

Addressing Barriers to Learning

Vol. 28, #4

... the Center's quarterly e-journal

Fiscal Cliff Threatens Student/Learning Supports: It's Time to Braid and Rethink Resource Use

If we really want to eliminate the achievement gap, we must also ask schools to develop comprehensive plans to address the [many] needs of our students. ... Most of our schools have resources in place, but we need to reorganize those resources to proactively meet the needs of the entire student body....

Paul Pastorek, former state superintendent of Education

The headlines we've been seeing are scary:

- > *A fiscal cliff looms with the impending end of the education windfall*
- > *Schools face looming fiscal cliff as school year opens*
- > *Districts Brace for Fiscal Cliff in Final Year of COVID Relief Funding*

A recent [report](#) from AASA discusses findings from superintendents about the financial problems ahead as COVID relief funding ends. At a time when learning, behavior, and emotional problems are on the rise, those responding to the survey emphasized that the cuts in specialist staff will reduce student/learning supports for all students, with students who are struggling especially hurt.

Requests to extend the ending date for use of relief funds are reasonable but will only delay inevitable layoffs. And currently unused funds add fuel to efforts of some in Congress who want to reduce funding for programs such as Title I.

At this critical juncture for schools, administrators and staff must take time to pursue strategies for (a) braiding existing resources designated for student/learning supports, (b) weaving them together with available community resources, and (c) deploying them in ways that rebuild student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

Braiding Existing Resources

Funding for student/learning supports has long been done through ad hoc and piecemeal policy making. The result is a patchwork of grants and fragmented initiatives, programs, and services.

As one recent [online post](#) noted:

"the federal school funding system is composed of a patchwork of grants, each with its own application, requirements and timelines, and each managed by a separate office within the U.S. Department of Education. These distinct offices communicate with distinct offices at state departments of education that then communicate with an individual at the district level responsible for that one grant program. This disjointed process stymies districts' ability to develop and deliver on a set of coherent priorities."

At the same time, coordinating efforts to bring together fragmented resources aimed at improving support for children’s well-being has long been encouraged. For example, coordination among programs and agencies is specified in [ESSA](#) and more recently by a [Joint Letter](#) to states from six agencies across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Unfortunately, such efforts have not often produced significant outcomes. In the long-run, the emphasis needs to be on braiding, and as feasible blending, all overlapping resources at state, district, and school levels – including a broad range of community resources.

Over the long term, understanding the current nature and scope of funding and ways to braid and possibly blend resources is imperative to helping schools sustain their operations and play their role in providing supports to students and their families. And such understanding is essential in developing the type of unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that can significantly reduce achievement and opportunity gaps.

ESSA and Coordination of Federal Programs

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) calls for state plans to include assurances that the SEA will modify or eliminate state fiscal and accounting barriers so that the schools can easily consolidate funds from other federal, state and local sources to improve educational opportunities and reduce unnecessary fiscal and accounting requirements.

The act also calls for COORDINATION OF FEDERAL PROGRAMS. Coordination in the act refers to how funding across multiple federal program areas, in combination with state and local funds, can be braided together to better support students.

“The state plan must coordinate with other federal programs, including:

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

Examples of coordination efforts can be seen in State Consolidated ESSA Plans (e.g., see [Oklahoma](#)).

In fall 2022, the White House developed a toolkit on [Federal Resources to Support Community Schools](#). Section I lays out the federal funds that may be used for student/learning supports. Section II describes tools and resources provided by the U.S. Department of Education and non-governmental organizations to help state educational agencies, school districts, K-12 schools, and community members understand the range of both formula-based and competitively-awarded federal funding that can be braided and possibly blended.

Howard-Brown and Zuber (2022) differentiate braiding and blending as follows:

- Braiding funds happens when districts coordinate funds from different sources for one purpose. Each fund maintains its own identity and reporting requirements.
- Blending combines funds into a single pot that has its own reporting requirements. The identity of all the funds going into the single pot is lost. Blending offers more flexibility, but given constraints around funding, braiding is often easier to do.

