

Center Report

Improving How Schools Address Barriers to Learning & Teaching: Escaping Old Ideas and Moving Beyond Current Trends

To paraphrase a quote about change:

For new ideas to succeed, decision makers and planners need to escape old ideas.

For some time, old ideas and ad hoc activity have dominated school improvement efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching. This has resulted in a great deal of tinkering and the introduction of a variety of special initiatives.

Unfortunately, rather than significant improvements, the efforts have mostly exacerbated the long-standing marginalization and fragmentation of how schools provide student and learning supports. And a counterproductive competition for sparse resources has been perpetuated.

The results of all this are seen in the wide-spread failure to *effectively* address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. This failure undermines the aim of enhancing equity of opportunity for all youngsters to succeed at school and beyond.

Needed is a fundamental transformation of all activity intended to address barriers to learning and teaching. The goal is to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice. Moving forward with such a transformation requires escaping the old ideas and piecemeal strategies that continue to dominate school improvement planning (e.g., ESSA planning). It also requires embedding and evolving current trends aimed at meeting priority concerns.

Ideas to Escape and Current Trends to Evolve

Too often, discussions of student and learning supports mainly focus on *services* and how to coordinate them better. The current trend toward multitiered systems of support has highlighted the need to pay more attention to prevention and early intervention. So have the widespread calls for safe schools and improving school climate. And the recent emphasis on whole child and whole school has increased interest in social emotional learning (SEL) and community schools.

Our focus here is to highlight the importance of evolving current thinking about these matters in order to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

Think Beyond Services

The number of students in many school districts encountering barriers to learning is so great that the need cannot be met by focusing student supports *primarily* on direct services (one-on-one interventions, wrap-around services).

Much greater attention must be given to classroom and school-wide interventions that can reduce learning, behavior, and emotional problems and thus decrease the numbers needing specialized services.

See: *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

*The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA,
Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu
Feel free to share and reproduce this document.

Beyond Better Coordination-Integration-Co-location of Interventions

Over the last few decades, the fragmentation of school and community practices for supporting families and their children has been the focus of many initiatives and policy reports. These have generated terms such as school-linked services, integrated services, one-stop shopping, wraparound services, seamless service delivery, coordinated school health, co-location of services, integrated student supports, full-service schools, systems of care, and more. While well-intentioned, such a limited focus has little chance of enhancing equity of opportunity on a large-scale for students across the country. Moreover, as practiced, serious unintended negative consequences for schools have been observed.

The type of *transformation* needed in how schools address barriers to learning requires

- first coalescing all student/learning supports into a primary and essential component of school improvement policy
- then developing the component into a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports that weaves together school and community resources with a view to filling critical intervention gaps and enhancing home and community engagement with the school.

See: *School Improvement Policy Needs to Move from a Two to a Three Component Guiding Framework*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/why3comp.pdf>

Beyond Current Conceptualizations of MTSS

A growing trend, fueled by federal legislation, is widespread adoption by states/districts/schools of some form of multitiered system of support (usually referred to as MTSS, although some places use other acronyms). In ESSA, for example, a schoolwide tiered model is referenced for preventing and addressing behavior problems. The tiered model is defined 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 legislation presents the tiered framework (including use of early intervening services) and specific approaches such as positive behavioral intervention and supports as strategies for enabling children with disabilities and English learners to meet challenging state academic standards and stresses coordination with similar activities and services carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

It is important to understand that current discussions of MTSS do not account for its serious limitations as a framework for student and learning supports. Among our concerns are:

- MTSS is an inadequate depiction of a continuum of student/learning supports (e.g., it simply delineates *levels* of school interventions, rather than conceptualizing a *continuum of intervention subsystems* and *the importance of weaving together school and community resources* at each level)
- it does not clarify that each tier is essential to reducing the number of students needing special assistance and how the continuum applies the principle of using the least intervention necessary and the role of response to intervention
- it does not systematically organize the arenas of intervention that schools pursue each day in addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and does not cross reference these arenas with the continuum of intervention subsystems.

Evolving away from MTSS's limitations is critical.

See: *Prototype Guide for Reframing Fragmented Student and Learning Supports into a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable Learning Supports System*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/reframing.pdf>

Need to Evolve Understanding about Safe Schools, School Climate, and Community Schools as *Emerging States*

It is not enough for stakeholders to say they want to educate the total child, ensure equity of opportunity for all students, reduce the achievement gap, increase graduation rates, have safe and drug free schools, have a positive school climate, turn all schools into community schools, etc., etc. Because they are not understood as *emergent qualities*, such ideals often generate ineffective practices and become buzzwords rather than

generating significant improvements. The desired outcomes can only emerge from transformative efforts to coalesce and improve instruction, student/learning supports, and school management/governance.

We recognize that some current initiatives are helping to enhance safer schools, generate somewhat more positive school climates, and encourage school-community collaborations. Examples include calls for addressing a myriad of mental and physical health concerns (e.g., MH education, violence and other prevention programs, trauma-informed schooling, student and family wellness centers) and moves to enhance how schools promote social and emotional development (e.g., SEL). *However*, the reality is that *emergence* of the full degree of desired system change requires that all such activity be systemically prioritized, adapted to ensure fit, and embedded into a continuously developing unified, comprehensive, and equitable school improvement plan (with realistic accountability indicators and timelines).

See: *Improving School Improvement* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

Need to Evolve Understanding that Student Problems Generally are Multifaceted and Require More than Discrete Initiatives

While some barriers to learning are the result of significant individual disabilities and disorders, external factors are responsible for the majority of learning, behavior, and emotional problems. All too familiar is the litany of interfering factors (e.g., inadequate school readiness; violence; youth subcultures that promote criminal acts, bullying, sexual harassment, interracial conflict, vandalism; frequent school changes; and a host of problems confronting immigrants and poverty laden families).

Students who only experience one type of problem are rare. For example, an adolescent referred for misbehaving or using drugs often is truant, has poor grades, and is at risk of dropping out. Misbehavior is associated with learning and emotional difficulties; learning and behavior problems become overlaid with emotional reactions; emotional problems can lead to and exacerbate behavior and/or learning problems.

Diverse school and community resources are attempting to address complex, multifaceted, and overlapping student problems. Unfortunately, at schools interventions usually are developed, organized, and function in relative isolation of each other, with practitioners spending their time working directly with specific interventions and targeted problems. For example, screening of students is frequently advocated for problems such as depression, potential violence, dyslexia, etc. When students experience problems, the trend is to refer the individual directly for assessment and special assistance, perhaps even assignment to alternative programs. When problems are severe, pervasive, and/or chronic, students are referred for a possible special education diagnosis (e.g., most often learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). In some schools and classrooms, the number of referrals is dramatic. And the need to label students in order to obtain special, categorical funding and/or reimbursement from public/private insurance often skews practices toward discrete interventions.

The reality is that schools require and staff need time to develop a comprehensive and cohesive system to address the multifaceted learning, behavior, and emotional problems manifested widely by so many students.

See: *Common Psychosocial Problems of School Aged Youth: Developmental Variations, Problems, Disorders and Perspectives for Prevention and Treatment*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/psysocial/entirepacket.pdf>

Escape the Myth That Teachers Can Do it by Themselves

Every school improvement effort calls, often unrealistically, for enhancing what teachers know and are expected to do. The reality is that, in too many schools, teachers are confronted with teaching conditions and classroom dynamics that are beyond one individual's ability to cope effectively. When teachers go into their classroom and shut the door, they are deprived of essential support and learning opportunities. Too often, negative classroom dynamics and the isolation from colleagues lead to feelings of alienation and "burn out." And, students are cut off from resources and experiences that can enhance learning and prevent problems.

Opening school doors is essential to enhancing collaboration for support and learning. It allows for in-classroom consultation, mentoring, and use of a variety of expert assistance; it enables drawing on the resources and talents of volunteers, family members, and the community-at-large. The resultant supports and on-the-job learning are especially important for preventing commonplace learning, behavior, and emotional problems and for responding quickly when problems appear. Effective collaborations are seen as key to fostering the emergence of a caring climate, a sense of community, and overall teaching effectiveness.

See: *Improving School Improvement* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

Escaping the Temptation of Pernicious Funding

Not surprisingly, the trend for some time in trying to find “extramural” funds for student and learning support has been to reach for and accept whatever is around. Increasingly, however, concerns have been raised that some sources of funding can distract from and distort development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable student/learning support system. A major example is “projectitis” – the pursuit of extramural funding for relatively short-term, small projects that end up redirecting staff attention away from system building. Another example is relying on Medicaid funding for school-based services which ends up redefining the roles of some school support staff by turning them mainly into providers of fee-based clinical services.

Extramural funding can be helpful if it is used to unify and develop student and learning supports. It can be pernicious when it pulls time and attention away from the need for system transformation.

See: *About ESSA and Funding Stream Integration* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fundinginteg.pdf>

Moving Forward in New Directions

No single program, service, or special initiative can address the range of factors interfering with equity of opportunity to succeed at school for the large number of students affected. The reality is that existing student support services effectively help only a small proportion of the many students who manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems. And the competition for resources resulting from separate advocacy for such activity contributes to the continuing marginalization and resultant fragmentation of such endeavors.

The current unsatisfactory state of affairs underscores the need for transformative changes. The time has come for escaping the systemic problems that arise from pursuit of separate, narrow agenda for student and learning supports. While districts can and do build a few islands of excellence (demonstrations, pilots) and “Cadillac models,” the scale of need (e.g., over 90,000 schools in the U.S.A.) calls for moving widely and quickly in fundamentally new directions.

About New Directions

For many years, our Center’s policy analyses have stressed that all narrow agenda for student and learning supports, including endeavors to expand mental health in schools, need to be embedded into a unifying concept such as Learning Supports and fully integrated as a primary and essential component of school improvement policy and planning. By coalescing all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, policy makers can

- avoid the unrealistic and often inappropriate call for more and more one-on-one direct services
- counter the mistaken view that co-locating community services on school campuses can ever be a sufficient approach to filling critical intervention gaps at schools and for enhancing community and home engagement
- better address classroom, school wide, and community interventions that can reduce the need for one-on-one services
- facilitate the weaving together of school, home, and community resources to reduce nonproductive competition for sparse resources, gain economic benefits, and enhance outcomes
- enhance coordination and cohesion of all resources (school, community, family) intended to support young people and achieve economies of scale.

Needed: A Policy Shift. Current school improvement planning is guided primarily by a two component school improvement framework; that is, the focus primarily is on (1) instruction and (2) governance/management. Some plans also are made for ways to address concerns about safety and specific problems that can interfere with students learning and teachers teaching. However, as stressed above, the focus on such concerns has long been marginalized, and this has and continues to produce ad hoc, piecemeal, and counterproductively fragmented and competitive initiatives, programs, and services.

The predominantly two component approach has worked reasonably well in schools where most students are motivated and able to perform up to expectations. However, the two component emphasis, plus existing student/learning supports, is grossly insufficient in schools where large numbers of students are not doing well. Substantial improvement in all “low performing” schools requires policy for development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable third component that is pursued as a primary and essential support system.



The third component becomes the umbrella under which all efforts and resources to address barriers to learning and teaching are woven together to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of interventions. When the three components are fully interconnected with each other and well integrated into school improvement policy and practice, they provide an essential foundation for promoting whole student development, enabling equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school, and enhancing school climate.

For district policy statements and a prototype for state legislation, see *Section A-3 of the Center's System Change Toolkit* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaidsA.htm> .

Making it Happen. Development of a system that transforms and sustains how schools address student/learning supports cannot be accomplished without a well designed strategic plan for systemic change and personnel who have the capacity to effect the changes. The initial means for operationalizing the third component comes from redeploying and weaving together existing school and community resources (including the frequently untapped human and social capital that students and families can provide).

See examples and guides in *Section A-4 of the System Change Toolkit* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaidsA.htm>.

The process must be guided by a carefully defined and broad intervention framework and a dedicated operational infrastructure designed to develop, implement, and sustain system transformation. A major emphasis is on facilitating school-community collaboration in ways that (a) minimize counterproductive competition for sparse resources and (b) redeploy and integrate resources to fill critical gaps in keeping with high priority needs (e.g., see *Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf>).

Learning from Early Adopters. For a look at lessons learned from pioneering efforts at state, district, and school levels, see *Where's it Happening - Trailblazers* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>. Of special interest, see the statewide work in Alabama (e.g., their design document and capacity building activity). All the places listed, even those that only flirted with changes, have and continue to teach us about the do's and don't's of system change related to transforming student/learning supports in ways that embed and evolve current activity into school improvement.

For a look at how the work is traveling, here's a link to a Canadian summary developed by EENet and the Performance Measurement and Implementation Research (PMIR) team, which are part of the Provincial System Support Program (PSSP) at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). The summary's intent is to support the selection of an evidence informed intervention by Ontario's Systems Improvement through Service Collaboratives (SISC) initiative. <https://eenet.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/Comprehensive System of Learning Supports.pdf>

Concluding Comments

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;
transforming student and learning supports
is fundamental to enabling equity of opportunity.

Few will argue against the need to end the marginalization of student/learning supports. Escaping old ideas is a first step forward. The next step is to coalesce and evolve current efforts and weave school and community resources into a primary component of school improvement policy. The aim is to transform what exists into a unified, comprehensive, equitable approach that addresses barriers to learning and teaching and re-engages disconnected students.

To do less is a recipe for maintaining widespread inequities of opportunity.

About the Center's Resources for Distance Technical Assistance and Coaching

Want resources? Need technical assistance? Coaching?

To support efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching, the Center offers a variety of ways for you to get help.

1. Quick Finds offer a fast and convenient way to access Center materials – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm> .
2. Center Staff offers free Technical Assistance and Coaching – contact Ltaylor@ucla.edu
3. Do-It-Yourself – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/selfhelp.htm>
4. Community of Practice & Exchange – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/netexch.htm>

For those Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports

System transformation is challenging (especially with everything else that has to be done on most days).

The transformation process involves (1) expanding school improvement policy so that student and learning supports are fully integrated as a primary and essential component, (2) reframing interventions to create a unified and comprehensive classroom and school-wide system, (3) reworking operational infrastructures to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing system development, and (4) ensuring effective implementation, replication-to-scale, and sustainability.

The Center offers free mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance by email and phone with teams that are moving this work forward. All this is done at no cost to those who are pioneering the work. Those making such systemic changes have found it particularly helpful when we work with them in preparing a design document and strategic plan for the work in ways that integrate the transformation into district and school strategic plans and implementation.*

CONTACT: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

*Note: Various vendors are offering coaching for this transformation. While these can be helpful (if they can be afforded), working directly with the Center, at least at the start, can ensure that the frameworks and essential system elements are understood and systemic changes are designed in ways that ensure substantive transformation, scalability, and sustainability.

All great achievements require time.

Maya Angelou