

Featured

(1) *Preparing for peer involvement in newcomer transitions*

(2) *Do you know how to make sustainable systemic changes to improve mental health in schools?*

And, as always, you will find

(3) *Links to more resources*

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

For discussion and interchange:

>Preparing for peer involvement in newcomer transitions

Peers can make or break a student's transition to a new school. When a student arrives at a new school, classmates often become the most immediate source of support. One or more welcoming peers can ease anxiety, foster a sense of belonging, and help newcomers feel seen and valued. Conversely, social isolation or negative peer interactions can heighten stress, undermine engagement in learning at a time when a student is already coping with multiple changes.

Given this, student supports are especially important for those moving to a new school, and a critical facet of these supports involves intentionally connecting students with peers. Buddy systems, peer mentors, cooperative learning groups, and extracurricular activities can provide structured opportunities to build relationships. These connections do more than promote friendships – they help students learn routines, expectations, and social norms. When schools attend to peer connections as part of transition supports, they strengthen both adjustment and academic engagement.

Buddy Systems Can Anchor a Newcomer's Transition

Buddy systems help new students by providing an immediate, personal connection to the school through a supportive peer who understands the setting from a student's point of view. Having a designated buddy reduces the uncertainty that often accompanies transitions – such as not knowing where to go, how routines work, or whom to ask for help. Buddies offer practical guidance (finding classrooms, understanding schedules, navigating lunch or recess) while also serving as a friendly face in an unfamiliar environment, which can reduce anxiety and build confidence.

Beyond logistics, buddy systems support social and emotional adjustment. A buddy can help a new student feel included, interpret unwritten social norms, and make introductions to other peers. This early sense of belonging is critical for engagement and persistence, especially for students who may already feel vulnerable. Over time, buddy systems also benefit the buddies themselves by fostering leadership, empathy, and responsibility – enhancing a school culture in which students actively look out for one another.

As schools plan for the next school year, well designed peer support strategies require intentional structures and practices that can help newcomers develop positive relationships, feel accepted, and learn how to navigate a new school environment. The most effective approaches are seen as sharing three features: they are welcoming, structured, and ongoing, rather than left to chance.

Key peer support strategies include:

- **Peer leadership and ambassador programs** – Student leaders can serve as school ambassadors, welcoming new students, giving tours, and organizing transition activities. This elevates inclusive norms while giving leaders meaningful responsibility.
- **Peer mentoring or buddy systems** – New students are paired with trained peers who model positive behavior and act as a safe social bridge during the first weeks or months.
- **Small peer groups or advisory circles** – Grouping newcomers with a consistent set of peers for discussion, problem-solving, or social-emotional learning can reduce isolation and encourages trust. Such groups emphasize peer interaction but are guided by an adult.
- **Cooperative learning structures** – Purposefully designed classroom activities – such as team projects or partner work – create natural opportunities for interaction around shared goals. When roles are clearly defined, all students can participate without social pressure.
- **Clubs, extracurricular activities, and shared-interest groups** – Participation in sports, arts, service, or interest-based clubs helps students form friendships around common passions rather than social status. Schools can ease access by actively inviting and guiding new students into these activities.

Taken together, these strategies recognize that peers are powerful agents of adjustment. When schools deliberately connect new students with supportive peers, they reduce social stress, strengthen belonging, and create conditions that support both emotional well-being and academic engagement. These efforts are enhanced when embedded in a school culture and teaching practices that consistently promote kindness, caring, inclusion, and respect.

Here's a brief excerpt from a related article:

***Emotion Socialization, Peer Relations, and School Belonging
During the High School Transition***

“...The transition to high school occurs during a developmental context replete with physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes, which makes this transition a key period for prevention and intervention. We found that problematic peer relations were related to lower school belonging, suggesting the importance of parents, teachers, and school administrators attending to the peer climate in high schools.

The transition to high school can provide a positive opportunity for youth to find peers with interests that fit well with their own, or may increase experiences of peer isolation and exclusion. The transition to high school often disrupts peer cohorts as multiple smaller primary schools combine and class options increase, making it a pivotal time to establish positive peer contexts that may carry through the remaining years of high school...

Given that youth demonstrate more advanced social cognition and are more focused on peer relationships during adolescence, SEL programming focused on social awareness and relationship skills may be particularly beneficial for high school students and translate to a stronger sense of community and belonging in school....”

For more on Peers, see our Center Quick Find on:

>[*Peer Relationships and Peer Support*](#)

For more on Peer, see our Center Quick Find on:

>[*Supports for Transitions*](#)

For discussion and interchange:

>Do you know how to make sustainable systemic changes to improve mental health in schools?

Request from a colleague:

“I recently came across your research on school based mental health programs and addressing barriers to student learning. ... What stood out to me is your emphasis on building a unified system rather than relying on fragmented supports. That shift feels fundamental.... In your experience, ... what methods do you consider most effective for creating sustainable systemic changes that support long term healthy development?”

Center Comments:

As emphasized in our **2024 report**, making multifaceted, complex, and sustainable improvements – at both the school site and systemwide levels – requires explicit attention to four interrelated sets of intervention considerations:

- Developing a multifaceted intervention prototype for system improvement
- Reworking operational and organizational infrastructure to support initial implementation, day to day operation, and continuous improvement of the prototype
- Pursuing systemwide replication that is sustainable and renewable
- Ensuring enabling policy support and ongoing policy revision

While implementation efforts may focus primarily on one of these considerations, we stress that the four are functionally interdependent. Problems that surface during implementation rarely stem from failure in only one area; instead, persistent difficulties reflect misalignment across all four. Viewed through this lens, the challenges observed in efforts to bring any new approach into schools are best understood as symptoms of incomplete development across the full set of considerations rather than isolated implementation failures.

With specific reference to mental health in schools, we stress the importance of embedding mental and behavioral health within a broader intervention framework designed to promote engagement, address barriers to learning, and enhance overall student well-being. Such a framework delineates developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

For more on our approach, go to ***Transforming Student/Learning Supports & Enhancing Equity of Opportunity: A Journey of Lessons Learned***

See Chapter 2. “Student/Learning Supports: What Needs Changing?”

- >Student/Learning Supports: Fragmented and Piecemeal
- >Efforts to Deal with Fragmentation
- >Fragmented Supports are a Symptom of Policy Marginalization
- >Needed: A Three Component Framework for School Improvement

Comments from the Field:

We asked a couple of with colleagues to comment on this; here are their responses:

1. “For me, methods for creating lasting change are rooted in leadership processes and practices rather than implementing new “things” to support healthy development. And these leadership processes and practices are generic. They can (and should) be applied to all aspects of educational improvement.
A first step is to start with the end in mind and have a clear picture of what the goal looks like. If healthy development is the goal, how is that defined? How will you know that students are healthy? Can healthy development be quantified? What are indicators of healthy development? Asking these types of questions will help school leaders better understand what it is they want to achieve. The clearer the goal, the more clear the path to that goal becomes.

Once the goal is understood and shared throughout the system, a next step is to understand what

research tells us about achieving that goal. It goes without saying that leaders should stick to reputable journals and publications that don't try to "sell" a product or program. Read and learn. Share findings. Then come to an agreement about what seems to be most important for achieving the identified goal.

Next - apply those findings to your school and measure them! What already exists and how much more is needed? How do you know? Based on your study of the research, what is missing? Answering questions like these can get messy. The important thing to keep in mind is that your goal needs to drive the types of data collected. The research studied to date should also help direct the types of data needed - in case school leaders don't have everything they need to make informed decisions. Then a judgement is made on what is "acceptable" and where the leaders should focus first.

Once you know where you're going (Healthy Development Goals) and where you currently are (based on data), it's a matter of determining how to "fill in the blanks" specified in the research. The plan for "how to" fill in the blanks will require resources and must be monitored for quality. Some plans may require a longer timeline to allow for resource generation before implementation can take place. That said, building timelines, resources and accountability into a plan will keep everyone on track. Ultimately, the indicators used to define the goal can also be used to see if the plan is working (assuming progress monitoring shows quality implementation).

Bottom line - if leaders adopt these processes and practices, they are more likely to be successful regardless of their focus."

2. "Preserving stories of how individuals and communities overcome obstacles resonates deeply with other work that people are trying to do in education. Those stories are not only powerful narratives; they are also data points that help us understand what enables people to thrive despite barriers.

