

Addressing Barriers to Learning

Vol. 24, #4

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Out-of-the-Box:

Rethinking MTSS to Better Address Barriers to Learning

*The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise
lies not in developing new ideas
but in escaping old ones.*

John Maynard Keynes

In the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a multi-tiered support system (MTSS) is referenced as "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data based instructional decision making." As states, districts, and schools adopt some version of (MTSS), we observe a tendency for them to box themselves in with old thinking about student/learning supports. In doing so, they miss the opportunity to significantly enhance how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

Now that adaption of some form of MTSS is so widespread, it is time to realize that more is involved in a truly *comprehensive* approach than the emphasis on a continuum of interventions. That is, *while a full continuum is essential, it is just one facet of a comprehensive intervention system.*

Given this, schools using MTSS as a intervention framework need to build on and expand their intervention framework into a *unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.* Doing so will move beyond the limitations of the MTSS framework and can lead to ending the marginalization and fragmentation of student and learning supports in schools.

In what follows, we briefly clarify the short-comings of MTSS as widely adopted for addressing barriers to learning. This analysis is followed by discussion of research and development that evolves MTSS. We end by outlining seven steps for moving forward.

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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MTSS: As Widely Implemented

ESSA emphasizes MTSS as a framework for preventing and addressing behavior problems. As noted above, the tiered model is defined as *a comprehensive continuum*.

MTSS has proven to have considerable appeal for a variety of reasons, including its conceptual simplicity. Because it is too simple, some states already have begun to broaden the formulation in their school improvement planning.

One State's Adaptation of MTSS

In the North Carolina consolidated state plan, for example, MTSS is adapted as a broad framework to encapsulate practices for analyzing “the overall health of the educational system by examining the system, implementation, and outcome data.” The framework encompasses the “Three-Tiered Instructional/Intervention Model” as a multi-tier system of supports for preventing and addressing behavior problems.

The plan defines MTSS as: *a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making.*

The plan states: *The core belief of [our] MTSS is that implementation of appropriately matched instructional and practices, curriculum choices within a well-designed environment results in successful outcomes for the majority of students in the school, without the need of additional supports.*

It also states that: *MTSS is an every education problem-solving framework of evidence-based practices in instruction, assessment, and curricula alignment that address the needs of all students. MTSS allows educators to analyze the overall health of the educational system by examining the system, implementation, and outcome data sets. MTSS allows for a rapid response system to address group and individual student needs to ensure students are provided evidence based, appropriately targeted instruction for academic, behavior, and/or social emotional needs. Structured problem solving occurs within the school and district setting at various tiers, and with increasing complexity, as the resources needed to resolve a problem increase. The intent of the problem-solving process is to resolve the problem, using the necessary resources, as early as possible for district, school, group and individual needs.*

The three-tiered instructional/intervention model is described as “another critical element of MTSS implementation.” This element includes use of early intervening services and specific approaches such as positive behavioral intervention and supports. It is presented as a set of strategies for enabling children with disabilities and English learners to meet challenging state academic standards. These interventions are to be coordinated with similar activities and services carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

In this context, the plan states that: *In a typical system, Tier I includes the instruction all students get; Tier II includes supplemental instruction or intervention provided to students not meeting benchmarks; and Tier III includes intensive, small group or individual interventions for students showing significant barriers to learning the skills required for school success. It is important to consider both academic and social-emotional/ behavioral instruction and interventions when examining this domain.*

Despite broadening the concept, the North Carolina adaptation does not address several fundamental limitations of the MTSS framework.

Limitations of MTSS in Framing Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning

As noted, the simplicity of the tiered presentation as widely adopted is appealing and does help underscore differences in levels of intervention. However, while focusing on levels of intervention is essential, multi-tier formulations as commonly applied are insufficient for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Three basic concerns about such formulations are that they

- mainly stress levels of *intensity*,
- do not address the problem of systematically connecting interventions that fall into and across each level,
- do not address the need to connect school and community interventions.

As a result, adopting MTSS does little to end the fragmentation, never mind the marginalization, of student and learning supports in school improvement efforts.

A Way Forward: What Our Research and Development Indicates

Over the years, our analyses of school improvement activity has indicated that policy and practice planning is guided primarily by a two component framework, namely (1) instruction and (2) governance/management. The result: all interventions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. This marginalization is an underlying and fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports.

