitable access to the support needed for success.

The next frontier is not adding more programs.

The next frontier is transforming how schools organize, develop, and sustain student and learning supports.

Why It Is Essential to Transform K-12 Student/Learning Supports?

Current student/learning supports are not designed to effectively address the full range of barriers to learning and teaching. As presently organized, they are:

- *Fragmented*: Services and programs are siloed across departments (e.g., counseling, school psychology, special education, discipline), creating redundancy, inefficiency, and gaps in support.
- *Overspecialized*: Personnel often focus narrowly on specific problems or initiatives, limiting comprehensive approaches to addressing student and school needs.
- *Reactive*: Interventions are frequently initiated only after problems escalate rather than emphasizing prevention and early intervention.
- *Under-resourced*: Funding and staffing are insufficient and limit availability and consistency of supports.
- *Inequitably distributed*: Access to resources varies widely, with schools in low-income communities typically having fewer supports.
- *Marginalized*: Student/learning supports are treated as ancillary services rather than as a fundamental component of school improvement policy, planning, and practice.

Together, these conditions severely limit schools' ability to address barriers to learning and teaching, reduce achievement and opportunity gaps, and promote student well-being and success. Prevention and early intervention are particularly neglected.

Three Aims in Transforming Student/Learning Supports

1. *Ending the Marginalization of Such Supports*

Although essential for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students, student/learning supports continue to receive insufficient attention in school improvement policy and practice.

Marginalization leads to:

- Limited availability and access for many students and teachers
- Ad hoc, fragmented interventions
- Counterproductive competition for scarce resources
- Disproportionate impact on schools in low-income communities

Modern educational frameworks emphasize educating the whole child — academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. Such goals cannot be fully realized when student/learning supports remain peripheral to school improvement efforts.

2. *Ending the Fragmentation of Current Supports*

Most schools provide a range of supports (e.g., counseling, behavior interventions, tutoring, special education). However, because these efforts are marginalized, implementation often is disconnected and reactive, resulting in inefficiencies and gaps.

Transformation builds on the continuum of interventions emphasized by MTSS while addressing a limitation frequently overlooked. Transformation does not replace MTSS. Rather, it strengthens and extends continuum-based approaches by organizing interventions into a coherent and comprehensive system of student and learning supports. Having a continuum of supports does not by itself ensure coherence. The next step is organizing interventions into a defined set of intervention domains that operate across all tiers. This creates a unified framework that reduces fragmentation, strengthens prevention and early intervention, and moves schools beyond a collection of disconnected programs.

3. *Reaching More Students, Families, and Teachers*

Achievement and opportunity gaps persist, particularly for students from low-income families, English learners, and students with special needs.

Current supports often fail to meet to the complexity and diversity of student and teacher needs, particularly in underserved communities.

Ending the marginalization and fragmentation of student/learning supports is a fundamental strategy for addressing systemic inequities that limit opportunities for many students and families. A unified, comprehensive, and equitable system helps schools promote greater equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond. Such a system

- assists more students, families, and teachers
- strategically restructures and builds capacity using existing resources (rather than unrealistically hoping to fund additional personnel)
- makes systemic change scalable across districts and states.

What Might a Transformed System Look Like?

The challenge is not a lack of programs, personnel, or good intentions. The problem is seldom the complete absence of resources. Many schools already possess valuable resources, including counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, attendance personnel, community partners, and a wide range of support programs and interventions.

The fundamental problem is that existing activity and resources are typically disconnected from one another. Current approaches often devote disproportionate attention to responding after problems become severe. Staff time and resources become consumed by crisis management, intensive intervention, disciplinary responses, and compliance requirements. Interventions are not organized into a coherent system capable of addressing barriers to learning and teaching in a comprehensive and equitable way.

Given increasing student needs and growing expectations for schools, continuing to rely on fragmented approaches is no longer sufficient. An improved student/learning support system is essential to improving how schools deal with factors that interfere with learning and teaching. Such a system enables schools to address barriers to learning and teaching more effectively, reengage disconnected students, and promote healthy development and well-being. See

Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions

System transformation focuses on integrating available assets into a unified system that minimizes fragmentation, reduces redundancy, fills gaps, and improves access for students and families. One facet of the system encompasses a comprehensive continuum of supports that:

- Promotes healthy development and learning for all students
- Prevents problems
- Identifies concerns early before they escalate and provides timely assistance
- Enables intensive and specialized help when needed.

Such a continuum shifts the emphasis from reacting to problems toward promoting healthy development, prevention, early intervention, and timely assistance while making more effective use of available resources.