Too often, systems respond to visible issues, behavior, attendance, academic struggles, without addressing the underlying drivers such as unmet behavioral health needs, language development gaps, or environmental stressors. Sustainable change requires shifting from reaction to root-cause understanding. This is illustrated by the perception most people have about poverty....

Healthy development does not occur within a single system. The strongest approaches align education, health, and community supports so that children and families experience continuity rather than fragmentation. Frameworks like the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model help organize this work. The most impactful strategies are those that begin early – those supporting language development, access to basic health services like vision and hearing, and strong relationships in early learning environments. These upstream investments shape long-term outcomes in both education and well-being, and sustainable change depends on the people implementing it. ...

What this means is equipping educators and community partners with the knowledge, tools, and support needed to respond effectively to diverse student needs, as well as creating environments where collaboration is the norm. Effective systems rely on both quantitative data (attendance, achievement, climate) and qualitative insights (lived experiences, community voice). When used well, data becomes a tool for learning and refinement rather than simply accountability....

Children and adolescents thrive in environments where they feel known, supported, and connected. Systems that prioritize relationships create the conditions for engagement, resilience, and help-seeking, which means whatever else we do, we must create positive learning climates in public and private schools, in pre-schools and after-schools, in universities and colleges, in cities and counties,

But for change to endure, policies and funding streams must reinforce—not work against—these approaches. Alignment ensures that what is valued at the system level is reflected in day-to-day practice. Ultimately, sustainable systems are those that recognize that development is shaped by interconnected experiences, across home, school, and community. When we design with that understanding, we move from isolated interventions to coherent systems that support child....

There are models/methods that you're probably aware of, but these are the ones that I've seen be effective and sustainable:

- > The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model provides a comprehensive structure for aligning education, health, and community systems. It helps ensure that efforts are not fragmented and that all aspects of a child's development, physical, social, emotional, and academic, are addressed in a coordinated way. For example, a district partnered with local health providers to offer on-site vision screenings, integrated social-emotional learning into daily instruction, engaged families through community liaisons, and used school climate data to guide supports, ensuring students receive coordinated services rather than disconnected interventions.

> The Collective Impact Method approach is for large-scale, cross-sector change. It emphasizes a shared agenda, common measures, continuous communication, and a backbone organization to coordinate efforts, ensuring that multiple partners are working toward the same outcomes. For example, a regional literacy initiative united schools, public health agencies, nonprofits, and early childhood providers around improving third-grade reading outcomes, using shared data, aligned strategies (e.g., early language development, attendance, family engagement), and the United Way coordinated efforts across sectors....

See the [Barriers to Learning Report](#) – There is a meaningful connection between documenting how barriers have been overcome and using those insights to design systems that prevent those barriers in the first place.”

For more on our Center’s take on this, see

>[Systemic Change for School Improvement](#)

>[Implementation Science and School Improvement](#)

>[Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions](#)

>[Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Starting the Process](#)

Also see the Center’s Quick Find on [Systemic Change](#)

*I hear the school assigned you a peer buddy.
How helpful is that?*



*Our experience is that: when students support each other,
learning is enhanced – and so too are confidence, belonging,
and a true sense of community.*

>Links to a few other relevant shared resources

- >>Memorial Day in the Classroom: Resources for Teachers
- >>The meaning behind Memorial Day
- >>Teaching about Memorial Day
- >>Barriers to parental involvement in education
- >>Exploring possible factors contributing to parents' inability or unwillingness to get involved in their child's education
- >>Literacy Across Academic Disciplines in Adolescence: The Integration of Social and Emotional Learning
- >>A lifeline or 'dystopian'? Schools open parking lots for homeless students and families

A Few Upcoming Webinars

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

- 5/20 Teaching with Precision: Using Microlearning to Move Students Toward Success
- 5/26 Understanding eating disorders
- 6/8 Nurturing Independence in Kids
- 6/10 Understanding Loneliness and Building Social Connections
- 6/17 Strong Teacher-Student Relationships
- 6/17 Coaching for Change: Providing Tier 1 Classroom and Behavior Management Feedback
- 8/12 Strategies for Supporting New Teacher Happiness and Success
- 9/29 Leading Teams: Building Capacity for Teacher Leaders

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)

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To Listserv Participants

We hope you will share this resource with others who may find it helpful.

And 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.)

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

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

@#@#@#@#

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

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 and now is named the
Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports.