27 years & counting

Addressing Barriers
to Learning

New ways to think . . .
Better ways to link

Transforming Student and Learning Supports:
ESEA Won't Do It,
But States and Localities Can

Given the constant political battles related to reauthorizing ESEA, federal policy will likely do little more than tinker with addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. It is up to states and localities to take the lead in transforming student and learning supports into a unified and comprehensive system. Such a system encompasses a full continuum of interventions and covers a well-defined and delimited set of classroom and school-wide supports and is directly accountability for whole child and whole school progress.

As Congress returns to the problem of fixing the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, several fundamental battles are underway. One clearly stems from the long-standing argument about the appropriate role of the federal government in education. Another stems from the different views about what really must be done to improve public schools. As always there is rhetoric about enhancing equity of opportunity for students to succeed at school. As always, there is little attention to the need to substantively transform student and learning supports as a means to this end.

After reviewing both the Senate and House committee proposals for strengthening America's schools, we see little reason for optimism that federal policy will do more than continue to tinker with student and learning supports. Congress perseveres in marginalizing efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and draws on old ideas when it does anything about these concerns.

So States and Districts Must Lead the Way

Currently, policy makers at federal, state, and district levels focus mostly on improving instruction and on how schools are governed and managed. These arenas, of course, are primary concerns. And fortunately the considerable attention is paying off.

This is good news in schools where the majority of students are doing just fine. The bad news is that in too many schools,

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particularly those serving lower income families, large numbers of students are doing poorly. For example, a 2004 report found that nearly 2,000 (about 13%) of high schools in the U.S. account for more than 50% of all high school dropouts. Located in areas with high poverty and often high minority populations, the typical freshman class in these schools was found to shrink by 40% or more by the time students became seniors.[1]

Besides needing to reduce dropout rates and excessive absences (of students and staff), almost every school is caught up in addressing bullying, harassment, and a variety of other problems that interfere with learning and teaching. Any combination of neighborhood, family, school, peer, and individual factors can lead to such problems. The higher the concentration of such "risk" factors, the greater the number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Given all this, states and districts must come to grips with the following realities as they move to lead the way in improving public education:

- Schools can only achieve their mission by effectively addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students.

- Effectively addressing such barriers requires substantive innovation that transforms the way schools provide student and learning supports.

- The first step is to establish policy that unifies the many existing student and learning supports.

Which barriers should schools address and which can they leave to other agencies?

Emphasizing barriers to learning and teaching in no way is meant as an excuse for poor school performance. Indeed, doing so simply underscores common sense. As schools and districts move to high-quality, rigorous, grade-level standards and teaching, school and student success often will depend on addressing interfering factors. Indeed, the Carnegie Task Force on Education wisely stresses that while school systems cannot be responsible for meeting every need of their students, "when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge."[2]

In meeting the challenge, too often the tendency is to think mainly about specific problems experienced by individual students. Certainly, schools need to continue to broaden what they do about specific problems such as bullying and dropouts. But the complex array of factors interfering with schools achieving their mission calls for more than enhancing services for an array of separate problems. Meeting the challenge requires embedding agenda for specific problems into the mission of schools by embracing an expanded vision for school improvement policy and practice that establishes innovative new directions for student and learning supports.

What's Involved in Establishing New Directions for Student & Learning Supports?

In response to the number of schools and students in trouble, state departments and districts across the country are beginning to focus on new directions for student and learning supports. In doing so, sparse resources make it necessary for them to set priorities and phase in systemic changes.

With this in mind, we stress a process that first pulls together all student and learning supports and then, over a period of several years, develops a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of interventions. Our research indicates that accomplishing this requires pursuing four fundamental and interrelated policy and implementation concerns:

(1) expanding school improvement policy from a two- to a three-component framework; that is, adding to the prevailing focus on instruction and management, a third component dedicated to addressing barriers to learning and teaching,

(2) operationalizing the third component as a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports,

(3) reworking school leadership and infrastructure and the infrastructure for school-community collaboration to ensure development of the third component – with an emphasis on redeploying and weaving together existing resources,

(4) ensuring establishment of effective mechanisms for systemic change, scale-up, and sustainability.

This is not the place to cover each of these matters. Rather, in what follows, we briefly highlight frameworks for expanding school improvement *policy* and for guiding development of a unified and comprehensive *intervention system*. At the end of the article, references are provided to the other related concerns and to more detailed presentations.