However, outlining a continuum, while necessary, is insufficient. It is essential also to organize all student/learning support interventions into a set of support domains. The current trend is just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level of the continuum. Our research indicates the benefits of cohesively organizing all student and learning supports into the following set of six interconnected domains. These domains provide a way of organizing all student and learning supports so that existing programs, services, and personnel are viewed as parts of a coherent system rather than as isolated initiatives.

- Classroom-Based Learning Supports
- Supports for Transitions
- Home Involvement and Engagement
- Community Involvement and Collaborative Engagement
- Crisis Response and Prevention
- Student and Family Assistance

Organizing the domains across the continuum creates an intervention matrix that can be used to map and analyze existing school and community resources. The matrix helps identify redundancies, uncover critical gaps, and establish priorities for system development. (See Exhibit on the next page.)

A transformed system cannot be developed and sustained without designated leadership and a supportive infrastructure. Indeed, the absence of such leadership is one of the most common reasons efforts to improve student and learning supports fail to achieve lasting change. See <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/reworkinfra.pdf>.

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
		Accommodations for differences & disabilities		Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., special education, school-based interventions)

Transforming student/learning supports is not an add-on reform. It is a systemic strategy for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, promoting equity, strengthening school climate, enhancing student engagement, and improving outcomes for students, families, and staff. By ending marginalization and fragmentation, schools can develop systems of support that are more comprehensive, effective, sustainable, scalable, and equitable.

In our experience, every school system has stakeholders who recognize the need for such change. These leaders can form a workgroup to initiate the process of transforming student and learning supports using existing resources. For those ready to move forward, we provide a practical month-by-month guide for systemic change. See

An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports

Interest is Growing

In response to our recent report, *New Directions for Student and Learning Supports: From Fragmented Initiatives to System Transformation*, we are hearing from superintendents, school board members, leaders in SEA's, deans of schools of education, and others across the country.

They indicate that the issues raised in the report are fundamental to the future of school improvement. They are sharing the report with colleagues and encouraging discussion about the implications for policy and practice. One example comes from Wyoming, where state leaders have begun circulating the report broadly as a resource for discussion about the future direction of student and learning supports. (See [Wyoming response](#)).

For readers who have not yet had an opportunity to review the report, we include the abstract below. A brief Executive Summary is also provided at the beginning of the report.

The growing response suggests that leaders across education are recognizing that addressing barriers to learning and teaching must become a central component of school improvement policy and practice.

Report Abstract

"Across the United States, growing attention is being given to addressing the barriers that interfere with students' learning, development, well-being, and school success. In response, a variety of initiatives have emerged, including whole-child approaches, integrated student supports, community schools, comprehensive school mental health systems, Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), and expansions of student support personnel. While these efforts have increased awareness, expanded services, and strengthened school-community collaboration, they have not resolved a persistent problem: student and learning supports continue to be fragmented, marginalized, and insufficiently integrated into school improvement policy and practice.

This report first reviews seven major arenas of activity currently shaping student and learning supports and analyzes the lessons emerging from these efforts. The analysis concludes that fragmentation is not the fundamental problem but rather a symptom of a deeper policy issue: addressing barriers to learning and teaching has not been established as a primary and essential component of school improvement. As a result, programs, services, personnel, and funding streams tend to operate in parallel rather than as parts of a coherent system.

The report argues that the next major frontier in school improvement is system transformation. It proposes moving beyond the prevailing two-component framework focused on instruction and management/governance to a three-component framework that includes a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports. Such a framework organizes and weaves together existing school and community resources, prioritizes prevention and early intervention, strengthens leadership and infrastructure, and enhances equity of opportunity for all students.

The report concludes with recommendations for policy, practice, operational infrastructure, accountability, and resource integration designed to transform fragmented initiatives into a sustainable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families."

We encourage you to share the report with colleagues and use it as a catalyst for discussion about the future of student and learning supports. We also welcome your perspectives, questions, and examples of efforts underway to move from fragmented initiatives toward system transformation.

Here's A Discussion Guide

This guide is intended to support conversations among educators, administrators, policymakers, student support staff, higher education faculty, community partners, and family leaders. The goal is to facilitate dialogue, reflection, and planning about enhancing local priorities for strengthening student and learning supports. It can be used in conjunction with the Center's recent report: *New Directions for Student and Learning Supports: Moving From Fragmented Initiatives to System Transformation*.

The report highlights that schools traditionally focus on two primary components of school improvement: Instruction and Management/Governance. It argues that improving student and learning supports requires a third essential component that directly addresses barriers to learning and teaching. Such a component enables development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.