Moving Forward Requires Expanding Policy to End the Marginalization

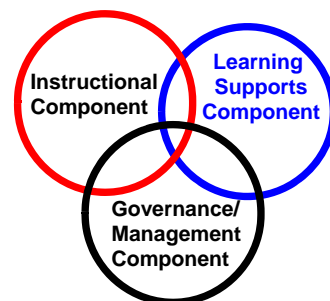
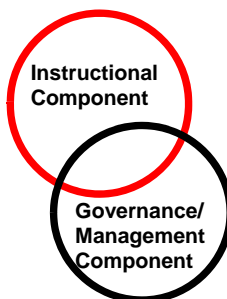
Establishing a three component school improvement framework can end the marginalization and the related fragmentation. As illustrated in Exhibit A, the expanded policy framework establishes efforts to directly address barriers as a *learning supports component* and makes the component a *primary* school policy commitment. Trailblazing examples of the policy expansion already have demonstrated its promise.¹

Exhibit A. Expanding the Framework for School Improvement Policy and Practice

Two Component Framework



Three Component Framework



Note: Because policy for improving schools across the country is "standards-based" and accountability driven, expanding the prevailing accountability framework and establishing standards for learning supports are key considerations in effective implementation of a three component policy.²

Expanding the school improvement policy framework to include learning supports as a primary component provides the essential foundation for transforming how states and districts address the large number of schools and students who need essential supports. The aim is to unify and develop a comprehensive and equitable intervention system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

This involves first unifying and weaving together all school resources currently expended for student and learning supports. *And then*, the focus is on discriminatively braiding school and relevant community resources together to strengthen interventions and fill gaps. The intent over time is to transform student and learning supports by replacing ad hoc and piecemeal policies and practices with a comprehensive, cohesive, and equitable system that can serve all students.

**Moving
Forward
Requires
Reframing
MTSS**

Simply adopting and tweaking prevailing views of a multi-tier framework falls far short of planning to develop student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that supports teachers in-classrooms and school-wide. Moving toward such a system involves reframing MTSS into a multifaceted and systemic approach. As discussed below, the emphasis is not just on levels of intervention, but on (1) an interconnected *continuum of subsystems* that weaves school and community resources together and (2) an cohesively organized set of *content arenas of activity*.

(1) Continuum of subsystems. Few will argue against the notion that conceptualizing levels of intervention is a good *starting point* for framing the nature and scope of an intervention continuum. However, as stressed above, MTSS is not the best way to depict such a continuum, never mind frame a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.