> Efforts to establish and institutionalize new directions start with ensuring the work is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice. Then, the focus is on reworking operational infrastructure and setting priorities for system development. Given sparse resources, the emphasis is on weaving together and redeploying existing school and community resources and taking advantage of natural opportunities at schools for addressing problems and promoting student, staff, and other stakeholder development.

Reframing Policy & Intervention to Better Address Student & Schooling Problems

Moving beyond piecemeal initiatives to improve the well-being of children and youth requires an expanded vision of school improvement policy and practice. Blueprint plans for education reform have become a trendy way to encapsulate the vision of policy leaders. For example, over the last few year, President Obama, governors, chief state school officers, local

superintendents' associations, policy institutes, foundations, and business leaders have offered blueprints. Analyses indicate that the most widely discussed plans fundamentally marginalize efforts to address student and schooling problems.[3]

Why?

Because the blueprints and prevailing education policy are based on a narrow vision that stresses a two-component framework for school improvement. One component emphasizes enhancing instruction; the other intends to improve the management/governance of schools. Some attention, of course, also is given to student and schooling problems. However, in most school systems, these matters are at best a secondary concern in school improvement planning.

An expanded vision adds an emphasis on addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a unified, primary, and essential third component. Many stakeholder groups recommending changes in the federal *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) touch upon the importance of addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Unfortunately, the recommended changes typically fail to include calls for expanding the overall federal policy framework.

In contrast, trailblazing education leaders at state and local levels are pioneering a three component school improvement framework.[4] The third component, dedicated to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, usually is referred to as a comprehensive system of learning supports. Moving to a three-component policy framework provides a driver for transforming what schools do in dealing with factors interfering with student success. Exhibit 1 highlights key systemic changes resulting from adoption of the third component. Also see page 9 for highlights of Alabama's design for their *Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports* that will be rolled out during the coming school year.

Exhibit 1

Moving to a Three-Component Framework for Improving Schools

Adoption of a third component provides the basis for

- Reframing the existing wide range of initiatives, programs, and services and redeploying resources to develop a comprehensive and cohesive system for enabling learning

- Developing both in-classroom and school-wide approaches – including interventions to support transitions, increase home and community connections, enhance teachers' ability to respond to common learning and behavior problems, and respond to and prevent crises

- Realigning district, school, and school-community infrastructures to weave resources together with the aim of enhancing and evolving the learning supports system

- Pursuing school improvement and systemic change with a high degree of policy commitment to fully integrate supports for learning and teaching with efforts to improve instruction and school governance

- Expanding accountability systems both to improve data-based decision-making and to reflect a comprehensive picture of student and school performance that incorporates efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

**Framing Student & Learning Supports as
a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System**

In practice, the third component involves not only addressing interfering factors but re-engaging disconnected students. As operationalized to date, the intervention framework for the component combines both an integrated and systemic continuum of school and community interventions and a multifaceted and cohesive set of content arenas.[5]

This framework embeds consideration of the many specific problems to which advocates want schools to attend (e.g., reducing misbehavior, suspensions, expulsions, grade retention, dropouts, and unnecessary referrals for special education and mental health services). In doing so, it continues to provide for individual supports while stressing how schools can do more to meet the needs of all students.

Individual Supports

The aim is to provide supports as personalized special assistance in the classroom. Any student who is not learning as well as *most* others in the classroom is a candidate for such supports.

Special assistance for a student in the classroom combines with personalized instruction as a second step in a sequential approach to addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Such assistance is an essential aspect of revamping classroom systems to address the needs of *all* learners.

Classroom-based special assistance and other forms of individual student and family assistance often only require extending general problem solving strategies. Sometimes, however, more specialized interventions are needed, including in-school assistance outside the classroom and/or referrals to community health and social services.

The first criteria for offering a student special assistance are straightforward indications of learning, behavior, and emotional problems. It is particularly poignant to see a student who is working hard, but learning little, retaining less, and is clearly in need of help. Students who are disruptive or harmful to self and/or others almost always are readily identified, as are those who appear to be extremely disinterested and disengaged. A bit harder to identify may be those doing mostly satisfactory work but not quite performing up to standards in some facet of the curricula. *Most teachers and many parents have little difficulty identifying students who need special assistance. More difficult is determining what type of assistance to provide and how to provide it.*

School-Wide Supports

Beyond the classroom, student and learning supports expand school-wide to encompass five other arenas that fit along a continuum of interventions. The continuum is designed to

- promote positive development and prevent problems

- intervene as early after the onset of problems as is feasible

- provide special assistance for severe and chronic problems.