General Discussion Questions

- To what extent does the report reflect the realities faced by many students?
- What barriers to learning and teaching are most evident in your school, district, community, or state?
- How well are these barriers currently being addressed?
- Which student groups are least well served by existing supports?
- Are student and learning supports viewed as a core mission in our schools?
- How are student and learning supports represented within leadership and governance structures?
- How well are efforts to improve student/learning supports integrated into school improvement decisions and plans?
- What is one idea from the report that most challenges current thinking?
- What are the implications for improvement?

For more indepth discussion as time allows:

(1) Which Student/Learning Supports Are Working Well and Which Are Not?

(2) How Is the Fragmentation Problem Being Handled?

Begin by listing all student and learning support programs, services, initiatives, and partnerships currently operating in your school or district.

Then, discuss:

- >Which programs operate independently and compete for resources?
- >Which students benefit most from current supports?
- >Which students may be overlooked or underserved?
- >Where do unnecessary redundancies exist?
- >Where are the most significant gaps?
- >How easy is it for students and families to access needed supports?
- >What are the implications for improvement?

- (3) What infrastructure is in place to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports?
- >Who currently leads current efforts to improve student and learning supports?
 - >What staff are involved in these efforts?
 - >Are these personnel marginalized in school improvement decision making?
 - >Do budgeting and staffing decisions reflect the importance of student and learning supports?
 - >Is there an effective infrastructure for school-community collaboration?
- (4) How Much is Devoted to Prevention and Early Intervention to Reduce Problems and the Need for Intensive Interventions?
- >What early indicators are monitored?
 - >What is impeding greater investment in prevention and early intervention?
 - >Are most resources devoted to reactive, intensive intervention?
 - >What changes would shift the balance toward prevention?

The report argues that the next frontier in school improvement is not creating more programs but transforming how existing resources are organized and developed into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.

Questions to Discuss About Moving Forward

- >What would you want a student/learning supports system to look like?
- >What is one action your organization could take during the next year?
- >What barriers stand in the way of system transformation?
- >What opportunities currently exist for advancing change?
- >Can you facilitate development of a workgroup to advance transformative change?
- >Who should be involved in such a workgroup?
- >What first steps should that group take?

As the report emphasizes, the next frontier of school improvement is the transformation of existing resources into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports. Our hope is that this guide helps stakeholders assess current practice and identify concrete next steps toward that goal.

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

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

Let us know what ideas, plans, and initiatives are emerging in your school, district, state, or organization as you explore new directions for transforming student and learning supports.

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

Designated Leadership is Essential

Transforming student and learning supports requires more than effective practices and programs. It requires leadership and infrastructure capable of organizing, coordinating, and sustaining a unified system of supports over time.

Schools and districts that establish leadership, planning, and accountability mechanisms for student and learning supports are better positioned to reduce fragmentation, strengthen implementation, and maintain progress over time.

Recognition of the need for high-level leadership for student and learning supports is increasingly evident in recent efforts by school districts to establish cabinet-level positions responsible for student and family supports. Here is how the role is described:

>Seattle Public Schools (WA) – “The Assistant Superintendent of Student and Family Support provides executive leadership, strategic direction, and districtwide oversight for a comprehensive portfolio of services designed to promote student well-being, safety, engagement, belonging, and success. Reporting directly to the Superintendent and serving as a member of the Superintendent’s Cabinet, this position works collaboratively with district and school leaders, families, community organizations, government agencies, and external partners to ensure students and families have access to coordinated, equitable, and effective supports.

The Assistant Superintendent provides leadership and oversight for departments and functions including, but not limited to, Safety and Security, Coordinated School Health, Student Discipline, Family Outreach and Engagement, and district partnerships, including tutoring, mentoring, community-based programs, and partnerships with the City of Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL).”

See [*job description*](#).

>Covington Independent Public Schools (KY) – “Build and lead an integrated system of academic, behavioral, health, mental-health, family, and postsecondary supports so that barriers are identified early, services are coordinated, schools are held to high expectations, and every student is known, supported, safe, and prepared for life after graduation.”

See [*job description*](#).

These positions reflect growing recognition that student and learning supports require leadership at the same organizational level as instruction and operations. Comparable leadership mechanisms also are needed at school and regional levels if system transformation is to be implemented effectively and sustained over time.

We see these developments as a promising step forward and an opportunity for districts to initiate a fundamental transformation in how they address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage students in classroom learning.