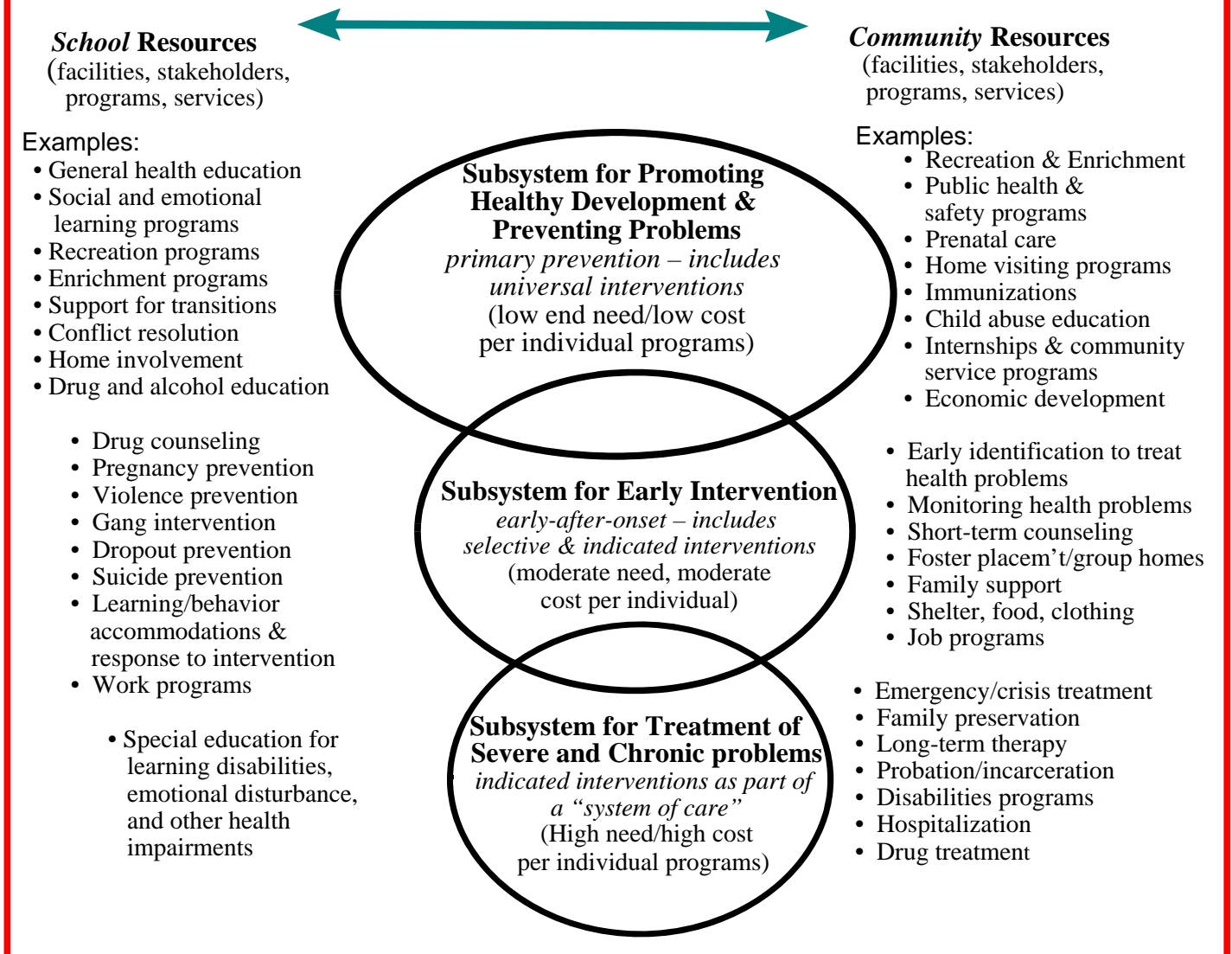
Another way to conceive the levels is in terms of what they aim to do and as an interrelated and overlapping continuum of braided school and community subsystems. The subsystems focus on promoting effective schooling and whole child development, preventing problems experienced by teachers and students, addressing such problems as soon as feasible after they arise, and providing for students who have severe and chronic problems.

As illustrated in Exhibit B, we operationalize the levels as three subsystems. Each subsystem is seen as weaving together a wide range of school and community resources. The interrelated and overlapping subsystems are illustrated as tapering from top to bottom to indicate the view that, if the top is well-designed and implemented, the numbers needing early intervention are reduced and then, as more are helped through early-after-onset assistance, fewer students will need “deep-end” interventions. Without a well-designed and implemented system, current evidence is that too many students are referred inappropriately for specialized, deep-end services.

(2) Content Arenas of Activity. A well-designed system of student and learning supports requires more than a continuum of interventions. For example, “mapping” done with respect to the MTSS framework does not escape the trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level. Thus, in addition to the continuum, it is necessary to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-conceived arenas that reflect the *content purpose* of the activity.

Our research and development efforts have categorized programs and services into six arenas based on concerns that schools need to address each day. In organizing

Exhibit B. **Reframing MTSS' Levels into a School-Community Intervention Continuum of Interconnected Subsystems**



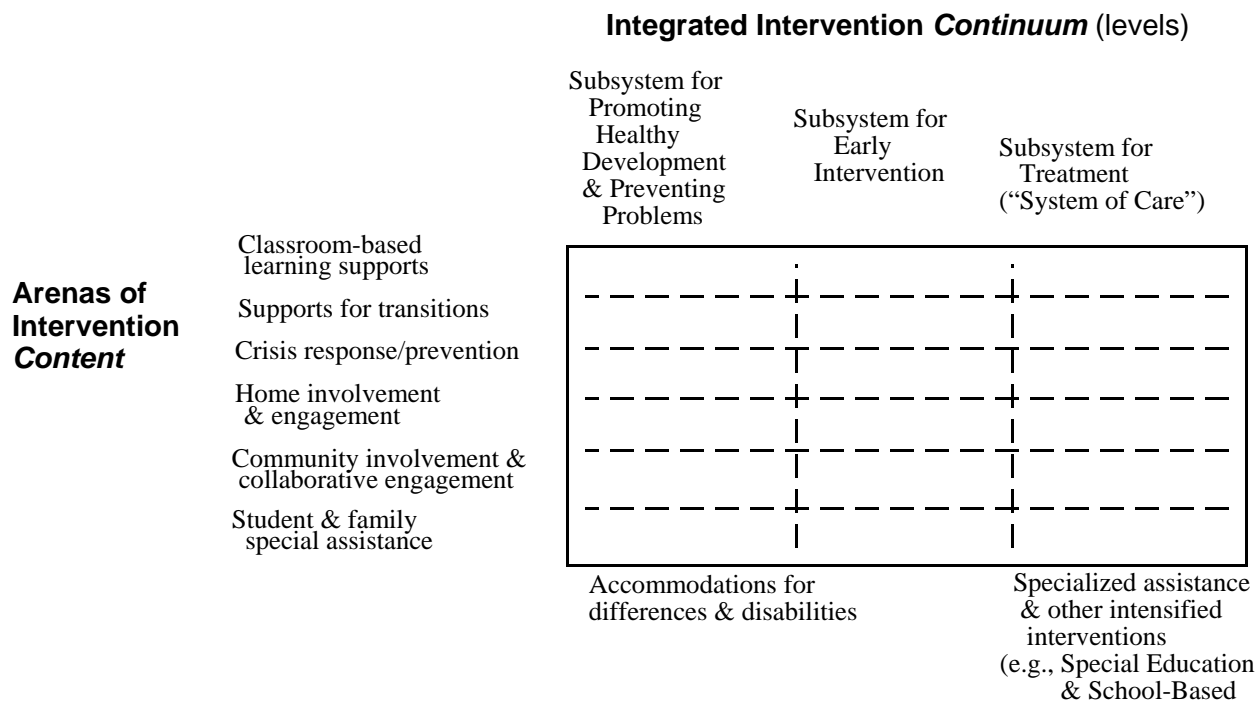
the activity, it becomes clearer what supports are needed in and out of the classroom so that teachers can enable the learning of students who are not doing well. The six arenas encompass:

- **Enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning** (e.g., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems; includes a focus on prevention, early intervening, and use of strategies such as response to intervention and social emotional learning)
- **Supporting transitions** (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
- **Increasing home and school connections and engagement**
- **Responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises**
- **Increasing community involvement and support** (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- **Facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.**

Some version of the six basic arenas has held-up over the last decade in a variety of trailblazing venues across the country.³

(3) **Continuum + content.** Combining the continuum and arenas of content activity moves MTSS thinking forward. It provides an intervention framework that can guide development of a total system designed to unify the resources a school devotes to student and learning supports, as well as braiding in community resources to fill critical gaps and strengthen the system (see Exhibit C).

Exhibit C. **Prototype Intervention Framework for the Third Component**



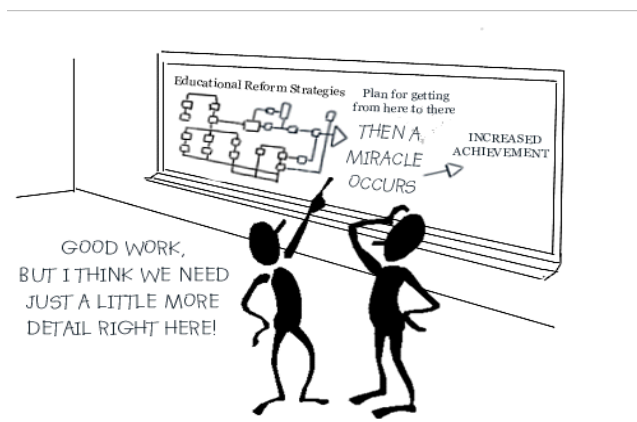
All this has implications for enhancing in-classroom student and learning supports by retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., student and learning support personnel – psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, Title I staff, dropout/graduation support staff, special educators, etc.). The jobs of these personnel need redefining to include working collaboratively with teachers *in classrooms* for part of each day. Improving student and learning supports in classrooms requires such collaboration, and such collaboration is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

Don't Forget to Plan for Implementation

We know that none of this is easy, but no one who understands the complexity of enhancing equity of opportunity expects to accomplish essential systemic changes easily. As states and districts develop innovative plans to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students, their strategic plans must include a focus on

- *developing standards and expanding the accountability framework* to account for the third component and to do so in ways that encompass both formative and summative evaluation,²
- *reworking operational infrastructures* to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of an effective system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching,⁴
- *enhancing mechanisms and strategic approaches for systemic change* in ways that ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability.⁵

And state education agencies will need to develop and institutionalize the type of support infrastructure that can *continuously* facilitate significant and sustainable LEA and school level systemic changes and ensure ongoing local capacity building – especially at low performing schools. Such an infrastructure requires a cadre of coaches who can develop and train LEA leadership teams.⁶



Steps for Moving Forward

The following steps and resources can be used as a guide to introducing the need for and ways to evolve MTSS into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

- (1) Enhance stakeholders' appreciation of why MTSS (as widely formulated and implemented) is insufficient, and provide them with a quick overview for understanding how to reframe MTSS into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports. See
 - > *Rethinking MTSS to Better Address Barriers to Learning*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/fall19.pdf>
- (2) For a more in-depth discussion, see:
 - > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html
- (3) To place the framework in the broad context of school improvement, see:
 - > *Improving School Improvement*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html
- (4) For examples of design and other documents developed by state and district trailblazers, see:
 - > *Design Document Examples* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb1a.htm>
 - > *Brochures Examples* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita1a.htm>
- (5) As evidence of the need to rethink student/learning supports and fill critical gaps, schools can map and analyze current efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. See the resource aid:
 - > *Mapping & Analyzing Learning Supports*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf>
- (6) Anyone interested in moving forward to transform student and learning supports can find other resource aid in the Center's System Change Toolkit at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>
- (7) And feel free to contact the Center co-directors to discuss ways we can help with the transformation; just email Ltaylor@ucla.edu or adelman@psych.ucla.edu

Concluding Comments

In evolving school improvement plans, the opportunity arises to end the marginalization and fragmentation of student and learning supports and to move beyond the limitations of the MTSS framework. Toward these ends, school improvement planners can build on their MTSS work to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

The transformation of student and learning supports is a logical evolutionary stage in enhancing equity of opportunity by more effectively addressing barriers to learning and teaching. It is an essential pathway to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps, enhancing school safety, reducing dropout rates, shutting down the pipeline from schools to prisons, and promoting well-being and social justice.

Notes

¹See examples and lessons learned in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports* – (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>).

²For an accountability prototype that focuses not only on achievement, but on personal and social development and on improvements that directly address barriers to learning and teaching, see “Reframing Accountability for Whole Child Development and Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching” Ch. 15 in *Improving School Improvement* (2018).

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

Prototypes of standards and indicators for a learning supports component also are outlined in Ch. 15.

³A brief discussion of and examples related to each of the six content arenas is offered in *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* (2017).

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

⁴See “Reworking the Leadership Infrastructure into a Three Component Framework” – Ch. 13 in *Improving School Improvement* (2018). http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

⁵See “Moving Forward” – Part IV in *Improving School Improvement* (2018).

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

⁶*Guide for Planning Coaching for SEAs/LEAs to Establish a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coaching.pdf>

WHO'S MOVING FORWARD? A QUICK SURVEY

Please take a few minutes to inform us about the following.

With respect to addressing barriers to learning and teaching:

- (1) If you know any efforts to unify and develop a comprehensive and systemic component to address such barriers, please tell us where.
- (2) What do you think would help enhance efforts to (a) unify and (b) develop a comprehensive and equitable system to address such barriers?
- (3) What do you consider the biggest obstacle to such efforts?

Please return responses and any other general comments about the Center's work to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Also, if you are interested in moving efforts forward, let us know. We would like to help!

Thanks for your assistance with this and for all you are doing to help children.