The five additional school-wide arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching at a school are:

- *Supporting transitions* (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate hurdles to enrollment, adjust to school, grade, and program changes, make daily transitions before, during, and after school, access and effectively use supports and extended learning opportunities, and so forth)

- *Increasing home involvement and engagement* (e.g., increasing and strengthening the home and its connections with school)

- *Responding to, and where feasible, preventing school and personal crises and traumatic events* (including creating a caring and safe learning environment and countering the impact of out-of-school traumatic events)

- *Increasing community involvement, engagement, and support* (e.g., outreach to develop a greater community support from a wide range of entities. This includes agency collaborations and use of volunteers to extend learning opportunities and help students-in-need.)

- *Facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance* (on campus and in the community as needed).

Combining the continuum with the six arenas provides a matrix illustrating a unified, "big picture" intervention framework for student and learning supports. The matrix guides rethinking and restructuring of daily work to enable learning at a school. It is especially useful as an aid in mapping and analyzing resources, identifying gaps and redundancies, enhancing coordination and integration of resources, and developing a unified, comprehensive, systemic, and equitable approach. Effectively implementing the framework facilitates adherence to the principle of using the least restrictive and nonintrusive forms of intervention required to appropriately respond to problems and accommodate diversity.

Focusing on More than the Most Severe Problems

Currently, the trend is to focus on the most severe problems (e.g., diagnosable disabilities). This skews intervention efforts in ways that result in little being done to prevent or at least intervene early after the problem appears. Classroom and school-wide learning supports extend the range of interventions for enabling academic, social, emotional, and physical development and ameliorate learning, behavior, and emotional problems. In doing so, the aim is to prevent the majority of problems, deal with another significant segment as soon after problem onset as is feasible, and end up with relatively few students needing specialized assistance and other intensive and costly interventions.

In general, development of a unified, comprehensive, systemic approach is intended to increase impact, reduce the number of individuals requiring special assistance, and enhance cost-effectiveness. This includes a focus on promoting the well-being of teachers and other school staff so that they can do more to promote the well-being of students. For individual students, the aim is to prevent and minimize the impact of as many problems as feasible and doing so in ways that equitably maximize school engagement, productive learning, and positive development. For the school and community as a whole, the intent is to contribute to a safe, healthy, nurturing environment characterized by respect for differences, trust, caring, support, social justice, and high expectations. All this is essential in enhancing a nurturing school climate and a school that is fully integrated into the community.

Concluding Comments

It is not enough to say we want to address child and adolescent problems, focus on the total child, ensure equity of opportunity, have safe and drug free schools, reduce the achievement gap, increase graduation rates, create community schools, and all the other ideals set forth for public education and public health. Such ideals must be understood as qualities that emerge from a well-conceived, big-picture vision and effective capacity building – pursued every day with common sense, wisdom, commitment, and perseverance.

From a political perspective, we understand why the focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students is scattered through so many parts and sections of the ESEA. An unfortunate consequence, however, is the continued siloing and *fragmentation* of too many programs and the counterproductive competition that arises from efforts that push separate, narrow agenda. It is not uncommon for student support staff to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with too much of the work oriented to addressing discrete problems and providing specialized services for relatively few student.

Over the years, policy makers have recognized that the fragmentation is counterproductive. This leads many to propose coordination of services as the solution. But, fragmentation is a symptom of policy *marginalization*. Better coordination, while desirable, has not and will not end the marginalization.

As to the counterproductive competition for specific concerns, no single program or even a coordinated set of wrap around services can address the range of factors interfering with equity of opportunity to succeed at school for the large number of students affected. Moreover, the competition for resources resulting from separate advocacy for specific concerns is contributing to the continuing marginalization and resultant fragmentation of essential supports. In turn, this ensures that needed supports reach only a small proportion of students. State and local policy makers must move to end the marginalization and resist the siren's call from lobbyists for special initiatives.

