

(2/4/26) This continuing education resource is from the national
Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

Featured

(1) Impact of peers on academic ambitions

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And, as always, you will find

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**This community of practice *Practitioner* is designed
for a screen bigger than an Iphone.**

For discussion and interchange:

>Impact of peers on academic ambitions

From: ***Friends Can Help to Aim High: Peer Influence and Selection Effects on Academic Ambitions and Achievement***

“The period of early adolescence represents a crucial phase in the development of self-concept and academic motivation. Between the ages of 10 and 12, conceptions of ability and future ambitions or goals become more coherent, and their impact on students’ motivation and academic performance becomes more apparent

During early adolescence, friendships become increasingly important compared to earlier stages of life, and friends can influence a variety of behaviors and attitudes. Early adolescents often modify their academic aspirations, motivation, and behavior to align with the academic standards, norms, and values of their peers.

In addition to the direct transmission of academic values, motivations, and ambitions, the academic achievements of peers can also shape students’ aspirations. The academic achievements of peers, particularly close friends, serve as a benchmark for social comparison, leading to adjustments in one’s own ambitions or academic performance....

However, the development of academic aspirations and achievement are interrelated and can be mutually reinforcing. Encouraging high aspirations among disadvantaged students can reduce educational inequality, but only if they are accompanied by resources to help them achieve their goals....”

Center Comments: A 2025 review of U.S. K–12 schools highlights that peer network structure (e.g., who students choose as friends, social network position) significantly affects academic outcomes. Low-achieving students are especially sensitive to peer network effects (<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1444570/full>).

Related to this are the many groupings that make up youth cultural associations (<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/youthintro.pdf>). As with other cultural considerations, there are positive aspects of youth culture which can enrich individual lives, and there are negative facets to be countered. The ongoing dilemma is one of maintaining an appreciation of individual differences at the same time one is enhancing understanding of youth culture and intervening when necessary.

The benefits students derive from identifying with a culture include status, support, safety, resources, nurturance, learning opportunities, a sense of community, and many other positive

contributions to development and well-being. A major concern for those addressing barriers to learning and teaching is when negative peer pressure leads disengagement from school.

<https://www.ijfmr.com/papers/2024/5/28091.pdf>;
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schooleng.pdf>

For more on this, see our online clearinghouse Quick Finds:

>*Peer Relationships*

>*Youth Culture & Subgroups*

For discussion and interchange:

>Improving student/learning supports at rural schools

Rural schools regularly report they do not have enough resources to help address students' problems. And the few specialists working in rural areas often must travel long distances and have limited time for providing school staff, students, and families with support and consultation. Given the sparsity of resources, it is essential to

- (1) weave together a network of school and community support and advocacy for students who need extra assistance and accommodation

and

- (2) enlarge the number of aides, paraprofessionals, and volunteers.

https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infra_small_school_notes.pdf

Taking these actions, not only coalesces existing resources, it can strengthen school-community connections. In turn, this can pave the way for developing supports into a more comprehensive and equitable system (<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>).

For more on this, see *[A Policy & Practice Framework to Guide School-Community Connections](#)* in *Rural Special Education Quarterly*.

Here's an excerpt from another relevant recent article

From: *[Beyond traditional models: A qualitative study of barriers and facilitators to rural teen mental health](#)*

"...Not only were youth in rural areas at higher risk of mental health challenges... but they face unique or increased challenges to accessing the limited services available. Individual barriers like stigma and negative perceptions about help-seeking (e.g., engaging in mental health services in small towns where residents are familiar with each other), lack of information, issues with internet connectivity, and difficulty traveling to therapy, are prominent and reduce access. Youth in rural areas are also more likely to rely on school based mental health services and less likely to seek specialist services compared to urban youth....

One theme emerging from the discussion of barriers and facilitators to support is that many of the barriers associated with traditional mental health supports includes limited availability of services and waitlists, financial concerns, and transportation... Limited availability was by far the most common barrier... While this was well-known... it can be hard for teens to do "a very brave thing" by saying they need help, only to encounter a dearth of services, which might be common particularly in a rural community....