NOTE: One section of the Center's website is devoted to *Hot Issues* and *Hot Topics* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/hottopicrev.htm> . The content represents natural concerns for professional development discussions. As an example, here is a recent Hot Topic.

Is Society too Ready to Label Children and Adolescents as Mentally Disordered?

It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.

Maslow's law of the instrument

Misdiagnosis and overdiagnosis using DSM and special education labels tends to bias understanding of behavioral and emotional concerns. Assignment of a diagnostic label plays a major role in decisions to intervene and may profoundly shape a person's future. People tend to associate strong images with specific labels and act upon these images. Sometimes the images are useful generalizations; sometimes they are harmful stereotypes.

Back in 1975, Nicholas Hobbs warned:

Categories and labels are powerful instruments for social regulation and control, and they are often employed for obscure, covert, or hurtful purposes: to degrade people, to deny them access to opportunity, to exclude "undesirables" whose presence in some way offends, disturbs familiar custom, or demands extraordinary effort. . . . Society defines what is exceptional or deviant, and appropriate treatments are designed quite as much to protect society as they are to help the child. . . . "To take care of them" can and should be read with two meanings: to give children help and to exclude them from the community.

Given the potential for harm caused by misdiagnosis and overdiagnosis, those who study diagnostic classification are especially concerned about the role labeling plays in segregating individuals with physical, cognitive, social, and emotional differences—including a disproportionate number from minority groups.

Labeling is inevitable, but labels need to be applied from a broad perspective of the causes human behavior and with a full tool chest of descriptors that range from normal behavior and emotions through intense disordered states. This is essential to countering the tendency to pathologize and sensationalize the ways in which youngsters respond to and cope with many of the demands of growing up. Before thinking about a mental disorder, good practice calls for differentiating the commonplace from the rare. (If you hear hoof beats, is it more likely to be a horse than a zebra?)

A good example of describing a full range of differences is found in

The Classification of Child and Adolescent Mental Diagnoses in Primary Care published by the American Academy of Pediatrics. <http://www.contentedits.com/img.asp?id=16977>

Before highlighting problem functioning, this classification manual stresses developmental variations within the range of expected behaviors for different age groups

For instance, with respect to *sadness*, the manual indicates that “transient depressive responses or mood changes to stress are normal in otherwise healthy populations.”

In Middle Childhood: The child feels transient loss of self-esteem after experiencing failure and feels sadness with losses as in early childhood.

In Adolescence: The adolescent's developmental presentations are similar to those of middle childhood but may also include fleeting thoughts of death. Bereavement includes loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend, friend, or best friend. ...

The manual describes sadness as a problem (not a disorder) when there are “behaviors serious enough to disrupt functioning with peers, at school, at home, but not severe enough to meet criteria as a disorder.” These include “some symptoms of major depressive disorders in mild form (e.g., depressed/irritable mood, diminished interest or pleasure, weight loss/gain, or failure to make

expected weight gains, insomnia/hypersomnia, psychomotor agitation/retardation, fatigue or energy loss, feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt, diminished ability to think/concentrate). However, the behaviors are not sufficiently intense to qualify for a depressive disorder. These symptoms should be more than transient and have a mild impact on the child's functioning. Bereavement that continues beyond 2 months may also be a problem.”

In Middle Childhood: The child may experience some sadness that results in brief suicidal ideation with no clear plan of suicide, some apathy, boredom, low self-esteem, and unexplained physical symptoms such as headaches and abdominal pain....

In Adolescence: Some disinterest in school work, decrease in motivation, and day-dreaming in class may begin to lead to deterioration of school work. Hesitancy in attending school, apathy, and boredom may occur....”

As the above brief example suggests, having language to describe the range of emotions that includes normal responses can help prevent misdiagnosis and overdiagnosis and counter tendencies to misprescribe interventions.

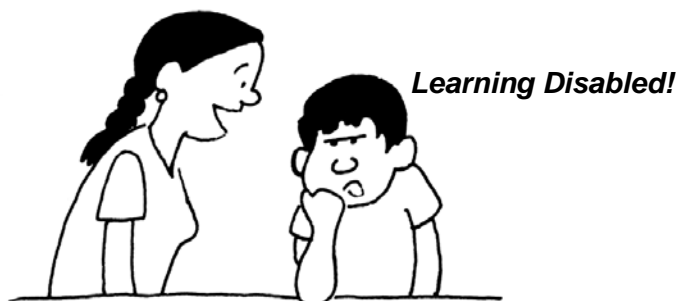
For a related discussion of concerns, see:

>*Countering the Over-pathologizing of Students' Feelings & Behavior:
A Growing Concern Related to MH in Schools*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/pathology.pdf>

Please share your thoughts on this and any related matters.