The bottom line in terms of policy is that it is time to adopt a unified, comprehensive, systemic, and equitable approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. The broad mission of schools in our society cannot be achieved by focusing mainly on specific facets of learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

We can continue to build a few islands of excellence (demonstrations, pilots) and "Cadillac models" related to particular problems and approaches, but with over 90,000 schools in the U.S.A., the scale of need calls for moving quickly in fundamentally new directions. A well-implemented transformation will replace "reforms" that mainly tinker with fundamental systemic change and will enhance equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond. It's time for states and localities to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching, re-engage disconnected students, and enhance equity of opportunity for all.

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Notes

[1]R. Balfanz & N, Legters (2004). *Locating the dropout crisis*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk.

[2]Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Author.

[3]Center for Mental Health in Schools (2012). *Blueprints for education reform: Have you analyzed the architects' vision?* Los Angeles: Author. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/blueprint.pdf

[4]See Center for Mental Health in Schools (2012). *Where's it happening? Trailblazing and pioneering initiatives.* Los Angeles: Author. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm

[5]For detailed discussion of learning supports, see:

> Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006). *The implementation guide to student learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide: New directions for addressing barriers to learning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

> *New Directions for Student and Learning Supports National Initiative –* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm

I hear Congress is working on the ESEA.

And maybe they'll finish sometime in this century!

Implementation Science and Innovative Transformation of Schools and Communities

Increasing attention to *Implementation Research* and the *Implementation Problem* has given rise to confusion about matters such as the role of empirically-supported practices, fidelity of implementation, and monitoring fidelity of implementation. To clarify the matters, we approach these topics from the broad perspective of efforts to transform schools and their relationship to the surrounding community and with reference to the literature on diffusion of innovations and enabling major systemic changes. Such a perspective points to the need to expand implementation research and practice in ways that focus on the complexities of (a) facilitating essential systemic changes for implementing a comprehensive approach at specific sites, (b) replicating the approach across a school district, and (c) sustaining and evolving what has been implemented.

For more on this, see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/implement.pdf

ALABAMA KICKS OFF ITS MOVE TO A UNIFIED AND COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM OF LEARNING SUPPORTS

[Excerpts with some adaptations from Alabama's design document for a *Unified And Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*.]

It is critical for schools to provide a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports that address barriers to learning and teaching and ensure that students are engaged and re-engaged in learning.

From the Design Document

If we always remember what's best for the child in the chair, how can we make wrong decisions? We serve one group. That's the students.

Tommy Bice, Alabama's Superintendent of Education

In December 2011, Dr. Thomas R. Bice, then Deputy Superintendent of Alabama and Dr. Eric Mackey, Executive Director of the School Superintendents of Alabama, traveled to Louisiana to learn about the transformative work of UCLA in developing a comprehensive system of learning supports for students. Upon his appointment as State Superintendent, Dr. Bice reorganized the leadership of the department with a focus on learning supports as a major departmental support initiative.

In August 2012, an overview of the work on addressing barriers to learning and teaching was presented to Superintendent Bice's senior leadership staff by the lead team from UCLA and Scholastic, Inc. The UCLA team of Dr. Howard Adelman and Dr. Linda Taylor provided a day-long training for design team members and representatives from the School Superintendents of Alabama (Dr. Eric Mackey); Alabama Association of School Boards (Sallie Howell, J.D.); and Council for Leaders of Alabama Schools (Mr. Earl Franks).

Dr. Linda Felton-Smith, Director of the Office of Learning Support, was charged with implementing the initiative as part of the department's strategic plan, Plan 2020. With support systems as one of the four pillars of Plan 2020, development of a design document for the Alabama framework was critical to move the work forward to local schools districts.

During the Fall 2012, a design team representing staff across the department met and drafted the design document.

The work is driven by the reality that school improvement efforts need leadership and guidance to insure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school, thereby increasing the graduation rate and closing the achievement gaps. The design team recognized the untiring efforts to improve instruction, but also the need to develop better ways for schools, families and communities to support learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching. To that end, the design document is a structured framework for Alabama's system of learning supports.

Note: The roll out of the design will begin with implementation in nine districts during the Fall 2013. Other districts will be phased in over the coming years.

WHAT ALABAMA'S DESIGN COVERS

Need

The design document highlights that:

"There is great concern and debate about how to raise student achievement, reduce dropout rates, address disparities among children from different socio-economic backgrounds, close racial and ethnic achievement gaps, serve transient students and immigrant populations, and increase the level of expectations of—and support for—all children. Improved instruction alone cannot address the wide range of barriers to teaching and learning that interfere with schools reaching their improvement goals."

Barriers to learning stem from neighborhood, family, school, peer, and individual factors and these barriers "contribute to large numbers of students having difficulty at school, with some youngsters becoming chronically disconnected, and this has fundamental implications for school improvement. There must be an understanding of why students become disconnected and, to aid in their success, it is incumbent upon the adults to implement supportive strategies to re-engage them in the classroom learning process."

"The current efforts to address barriers to learning, teaching, and re-engage disconnected students are spread across sections and initiatives. ... In order to accomplish the essential goal of public education for all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school, research studies indicate the need for developing a comprehensive multifaceted, and unified system of learning supports."

Belief Statements and Intent

As part of the rationale underlying the work, the following belief statements are articulated:

1. There must be an overarching belief that each student is entitled to receive the supports needed to ensure that he or she has equal opportunity to learn and to succeed in school.
2. A Learning Supports System doesn't just focus on an individual student with problems. A school-based learning supports leader and leadership team represents the type of mechanisms needed for overall cohesion and ongoing development of learning supports programs and systems.
3. A Learning Supports System is a process by which schools, families and communities facilitate learning by alleviating barriers, both external and internal that can interfere with learning and teaching.
4. A Learning Supports System is essential to alleviate the fragmentation that exists within current systems and increase the effectiveness and efficiency by which they operate.
5. The challenge is to transcend what any one system alone can provide.
6. The role of the state and regional agencies is to align, assist, and support community level changes.

The intent in designing the system is described as the challenge of "fully integrating into school improvement policies and practices a systematic focus on how to:

• Reframe current student/learning supports programs
• Redeploy resources

- Develop in-classroom and school-wide approaches, including learning supports found effective in our High Poverty/High Achieving schools
- Develop the capacity to implement learning supports through leadership training
- Revamp infrastructures at the school, district and state levels
- Develop and implement accountability indicators directly related to the Learning Supports System and fully integrate them into school improvement accountability"

About Integrating Learning Supports into School Improvement Policy and Practice

The document acknowledges that:

"Prevailing approaches to school improvement emphasize two components: Instruction and Management/Governance. There is virtually no major emphasis on developing a comprehensive component focused on learning supports. The focus on instructional insight and the implementation of quality initiatives alone will not help Alabama cultivate continued educational improvement. Teachers continue to be frustrated by factors that undermine student engagement in the learning environment and many of the issues seem to be beyond the control of the teachers and schools. The design presented here is intended to change this perception."

"For Alabama students to travel the road to success, a synchronized integrated system is needed ... and can be conceptualized with the following [three component] framework:

- *Instruction:* Learners and Professionals providing guidance for best practices for effective instruction

- *Management:* Site management by school and school system administration providing best practices in leadership and guidance

- *Learning Supports:* A unified and comprehensive system in classrooms and school-wide providing learning supports that are fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice to improve teaching and learning."
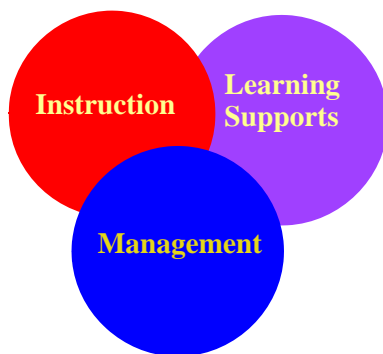
Learning supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports that directly address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

A comprehensive learning supports system provides supportive interventions in classrooms and schoolwide and is fully integrated with efforts to improve instruction and management at a school.

Six Learning Supports Areas

CLASSROOM-BASED APPROACHES TO ENABLE LEARNING

- Ensuring classrooms have necessary supports
- Ensuring rigorous and relevant learning environments
- Ensuring classroom and school-wide approaches used to create and maintain positive climate
- Pledging customized supports to districts via Regional Planning Teams and Regional Support Staff
- Implementing school-wide discipline plans

SUPPORT FOR TRANSITIONS

- Transitioning early childhood to school
- Transitioning into a new class
- Transitioning between school levels
- Transitioning precipitated by family moves and between communities
- Transitioning from school to adulthood
- Transitioning from plans/programs within the schools
- Transitioning from residential treatment facilities to schools

HOME & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOLING

- Supporting families in respectful two-way communication between home and school
- Building capacity to enhance family involvement
- Promoting parent programs that enhance family support of student learning and performance
- Involving families in student decision making
- Informing families of their rights and responsibilities in all educational services
- Addressing specific support and learning needs for families

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Building capacity to enhance community involvement and support in school districts
- Establishing mechanisms to recruit, screen, prepare, and maintain a wide range of community resources
- Coordinating and integrating services from various community agencies to meet the individual needs of students

CRISIS ASSISTANCE AND PREVENTION

- Ensuring immediate assistance in emergencies so students canresume learning
- Providing Follow up care as necessary
- Forming a school-focused Crisis Team to formulate a response plan and take leadership for developing prevention programs
- Mobilizing staff, students, and families to anticipate responseplans and recovery efforts
- Creating a caring and safe learning environment
- Working with neighborhood schools and community to integrate planning for response and prevention
- Staff/stakeholder development focusing on the role andresponsibility of all in promoting a caring and safe environment

STUDENT AND FAMILY INTERVENTION

- Providing extra academic and/or other support as soon as a need is recognized
- Monitoring and managing extra interventions for adequacy and effectiveness
- Enhancing access to direct interventions for health, MH, and economic assistance
- Establishing mechanisms for resource coordination and integration between schools and communities to avoid duplication and enhance effectiveness of services

Continuum

"The six learning supports areas are all part of an operational infrastructure that is synchronized to provide a continuum of interventions. The overarching purpose of the interventions is to:

- promote healthy development and prevent problems
- act early to address problems as soon as they occur
- intervene with chronic and more serious problems

Operational Infrastructure

Following the intervention framework is a section on "Framing the Operational Infrastructure for a Comprehensive Learning Supports System at All Levels." It notes: "In the context of Alabama's Learning Supports System, operational infrastructure refers to the mechanism necessary to plan, develop, implement, evaluate, and sustain the system at all levels. The intent is to improve schools, so the infrastructure should be designed from the school outward. The question becomes: How will a learning supports system look at my school? Then, the focus expands to include the mechanisms needed to connect a family/feeder pattern of schools and establish collaborations with community resources."

The infrastructure design emphasizes that "it is crucial to establish district, regional, and state leadership for this work at a high enough level to ensure the administrators are always active participants at key planning and decision-making tables.

Ultimately, central district units need to be restructured in ways that best support the work at the school and school complex levels. Indeed, a key guideline in designing district, regional, and state operational infrastructure is that the mechanism must provide leadership and build capacity for:

- Establishing and maintaining an effective learning supports infrastructure at every school
- Connecting a family/feeder pattern of schools."

Special emphasis is given in the document to establishing a resource oriented mechanism [i.e., a Learning Supports Leadership Team]. "This mechanism becomes an integrated facet of the infrastructure at a school and of the school improvement process. [At schools] Learning Supports Leadership Teams bring together representatives of all relevant programs and services. Members of the team may include, but not be limited to:

- School counselors, psychologists, nurses, social workers, attendance and dropout counselors, health educators, special education staff, after school program staff, English Language Title I program coordinators, and school safety staff.
- Also included on the team should be classroom teachers, non-certificated staff, parents and older students.

If a separate team is not reasonable, existing teams, such as student or teacher assistance teams, school crisis teams, or school improvement teams could expand their role to fulfill this larger role."

Accountability

The plan also includes a description of the accountability mechanism Alabama has adopted called *Deliverology*. Deliverology stresses a clarification of "goals through identifying problem areas, developing a strategy to improve those areas, and setting up benchmarks in order to monitor progress."

Standards

The final section of the document lists *Standards for a System of Learning Supports.*

Interested in Learning More?

As the Alabama design document indicates, our Center at UCLA is working with pioneering states and districts across the country to help them unify and develop their system of learning supports.[1] To broaden the platform for the work, we have entered into a collaboration with Scholastic and with the American Association of School Administrators.[2] We also are facilitating the *District and State Collaborative Network for Developing Comprehensive Systems for Learning Support*.[3]

If you want more information about any of this or if you want to share the work being done at state and district levels to develop a unified, comprehensive, and systemic approach to addressing barriers and re-engaging disconnected students, please contact us at Ltaylor@ucla.edu .