In the early 2000s, the Louisiana Department of Education was an early pioneer in piloting a **comprehensive learning support system**. One facet of the work focused on assisting local education agencies in understanding how to integrate multiple funding sources. As an introductory statement, the department noted:

With each year's budget projections getting smaller and smaller, we are forced to think of more efficient ways to do business. We know the tremendous responsibility we have to do the right thing for our children. ... and we have to make tough choices - and make them now. ... Leadership is the key in integrating educational funds to achieve the sustainability of "system change" for improved student outcomes. We must put aside our "turfs" and our "purse-strings," in order to overcome the challenges that dwindling resources present for school improvement planning. It is critical for all leaders at the district level to support this effort, in order to empower all personnel to collaborate in new and effective ways. Leaders must remain engaged in this new way of planning and allow personnel the flexibility to think outside of the box to transform the way we do business. ... Managing change is difficult and to be successful, we have to meet the needs of all children, regardless of the ways we choose to fund programs. Far too often, in our silos we have said, "No, we can't do that because...", rather than working together to eliminate the silos. We are [too] comfortable with the inflexibility we have created.

In the documents to guide local education agencies, the department presents templates related to various promising initiatives for meeting the state priority goals for education. The emphasis is in clarifying ways that federal, state, and local funding sources can work together to implement and sustain the initiatives effectively. The templates offer a framework for district/school review of current and future planning for improving integration of resources. The template developed related to a Comprehensive Learning Supports System is on the next two pages.

Unfortunately, leadership changes in the Department resulted in the pilot work ending.



Comprehensive Learning Supports System (CLSS)

LDOE Critical Goals: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

Purpose To ensure all students have opportunity to succeed at school by aligning and redeploying resources to develop a comprehensive system of learning that addresses students' academic, emotional, physical, and social needs.

Possible Funding Sources Title I, II, III, IV, VI, X, School Improvement, MFP, IDEA.

Targeted Population Students with physical, social, or emotional barriers to learning.

Detail how this LDOE initiative supports academic achievement Students learn best when their academic, emotional, physical, and social needs are met. By addressing all of these needs, we are educating the whole child and ensuring that he/she is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. Anticipated outcomes are (1) increased graduation rates and reduced student dropout rates; (2) re-engaged students; (3) reduced number of low-performing schools; (4) narrowing of the achievement gap; and (5) countering of student achievement plateau effect.

PROGRAM/ACTIVITY: Implement a fully developed Comprehensive Learning Supports System

PROGRAM/ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: The Comprehensive Learning Supports System is a comprehensive and systemic approach to ensuring all students have equal opportunity to succeed at school. Learning Supports are the resources strategies and practices that provide physical, social, and emotional support to directly address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage disconnected students.

ACTIVITIES NEEDED FOR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT/IMPLEMENTATION/EVALUATION:

Personnel

- » District CLSS Facilitator - directs, guides, and facilitates the development of a cohesive and coherent district-wide support with the intent of addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students.

Professional Development

- » Job Embedded professional development to model appropriate learning supports strategies to improve student academic achievement.
- » Stipend and Substitute allowances for teacher and support staff participation in professional development.

Travel

- » In-state - travel to schools by facilitators to improve student achievement by providing technical assistance and job-embedded professional development. Travel to other districts to view model schools and to attend state-level training.
- » Out of state - Travel to conferences that focus on strategies to implement a comprehensive system of learning supports designed to improve student achievement by eliminating barriers to learning and teaching and providing equal opportunity for all students.

Materials/Supplies

- » Supplies to facilitate professional development activities.

Other

- » None.

RESEARCH: The work of Drs. Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor through the UCLA School Mental Health Project, (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>) indicates the need for developing a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of learning supports. There are many barriers that interfere with ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. A comprehensive learning supports system is essential to ensuring higher academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, and preparing students to be effective citizens in a global market. The research-base for initiatives to pursue a comprehensive focus on addressing barriers indicates the value of a range of activity that can enable students to learn and teachers to teach. The findings also underscore that addressing major psychosocial problems one at a time is unwise because the problems are interrelated and require multifaceted and cohesive solutions. In all, the literature supports the need for new directions, offers content for learning supports, and stresses the importance of integrating such activity into a comprehensive, multifaceted approach.

A Few Resources Related to Braiding and Blending

Unlocking State and Federal Program Funds to Support Student Success

- Part I: Braiding or Coordinating Federal and State Funds to Support Specific Programs, Activities, and Initiatives
(covers Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Professional Learning, Grade-Level Literacy, Parent and Family Engagement, Positive School Climate, Regular Attendance, Guidance, Preschool and Kindergarten Transition Activities, and more)
- Part II. LEA ESSA Funding Flexibility
(covers Transferability, Rural Education Achievement Program, Consolidating Funds in a Title I, Part A Schoolwide Program)
- Part III. Federal and State Programs

Blended and Braided Funding: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners

Includes an overview of braiding and blending and threats to effective use of funding and a chapter specifically on education.

Braiding Funds to Enhance Title IV-A Program Efficiency and Outcomes

Provides key questions to ask when braiding funds and suggests the following five-step approach: (1) conduct a comprehensive needs assessment, (2) create a consolidated plan with stakeholders and representatives from each program, (3) decide which funding programs can help address each aspect of the consolidated plan, (4) develop a budget to reflect braided funding, and (5) monitor performance/improvements and effectiveness of resources.

“Leveraging Resources: Blending and Braiding Funds”

An archived webinar for district- and school-level administrators

Weaving Together School, Community, and Home Resources

Interest in connecting school, community, and home resources is growing at an exponential rate. For schools, such efforts have been bolstered by the Community School movement.

Schools, homes, and the community in which they reside deal with multiple, interrelated concerns – poverty, child development, literacy, violence, safety, substance abuse, housing, employment. School and neighborhood improvements are mutually enhanced through effective school-community-home collaboration. Ultimately, the goal is to maximize mutual benefits, including better student progress, positive socialization of the young, higher staff morale, improved use of resources, an enhanced sense of community, community development, and more. In the long run, the aims are to strengthen students, schools, families, and neighborhoods.

Outreach to the Community

Every school outreaches to students’ homes with the hope of involving parents in various ways. In addition, some schools recruit volunteers from the community and solicit other forms of resource contributions from a variety of community stakeholders. Some pursue ways to link community social services and physical and mental health services to schools and seek community providers for afterschool programs. And when there is a school-related ballot measure, schools outreach for voter support.

For community agencies, connection with schools is seen as providing better access to families and their children, promoting greater engagement, and enhancing opportunities for having an impact on hard-to-reach clients. For school policy makers, connecting school-home-community is seen as an essential facet of promoting the well-being of children and youth and enhancing equity of opportunity for them to succeed at school and beyond. A major hope is that collaboration will produce a significant increase in the pool of resources available for student/learning supports.

The downside of current outreach is that it reflects a narrow vision about the role and functions of school-community collaboration for school improvement in general and for transforming how schools provide student/learning supports in particular. There are a great many community resources that can significantly help improve schools and that will strengthen the community. By adopting a broad vision, school improvement actions can increase school-community connections in ways that substantively weave together a wide range of resources.

Broadening Community Involvement

Researchers have mapped the range of community entities whose missions overlap that of the local schools. These include county and municipal agencies, mutual support/self-help groups, service clubs and philanthropic organizations, youth organizations, community based organizations, faith institutions, legal assistance groups, ethnic associations, artists and cultural institutions, businesses/corporations, unions, media, family members, local residents, senior citizens groups, and more. Districts/schools need to consider outreach to the full range of resources that exist, especially in neighborhoods where poverty reigns. Particular attention should be paid to linking and connecting with community entities that can fill critical gaps in school offerings and supports.

District and school efforts to enhance community connections can encompass four types of activities: (1) outreaching to a broad range of community entities, (2) developing immediate links and connections with community resources that can help fill critical intervention gaps at schools, (3) establishing an effective operational infrastructure for a school-community collaborative and (4) braiding and redeploying school and community resources where feasible to help with system development.

It should be noted that because community resources in many neighborhoods are sparse, a school-by-school approach often leads to inequities. This is evident in the extra resources available to schools in economically advantaged neighborhoods. It is also evident in outreach to agencies that have sparse resources when the first few schools to contact a given agency tie up all the resources the agency can bring to schools. Districts need to work with schools to connect community resources equitably.

For more on school-community-home collaboration, see

- > **“Community Outreach and Collaborative Engagement”** Chapter 16
in *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
- > **Enhancing School-Community Infrastructure and
Weaving School-Community Resources Together**
- > **Collaboration - School, Community, Interagency; community schools**

Equity Concerns About Bringing Community Services to Schools

With roots in the 1960's human service integration movement, the last few decades have seen many initiatives for connecting community services to schools to better meet the needs of children and their families. These have generated terms such as school-linked services, integrated services, one-stop shopping, wraparound services, seamless service delivery, coordinated school health, co-location of services, integrated student supports, full-service schools, community schools, systems of care, and more.

While bringing agency supports to schools is a well-intentioned endeavor, the activity has produced several problems.

For one, the prevailing emphasis of much of the activity is on connecting *community services* to schools (e.g., health and social services, after-school programs). However, given that in many neighborhoods such services are sparse, this usually means that productive linkages and co-location of a few services on campus can be established only at a few schools. This benefits the chosen schools but reduces resources available to other schools in the community, thereby increasing inequity.

Focusing primarily on linking with a few service agencies also ignores the full potential of broad-based school-community collaboration for enhancing equity of opportunity for young people and for strengthening families, schools, and neighborhoods.

An additional problem has arisen when thinking is limited mainly to connecting with community agency services. Such an approach feeds into the false impression that community resources are ready and able to meet all the support needs of students and their families. This impression already has contributed to serious cuts related to student supports (e.g., districts laying off student support personnel) in the struggle to balance tight school budgets. Such cuts, of course, further reduce the pool of resources available for improving equity of opportunity.

A related problem is how Medicaid funds are being used by schools. Medicaid allows schools to bill for school-based health services (including the time that Integrated Student Support Coordinators and Community School Coordinators/Directors spend on care coordination). To avail themselves of these funds, some districts and schools have moved student support staff from other needed functions.

It also has been noted that the frequently highlighted successful examples of connecting community services to schools are built and are operating on an exceptional resource base. As a result, they can't be taken to scale. From the perspective of school improvement, scalability is an essential facet of increasing equity across school districts.

*I heard you only passed
one class.*



*Yeah, but it's OK.,
I'm planning to be a specialist.*

Rebuilding Student/Learning Supports

The U.S. Department of Education's recent document *Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health* concurs with many of the concerns our Center has raised about mental health in schools and student/learning supports. (Unfortunately, the report also contributes to some core problems facing the efforts to improve student/learning supports for students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and for promoting healthy development.)

Examples of shared concerns are reflected in statements made in the report 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*.

At this point, we hasten to caution that the document from the U.S. Department of Education also contributes to thinking about student/learning supports in marginalized and fragmented ways. Note that its recommendation for establishing "an Integrated Framework of Educational, Social, Emotional, and Behavioral-Health Support" treats schools as if they were primarily in the mental health business rather than having a much larger role to play in our society. The document fails to embed the focus on Social, Emotional, and Behavioral and Mental Health

into every school's mission to educate and into a system of student/learning supports for addressing factors that interfere with learning and teaching. Instead, it only recommends establishing "a comprehensive system of mental health support" and integrating systems such as education, health, and mental health within a MTSS framework. And the limitations of the MTSS framework and the narrowness of the concept of a "comprehensive system of *mental health*" are not discussed. And there is no discussion of the possibility of enhancing mental health in schools by embedding the efforts into a system of student/learning supports.

So, while the document emphasizes seven key challenges to and offers recommendations for "providing school- or program-based mental health support across early childhood, K–12 schools, and higher education settings, we are concerned that the narrow focus skews and contributes to the prevailing limited thinking about student/learning supports at schools.

The feds, states, and localities need to expand frameworks for school improvement policy and school accountability in order to end the marginalization of how schools pursue student/learning supports. In doing so, mental health concerns can be fully embedded into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Such a system is essential if schools are to effectively address factors interfering with learning and teaching, reengage disconnected students and families, and promote the well-being of students, families, and school personnel.

A Snapshot of a Student/Learning Supports Problem

***My focus is on
improving instruction!***



***My job is bullying
prevention!***



***I'm only concerned
about PBIS!***



***My responsibility
is Title I!***



***I do
dropout
prevention!***



My focus is RtI!



I direct special education!



I ...



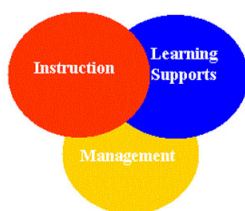
For a discussion of how existing student/learning supports can be transformed into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system, see the resources indicated in the presentation of *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* on the following page.

Concluding Comments

The impending fiscal cliff is a horror to think about. In responding, schools will have to think smarter about how they use sparse resources in addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Current approaches to providing student/learning supports have proven inadequate to the need. Layoffs will worsen the situation, and undercut supports that are essential to school improvement (and teacher survival).

A way forward entails pursuing strategies for (a) braiding existing resources designated for student/learning supports, (b) weaving them together with available community resources, and (c) deploying them in ways that rebuild student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

A fundamental transformation of existing student/learning supports is essential, and to that end, it is time for all who want schools to do better in addressing barriers to learning to think “outside the box”.



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.

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

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

It is essential to continue to urge districts/schools to play an increasing role in helping to transform student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

Our Center has many resources online focusing on transforming student/learning supports that can be used for discussion, continuing education, and planning. As a start, see, the following brief resources:

- > ***Rethinking Student and Learning Supports***
- > ***Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions***

The work is detailed in three free books:

- > ***Improving School Improvement***
- > ***Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide***
- > ***Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change***

Note: We caution that, unless they are evolved from their current limitations, moves to MTSS and Community Schools will exacerbate the prevailing marginalization and fragmentation of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and practice. See

- > ***Rethinking MTSS to Better Address Barriers to Learning***
- > ***Evolving Community Schools and Transforming Student/Learning Supports***



Center News

Here's what was discussed in the weekly **Community of Practice** over the last few months

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

- >Enhancing a positive school climate this school year begins with welcoming
- >About the role of school engagement in preventing school dropout
- >About kicking off the school year with community support
- >Connecting with students in the first days of the new school year
- >Interventions to promote attendance before it becomes a problem
- >Seeking family input to to improve student success
- >About threat assessment
- >Strengthening social connections among peers
- >Tiktok as a public health tool?
- >Positive psychology goes to school
- >About the growing number of reports of discipline problems
- >How do students know that teachers care about them?
- >Youth thrive when the environment fits
- >Free activities for summer learning and enrichment
- >What's the plan for strengthening relationships with families this school year?
- >Reclaiming our schools' promise and purpose
- >A closer look at mandatory reporting
- >Colleague asks: how to measure school mental health success?
- >About reducing teacher burnout
- >Interchange about "screening students for problems: testing often is not needed"
- >Adding belonging to summer learning
- >End of the school year is a time for expressing appreciations
- >Increasing student engagement: students as teachers
- >Enhancing mental health effectiveness: Focus on prevention
- >School board member responds to MH in schools: moving beyond the emergency

If you missed previous issues of the **Community of Practice**, see
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

Topics in the monthly **ENEWS** over the last couple of months

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

>What's Being Done for Students Who Have Not Adjusted to the New School Year?
INVEST NOW . . . OR PAY LATER!

>Welcoming Strategies for All Students & Their Families

Each edition also provides:

- >Continuing education through quick links to online resources
- >A few stories excerpted from various news sources
- >Comments and sharing from the field

A sample of recent commentaries

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinit3.html>

- >About Teacher Survival
- >About the Current State of Student Support and Future Directions
- >Thinking Outside the Box to Enhance Mental Health in Schools
- >About Opportunities to Prevent Child Maltreatment
- >A Focus on Improving the Role of Schools in Providing Student/Learning Supports for Homeless Students
- >About shifting the framework for improving schools
- >Screening Students for Problems: Testing Often is Not Needed
- >About Addressing the Growing Discipline Problems
- >Community Schools and MTSS Provide a Platform for Transforming Student/Learning Supports

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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 . . . and a host of students*