Send your responses to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

What's your nickname at school?



State Legislation Doesn't Effectively Enhance How Schools Address Barriers to Learning

This is a critical time in the history of efforts to reduce the opportunity and achievement gaps. In addressing education's role in these efforts, passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) devolved considerable responsibility to the states.

The Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA has been analyzing what states are doing to improve how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. Our previous analyses of consolidated state plans mandated by ESSA found poorly conceived approaches for addressing complex learning, behavior, and emotional concerns. The trend in such plans is to designate discrete types of problems and provide discrete interventions. Examples are universal interventions for bullying prevention and mental health counseling targeted to a relatively small number of students. Much of what is included has limited long-term efficacy.

A new report from the Center expands analyses of state efforts by analyzing recent state legislation. See:

How Well Do State Legislatures Focus on Improving School Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching & Re-engage Disconnected Students?

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

Brief Overview of Points Stressed in the Report

Recent education legislation focuses on many discrete matters and does so in an ad hoc, piecemeal, and scattered manner.

The various acts dealing with aspects of how schools address barriers to learning and teaching have a narrow and highly delineated focus and reflect a reactive concern for specific problems brought to education committees.

For example, there are bills focused on use of corporal punishment, restraints, exclusion, suspensions and expulsions; penalties for hazing; prevention of sexual abuse and harassment, substance abuse, bullying; school safety drills; armed security guards; concerns related to foster youth, migrants, homeless students; students in special education, English learners, immigrant youth, native Americans, those in the juvenile justice system, pregnant and parenting students; concerns about school start time; funding for preschool.

The relevance and often pressing nature of many of the acts is understandable. However, concerns arise because the body of legislation neither reflects a broad vision for school improvement nor an appreciation of the critical role addressing barriers to learning plays in enhancing equity for success at school and beyond. These concerns stem from

- the absence of legislation designed to (a) end the *marginalization* of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching or (b) even to deal with the *fragmented* approach to policy making and related interventions for improving how schools prevent and correct learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- the lack of attention paid to legislating policy to stimulate enhancement of the *effectiveness* of student/learning supports.

The report offers suggestions for how legislators can address these problems.

About Center Resources



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or contact us – E-mail: Ltaylor@ucla.edu or Ph: (310) 825-3634
Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS)?
Or our weekly Community of Practice Interchange?
Send requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Take a few minutes to browse the following special features highlighted on the Center's website:

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- >**ENEWS** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/enews.htm> – a free monthly electronic newsletter with online resources and news relevant to school improvement from all over
- >**Community of Practice** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhpractitioner/practitioner.pdf> – a free weekly practitioner exchange that shares concerns, information, and discussion
- >**Net Exchange** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange2.htm> – captures the interchange between users and the Center on specific topics
- >**e-journal *Addressing Barriers to Learning*** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/news.htm> – a free quarterly electronic topical journal.
- >**What's new** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/review.htm> – Center updates
- >**Gateway to a World of Resources** - http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/gateway/gateway_sites.htm – provides quick internet access to other Centers and resources.
- >**Hot topics & Issues** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/hottopicrev.htm> – info, resources, and analyses of current topics of interest relevant to the Center's concerns
- >**Download Center Resources** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/materials/resources.htm> – free access to almost all Center works (e.g., information and resource aids, school improvement guides, policy analyses, professional development materials, books, chapters, articles)
- >**System Change Toolkit** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm> – aids for transforming student and learning supports
- >**Practitioner Toolbox** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/toolbox.htm> – compilation of various brief aids developed by the Center
- >**Info about Upcoming Webinars, Conferences, funding opportunities, jobs** - the homepage provides links to opportunities across the country
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- >**National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports & Call to Action!** - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>
- >**Use our Search Engine** to find specific items on the website or from the Center databases. - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/websrch.htm> –