Teen participants were unique in sharing that a lack of online resources is a barrier to access. While some teens preferred to access resources in person, some teens did report that having to go somewhere in person would be a barrier. Overall, there was a push and pull between a desire for in-person support and a desire for anonymity... Teens, talked about the availability of teletherapy, which removes some barriers (e.g., transportation), but adds others (e.g., internet connectivity). Teens appreciated that teletherapy allows you to participate online rather than in person and noted generally that online resources are more readily available. ...

Community-based interventions – Others focused on alternative interventions in the school and

rural community, and the value of cost-effective, and preventative services. There is a need to increase the number of counselors in schools or increase the integration of mental health providers in school settings, which would help because “teens spend so much time of their day at school.” Others mentioned making mental health apps or telehealth available in school settings. Teens mentioned that school-based mental health services should be more generally focused on mental well-being, than on the impact of mental health on school.

Outside of school, some participants mentioned opportunities to create connectivity in communities and “find ways to bring kids with mutual interests together.” Some participants mentioned that summer programs could be beneficial, and another suggested creating a community center that addressed all aspects of wellness, from mental health to physical health. Formalizing peer-to-peer support was another suggestion....

Discussions of prevention included implementing mental health curriculums teaching about emotions and self-regulation in earlier grades. Discussions of increased collaboration included embedded care in primary care practices and increasing communication between mental health systems and the community, including community centers like libraries where teens congregate....

Though teenage participants did not frequently report parents or caregivers to be among their trusted support, they did identify some adults as supportive (e.g., school counselors, teachers) and expressed an interest in involving caregivers more. Indeed, participants from all groups discussed a need for mental health education, including for parents and caregivers of teens....

Another potentially cost-effective approach, given the barriers noted regarding insurance, cost and access, involves community centers, peer-support programs, and structured extracurricular activities which offer valuable opportunities for social connection to mitigate the effects of isolation and loneliness . Social support is critical in improving mental health outcomes among teens. Community-based workshops, webinars, and local outreach programs provide additional opportunities to engage in resources and extend education into the broader community. These interventions can be particularly beneficial in rural settings, where access to formal mental health services is limited....

The study's results highlight the need for innovative, community-specific strategies to address the mental health challenges facing rural teens. Emphasizing the role of trusted adults, school-based services, and teletherapy can enhance accessibility and reduce stigma, while early and preventative educational interventions for teens and caregivers can build resilience and mental health literacy. Community-based programs, such as peer-support networks and summer activities, offer promising opportunities to foster connection and reduce isolation. Collaborative approaches that integrate mental health services into primary care and education systems can create long-term change. Through these approaches, policymakers, providers, and trusted adults can create a more supportive environment for teens in rural communities....”

For more on rural mental health school supports, see our Center Quick Find on

[*>Rural School Mental Health*](#)

*You've been sent to the principal
every day this week.
What do you have to say for yourself?*



About Crosswell Drive Elementary School (Sumter, SC)

The 2025 *National Award for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* was given to Crosswell Drive Elementary. A brief description of the awardee's progress is provided here.*

As described by Principal Shawn Hagerty, over the past 8 years, the school has "undertaken a comprehensive restructuring of their approach to student supports, moving from a reactive, deficit-based model to a proactive, strengths-based framework that addresses the whole child."

Leadership for the work is guided by the principal and school staff, with the aim of ensuring that "every student has access to the resources and relationships they need to thrive."

The school approached the work through "an equity lens, ensuring that their restructured supports specifically addressed disparities affecting their most vulnerable students. The school's commitment is to systemic change rather than surface-level adjustments and to developing a "model that can and should be replicated across the district and beyond."

The school has:

- *restructured their learning supports' framework* "to integrate academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports seamlessly." Rather than operating in silos, interveners "work collaboratively to identify and address the root causes of student struggles."
- established a *Student Support Hub* "to coordinate mental health services, family resources, basic needs assistance, and community partnerships."
- developed *Flexible Learning Pathways* to redesign the "daily schedule and instructional model to provide flexible learning opportunities, including small-group instruction, personalized learning plans, and intervention blocks that don't pull students from core instruction" (to ensure students receive additional support without missing critical learning time).