[1] *Where's it Happening? Trailblazing and Pioneering Initiatives (and lessons learned)*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm
[2] See http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/rebuild/rebuilding.htm & http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/aasa/aasa.htm
[3] http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/network/network.html

What you can do: Start a Discussion About Developing a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

(1) Circulate a brief introductory document to the district leadership team – see for example,

Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf)

(Note: if this document doesn't seem to fit the local situation, there are others to choose from in Section A of the Center's Rebuilding Toolkit –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm)

(2) Follow-up by providing information about a few of the other places that have pursued development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. Specifically, refer to the following:

>***Brochures from Districts and State Departments***
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita1a.htm
>***Examples of State and District Design Documents***
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb1a.htm

(3) To answer typical questions raised in the process, see and share as needed material from

>***Q & A Talking Points*** (in Section A of the Center's Rebuilding Toolkit)
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita2.htm

(4) Review the documents:

>***Developing a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: First Steps for Superintendents Who Want to Get Started***
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/superstart.pdf
>***Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports at a School: Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff***
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf

The Role of a Leadership Team in Transforming Student and Learning Supports

In moving toward a *Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*, schools must establish an administrative leader who is accountable for system development and sustainability. To make the job feasible, the leader will need to create a *resource*-oriented team (e.g., a *Learning Supports Leadership Team)*. Schools have *case*-oriented teams (i.e., a team that focuses on individual students who are having problems), but they rarely have a *resource*-oriented team focused on building a system of learning supports.

A Learning Supports Leadership Team

In appreciating the difference between resource and case-oriented teams, consider the following tales as metaphors for addressing barriers to learning.

> The day after a great storm washed up all sorts of sea life onto the beach, a youngster set out to throw back as many of the still-living starfish as he could. After watching him toss one after the other into the ocean, an old man approached and said: *It's no use your doing that, there are too many; you're not going to make any difference.*
>
> The boy looked at him in surprise, then bent over, picked up another starfish, threw it in, and replied: *It made a difference to that one*!

This story nicely reflects the commitment we all have to assisting individual students.

The resource-oriented focus is captured by a different story:

> In a small town, one weekend a group of school staff went fishing together at the river. Not long after they got there, a child came floating down the rapids calling for help. One of the group on the shore quickly dived in and pulled the child out. Minutes later another, then another, and then many more children were coming downstream and needing help. Soon every one was diving in and dragging children to the shore and then jumping back in to save as many as possible. In the midst of all this frenzy, one of the group was seen walking away. Her colleagues were irate. How could she leave when there were so many children to save? After long hours, to everyone's relief, the flow of children stopped, and the group could finally catch their breath. At that moment, their colleague came back. They turned on her and angrily shouted: *How could you walk off when we needed everyone here to save the children?*
>
> She replied: *It occurred to me that someone ought to go upstream and find out why so many kids were falling into the river. What I found is that the old bridge had several planks missing, and when children tried to jump over the gap, they couldn't make it and fell through into the river. So I got some folks to help fix the bridge.*

This is a good way to think about prevention. And it underscores the importance of taking time to improve and enhance resources, programs, and systems.

School adjustment problems, misbehavior, grade retention, truancy, and dropouts are just a few examples of frequent and predictable problems confronting school staff. Rather than just focusing on such problems as discrete entities and responding student-by-student, a *Learning Support Leadership Team* makes analyses to identify contributing system factors and how various problems overlap. They recognize that some students are reacting to stressors, while others are proactively drawn to act in ways that lead them into trouble. They understand that the same behaviors may stem from different causes and that the same causes can produce different behaviors.

Learning supports' leaders work to improve and enhance resources, programs, and systems

Based on their analyses and with a commitment to prevention, the team focuses, first and foremost, on systemic changes in order to address as many factors as feasible that are causing problems. With a view to developing a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated system, they pursue strategies for weaving together the siloed activity at the school and whatever resources the community can bring to fill critical gaps.

In general, a preventive approach to many learning, behavior, and emotional problems at school begins with potent interventions to ensure students are welcomed and connected with ongoing social supports during every major school transition. Then special attention is paid to identifying and providing assistance quickly whenever students manifest school adjustment problems.

In terms of a continuum of interventions, a *Learning Supports Leadership Team* works to ensure that the school's improvement plan:

- Develops broad-band practices (often designated universal approaches) to ensure welcoming and ongoing social supports, promote healthy development, and prevent problems

- Enhances personalized instruction to accommodate minor adjustment problems (e.g., providing a few more options to enable effective functioning and make participation more attractive)

- Provides personalized special assistance as necessary at school and through community referrals (e.g., identifying as early as feasible those not making a good adjustment and those who remain uninvolved due to major barriers, an intense lack of interest or negative attitudes, and/or lack of capability).

Working with Teachers

Teachers can't and shouldn't be expected to do it all alone. From the perspective of addressing barriers to learning and teaching, student/learning support staff can team with teachers to modify classrooms in ways that enhance a caring context and a learning environment that is highly responsive to learner differences in motivation and development.

For example, student/learning support staff can

- assist with enhancing teacher professional development

- work in classrooms to support teachers as they implement new practices

- enlist teacher involvement in developing a comprehensive school-wide focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Enhancing support staff collaboration with teachers is key to effectively addressing barriers to learning and teaching

With specific respect to personalizing teaching, teacher and support staff collaboration facilitates appropriate grouping strategies for turning big classes into smaller units. This enables use of a variety of reteaching strategies that accommodate individual needs and differences. It also allows for more effective teaching of necessary prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes that some students may not have acquired. Finally, such staff collaboration can enhance the role teachers play in addressing major barriers that interfere with classroom learning and performance, including providing special assistance for specific students and families as needed.

Addressing Misbehavior and Engaging Students in Classroom Learning

Because behavior problems are so disruptive, the tendency is to focus a great deal of teacher and support staff time and attention on stopping misbehavior. From a learning supports perspective, misbehavior must be addressed in ways that maximize the likelihood that the teacher can engage/re-engage the student in instruction and positive learning. From a motivational perspective, the aim is not social control per se, but to (a) prevent and overcome negative attitudes toward school and learning, (b) enhance motivational readiness for learning and overcoming problems, (c) maintain intrinsic motivation throughout learning and problem solving, and (d) nurture the type of continuing motivation that results in students engaging in activities away from school that foster maintenance, generalization, and expansion of learning and problem solving.

Are you ready to build bridges? Here are a Few Relevant Center Resources

Besides references already cited in the other articles, see:

>*Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports at a School: Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf

>*Rethinking How Schools Address Student Misbehavior & Disengagement* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring08.pdf

>*Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School* – http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagingandre-engagingstudents.pdf

>*Addressing School Adjustment Problems*– http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/adjustmentproblems.pdf

>*School Attendance: Focusing on Engagement and Re-engagement* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolattend.pdf

>*Dropout Prevention* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/dropoutprevention.pdf

Center News

Latest Center Report

>*Matching Students and Instruction:
The Dilemma of Grouping Students*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/grouping.pdf

Also note that we have a Quick Find on
Ability Grouping & Tracking –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/abgrouping.html

New Directions Initiative

We are always pleased to hear about state departments and school districts that are pursuing new directions for student and learning supports. The folks at School District of La Crosse (WI) sent us the following video link to share how they are using our frameworks to rebuild their system. See brief video at –
http://youtu.be/-QmhekE7__k

New Series on Barriers to Prevention

Prevention of learning, behavior, and emotional problems is a long-standing concern. Despite the many compelling arguments for prevention and for minimizing the impact of factors interfering with learning and teaching, policy makers in schools and agencies have yet to make prevention a high priority. So, we have begun to develop a series of resources to underscore the reasons for this state of affairs in hopes of clarifying ways to address barriers to prevention policy, practice, and implementation. See**:**

>*Preventing Student Problems:
What are the Barriers?*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/preventseriesintro.pdf

>*Barriers to Prevention in Schools:
A Look at What's Happening*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/preventseriespolicy.pdf

Want resources? Need technical assistance?

For the latest Center resources and activities, go to *What's New* at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu

For technical assistance, e-mail ltaylor@ucla.edu

From the Center's homepage, access:
>Upcoming conferences & workshops   >Calls for grant proposals & presentations
>Training and job opportunities   >Upcoming and archived webcasts
  If you would like to add information to these, send specifics to ltaylor@ucla.edu

If you're not directly receiving our resources such as this Quarterly e-journal/newsletter, our monthly electronic newsletter (*ENEWS*), or our weekly *Practitioners' Interchange*, send your E-mail address to smhp@ucla.edu

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**School improvement
is a paradox.**

**That's right. Everyone is
going down the same road
in different directions.**

*If I am on an
operating table,
I don't want
collaborators,
I want an
integrated
system!*"
Bill Milliken

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

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