Major Functions for Leading Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Support

While the current job descriptions appropriately emphasize oversight of services and programs, the next step is to define responsibilities that ensure development, implementation, and long-term sustainability of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports. This moves beyond administering existing programs to leading systemic transformation.

If student and learning supports are to become a primary and essential component of school improvement, the designated leader must be a full partner in district governance, planning, advisory and steering bodies, budgeting, and accountability processes.

The leader's responsibilities encompass four interrelated functions:

I. Establishing and Maintaining Leadership and Organizational Infrastructure

Provide leadership for creating and sustaining the policy, planning, operational, and accountability structures needed to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports throughout the district. This includes ensuring that student and learning supports are an integral component of school improvement policy, planning, implementation, and evaluation at district and school levels.

II. Guiding Systemic Changes to Enhance School Supports

Lead strategic efforts to strengthen and unify programs, services, and initiatives intended to address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage disconnected students. Guide the redesign of existing interventions so they function as a coherent system rather than as separate and often fragmented programs. Promote continuous improvement, innovation, and accountability for equitable outcomes.

III. Enhancing School-Community Linkages and Partnerships

Provide leadership for developing, coordinating, and sustaining collaborative relationships with families, community agencies, higher education, businesses, health and mental health organizations, and other stakeholders. Ensure that community resources are mobilized and woven effectively into the district's student and learning supports system, expanding capacity while reducing fragmentation, duplication, and gaps in services.

IV. Building Capacity for Transformation and Sustainability

Develop the knowledge, skills, and commitment of administrators, student support personnel, teachers, families, community partners, and other stakeholders to carry out and sustain system transformation. This includes providing leadership for professional learning, coaching, technical assistance, succession planning, and ongoing stakeholder development designed to support both implementation and long-term sustainability.

The following examples illustrate the types of responsibilities and accountabilities that should be incorporated into job descriptions for district leaders charged with developing and sustaining a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

- Leads development, implementation, evaluation, and continuous refinement of a strategic plan for building and sustaining a cohesive and comprehensive student/learning support system, including benchmarks, indicators of progress, and mechanisms for accountability and ongoing improvement.
- Represents the Student/Learning Supports System when decisions are made about district policy, planning, budgeting, and operations. Ensures effective integration of the learning supports component with instruction and management/governance, including communication, information management, evaluation, and accountability systems. Develops and monitors indicators that assess the availability, accessibility, quality, equity, and impact of student and learning supports throughout the district.

- Monitors and provides support, guidance, visibility, public relations, and advocacy for the system at the school and in the community (e.g., maintaining a high level of interest, support, and involvement with respect to the system)
- Ensures effective communication, coordination, and integration among those involved in the Student/Learning Supports System and the district's instructional and management/governance systems.
- Leads a Steering Committee that reviews and monitors progress, guides long-range planning, facilitates problem solving, and acts as a catalyst for the ongoing development of a comprehensive Student/Learning Supports System and its full integration into school improvement planning and implementation.
- Develops a student/learning supports leadership team to facilitate progress related to plans and priorities for the system's ongoing operations and development.
- Mentors and helps restructure the roles and functions of key Student/Learning Supports staff (e.g., pupil services personnel and others whose roles and functions fall within the major facets of the system); in particular, helps redefine traditional pupil service roles and functions in ways that enable them to contribute to all content domains and the major levels of the intervention continuum encompassed by a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.
- Anticipates and identifies problems and provides rapid problem solving.
- Identifies immediate and future capacity building needs related to the system (e.g., status of stakeholder development and particularly inservice staff development), takes steps to ensure that plans are made to meet needs, and ensures that an appropriate amount of capacity building is devoted to system transformation, daily operation, and sustainability.
- Meets with the Staff Lead for Learning Supports on a regular basis to review progress and discuss and advocate for ways to enhance progress.

Developing and sustaining such a system requires leadership that extends beyond administration of existing programs. It requires a designated leader with both the authority and accountability to guide systemic change, build capacity, foster collaboration, mobilize resources, and ensure that student and learning supports become a fully integrated and enduring component of school improvement policy and practice.



AI generated graphic

Closing Achievement Gaps? Not While Student Supports is an Afterthought

For decades, education reform has focused on improving teaching, raising standards, strengthening accountability, and enhancing school management. Yet despite billions of dollars invested and countless initiatives launched, achievement and opportunity gaps remain stubbornly persistent.

Why?

A simple but often overlooked reality lies at the heart of the problem: Students cannot fully benefit from instruction when the barriers that interfere with learning remain unaddressed.

The national conversation about school improvement continues to treat student and learning supports as secondary concerns rather than recognizing them as a core component of educational success. Policymakers, researchers, and the media devote enormous attention to curriculum, testing, teacher quality, and school leadership. Far less attention is given to student engagement, attendance, mental health, family supports, and the many factors that determine whether students are ready and able to learn.

This omission has consequences.

When students are chronically absent, disconnected from school, anxious, depressed, traumatized, hungry, homeless, or facing major family challenges, instructional improvements alone cannot produce the outcomes policymakers seek. Better teaching is essential, but it is not enough. Students must also be present, engaged, and ready to learn.

The magnitude of these challenges is undeniable. Nearly 28 percent of public school students were chronically absent during the 2022-23 school year, and almost 40 percent of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. More than 1.3 million students experiencing homelessness were identified by public schools that same year. These are not peripheral concerns. They directly affect learning, achievement, and long-term success.

Yet schools continue to rely on fragmented programs, isolated initiatives, and limited specialized services to address barriers to learning. Attendance programs operate separately from mental health efforts. Social-emotional learning initiatives often stand apart from family engagement efforts. Community partnerships are frequently disconnected from school improvement planning.

The result is predictable: too many students continue to fall through the cracks.

The central question education leaders should be asking is straightforward:

Can school improvement succeed when one of its core components continues to be neglected?

Effective schools require three interdependent components: quality instruction, effective management, and a unified, comprehensive system of student and learning supports. Education policy has traditionally concentrated on the first two while largely overlooking the third.

The result resembles a two-legged stool. Instruction and management matter enormously, but without a unified system that addresses barriers to learning and promotes student engagement, stability remains elusive.

No other sector would expect major gains while ignoring significant barriers to performance. Businesses invest in systems that remove obstacles to productivity. Healthcare organizations increasingly recognize that outcomes depend not only on medical treatment but also on social and behavioral conditions. Education, however, continues to behave as though instructional improvements alone can overcome every challenge students bring to school.

Evidence from classrooms suggests otherwise.

Teachers increasingly report that disengagement, attendance problems, mental health concerns, and behavioral challenges are interfering with learning on a scale not seen in previous generations. At the same time, educators are expected to respond to these needs without the infrastructure, coordination, or resources necessary to do so effectively.

Just adding another program is not the answer.

Schools and districts need to move beyond fragmented initiatives and build unified, comprehensive, and equitable systems of student and learning supports. Such systems should integrate existing resources, connect school and community assets, emphasize prevention as well as intervention, and ensure that every student has access to the supports needed to succeed.

Achievement gaps persist not simply because students receive different levels of academic opportunity, but because many students face barriers that significantly limit their access to those opportunities. Closing achievement gaps requires more than improving instruction. It requires removing the barriers that prevent many students from benefiting from instruction in the first place.

America's continuing struggles with chronic absenteeism, student mental health, and homelessness remind us that achievement gaps are not simply instruction gaps. They are also engagement gaps, opportunity gaps, and support gaps. Students experiencing poverty, unstable housing, discrimination, health concerns, or limited access to community resources are disproportionately affected by learning barriers, making comprehensive student supports an equity imperative.

Teaching is essential. Effective management is essential. But neither can fully succeed when millions of students face barriers that schools are not systematically organized to address.

Until policymakers, reform advocates, and the media recognize student and learning supports as a central pillar of school improvement, efforts to create equitable outcomes will continue to fall short.

This may be one of the most important and overlooked stories in American education today.

The history of school improvement has been marked by waves of new programs and initiatives. Many have contributed useful ideas and valuable resources. However, piecemeal expansion has not resolved the longstanding fragmentation that characterizes student and learning supports.

The challenge ahead is not simply to do more.

It is to organize what schools and communities already possess into a comprehensive, unified, and equitable system that addresses barriers to learning and teaching as a primary mission of schooling.

That is the next frontier.

And that frontier is system transformation.



Center Update

Looking for Resources, Technical Assistance, or Coaching?

Start with the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Finds:

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm>

Or send us an E-mail request: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

>Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (*ENEWS*)?

>Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange*?

Send requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

For Those Engaged in System Change

you may be interested in our work on:

Implementation Science and School Improvement

The future of school improvement depends not only on improving instruction and management, but also on building the systems of support that enable all students to benefit from learning opportunities. We welcome your thoughts, experiences, and lessons learned about transforming student and learning supports.

And we invite you to join the conversation and the work ahead

The Next Frontier

The challenge ahead is not simply to do more.

It is to transform what schools and communities already possess into a comprehensive, unified, and equitable system that addresses barriers to learning and teaching as a primary mission of schooling.

That is the next frontier.

The Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

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