With specific respect to reengaging disconnected students and engaging families:

- *Mentorship and Relationship-building* – "Every at-risk student is paired with a staff mentor who maintains consistent contact, monitors progress, and advocates for the student's needs." Additional mentors and tutors are recruited from the community and high school.
- *Interest-based Learning Opportunities* – Projects, clubs, and other special learning experiences are tied to student interests and cultural experiences with a view to "reigniting passion for learning among students who have become disconnected."
- *Family Engagement* – A variety of personalized connections are pursued, including home visits, flexible meeting times, multilingual communications, and literacy nights.

The school attributes the following indicators as related to the work being done to transform student/learning supports:

- chronic absenteeism decreased by 26% over a three year period
- student behavioral incidents declined by 80% over an 8 year period
- academic proficiency rates increased by 30% in reading and 30% in mathematics
- family engagement increased by 68%
- student and family satisfaction on an annual report card rated the school excellent
- 25+ previously disengaged students returned to grade level performance
- staff retention improved by 80%

Principal Hagerty concludes that the work on transforming student/learning supports into a comprehensive, compassionate, and effective system is transforming not just the school, but the lives of countless students and families.

*Efforts to transform student/learning supports are works in progress. Over the years, we have identified five essential elements related to work on transforming student/learning supports at a school (LEA, SEA): (1) adopting a three component policy for school improvement, (2) pursuing a transformative intervention framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, (3) reworking operational infrastructure to ensure dedicated system transformation mechanisms, (4) continuous capacity building (especially professional development) to ensure the system is implemented and maintained, and (5) monitoring for improvement and accountability.

>Links to a few other relevant shared resources

- >>Leveraging the power of youth participatory action research to promote youth engagement and leadership
- >>Exploring the Pathways Through Which Teacher Support Predicts Changes in Students' Academic Coping Across the School Year: A Self-Determination Theory Approach
- >>Improving Attendance, Reducing Chronic Absenteeism
- >>Extracurricular activity participation, school belonging, and depressed mood: a test of the compensation hypothesis during adolescence
- >>School attendance and school absenteeism: A primer for the past, present, and theory of change for the future
- >>Increased Use of Extended Foster Care Allows More Young People to Benefit
- >>Concerns about MTSS

A Few Upcoming Webinars

For links to the following and for more webinars, go to the Center's Links to Upcoming/Archived Webcasts/Podcasts

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

2/4 Strategies for Strengthening Title I Supports for Homeless Students
2/5 Turn communication into an enrollment booster
2/10 Strengthening school community partnerships
2/10 Prevention core competencies
2/11 Building Resilient Teams, Coalitions and Communities
2/16 ADHD in Youth: Practical Strengths-Based Supports
2/17 Teaching students life skills
2/24 Whole school approach
2/25 Family therapy in foster care
2/25 IEP meetings for your child with mental health needs
2/26 Teaching children to care
2/26 Transitioning to a new school on an IEP
3/3 Strong leaders make strong schools
3/5 Building belonging in school
3/24 Student voice and advocacy
4/15 Supporting Grief-Sensitive Classrooms

How Learning Happens (Edutopia's series of videos explores guiding all students, regardless of their developmental starting points, to become engaged learners).

Unpacking the Impacts of Structural Racism on Youth (Webinar recording)



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.

See:

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

To Listserv Participants

- Please share this resource with others. (Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and this is a critical time for action.)
- Let us know what's going on to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 140,000 on our listserv.)

For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Looking for information? (We usually can help.)

Have a suggestion for improving our efforts? (We welcome your feedback.)

We look forward to hearing from you! Contact: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF THE PRACTITIONER*

***THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND
INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!***

**Send resources ideas, requests, comments,
and experiences for sharing
Ltaylor@ucla.edu**

*Who Are We? Our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor.