

# Students & Schools: Moving Forward

(September, 2024, 28 #12) – 38 Years & Counting

## Featured

### Forging Strong Working Relationships with Students and Families

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### Forging Strong Working Relationships with Students and Families

Welcoming and orienting students is a first step in establishing a strong working relationship with students and their families.

Then the focus turns to engaging them with school staff and activities and with others who can enhance a sense of connection to the school and its mission. The immediate focus is on facilitating positive participation in school activities and learning opportunities. In doing so, attention must be paid to

- >accounting for cultural and individual differences
- >providing social, emotional, and academic supports as needed
- >ensuring supports are in place to address barriers to learning and teaching

For some students and families, establishing a strong working relationship is relatively easy. But others have difficulty adjusting to new classes, new schools, new teachers, new classmates, etc. It is particularly poignant to see a student who is trying hard, but can't keep up.

Over the first few weeks, teachers realize quickly who has and hasn't made a good adjustment to their classroom and to the school. This is the time to address any problems before they get worse. If adjustment problems are not addressed, student motivation for school dwindles, and behavior problems increase. Misbehavior often arises in reaction to learning difficulties.

The first month is the time to be proactive. This is the time for staff development to focus on ways to minimize problems related to connecting with school. This is the time for student support staff to work with teachers in their classrooms to intervene before problems become severe and pervasive and require referrals for out-of-class interventions.

Some immediate steps to take with students and families who are not engaging:

- >Personalize staff contacts
- >Facilitate peer "buddy" supportive connections
- >Identify and draw on assets (e.g. student positive attributes, outside interests, what they like at school and in class; what families can bring to make the situation better)
- >Ask about what causing the school connection problem (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Are there feelings of alienation?)
- >Problem solve to mutually arrive at specific steps that can make things better

## **A Few Classroom Strategies to Consider When Students are Having Difficulty**

Enhance working relationships and student engagement through an emphasis on learning and enrichment options that currently are of greatest interest and which students want to and can pursue. And if a student needs some special help, here are some practices to consider:

*if a student seems easily distracted*

- identify distractive environmental factors and make appropriate accommodations
- interact with the student in ways that express warmth and caring
- personalize instruction
- have the student work in a group with others who will work inclusively

*if a student needs more direction*

- ensure someone checks with the student frequently throughout an activity to provide additional support and guidance in concrete ways (e.g., model, demonstrate, coach)
- provide support and guidance in ways that are nurturing and keyed to the student's progress and lead to next steps
- teach the student to self-monitor, self-evaluate, and elicit guidance and support

*if students have difficulty finishing tasks as scheduled*

- modify the length and time demands of assignments and tests
- modify the nature of the process and products (e.g., allow use of technological tools and allow for oral, audio-visual, arts and crafts, graphic, and computer generated products)

To enable pursuing the above strategies:

- Enhance use of aides, volunteers, peer tutors/coaches, mentors, those in the home, etc. not only to help support student efforts to learn and perform, but to enhance student's social support network.
- Encourage structured staff discussions and staff development about what teachers can do and what others at school (mentors, student support staff, resource teachers, paraprofessionals, etc.) can do to team with teachers in their classrooms to promote student success.

*What If the above Strategies Don't Work?*

- Add some tutoring designed to enhance student engagement in learning and to facilitate learning of specific academic and social skills that are seen as barriers to effective classroom performance and learning.
- Talk to others at school to learn about approaches they find helpful (e.g., reach out for support/mentoring/coaching, participate with others in clusters and teams, observe how others teach in ways that effectively address differences in motivation and capability, request additional staff development on working with such youngsters).

Only after all this is done and has not worked is it time to use the school's referral processes to ask for additional support services. As such services are added, it, of course, becomes essential to coordinate them with what is going on in the classroom, school-wide, and at home.

**For more on these concerns, see our Center resources**

- > [\*Supporting Students Experiencing Adjustment Problems as School Starts\*](#)
- > [\*Classroom-based Learning Supports to Enable Learning and Teaching\*](#)
- > [\*About school adjustment\*](#)

Also see the Center Quick Find on [\*Motivation, Engagement, Re-engagement\*](#)

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**You know you are in trouble when you already are counting the days until the end of the school year, and it's only September.**

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**>Links to a few other resources relevant to continuing education**

- >>Education Needs School- and District-Level Data to Fully Assess Resources Available to Students with Disabilities
- >>How Youth Surveys Guide Collective Community Investment and Planning: Benefits of Youth Data/
- >>Changing the Narrative on Public Education: A Communications Toolkit
- >>Report on Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2023
- >>Reimagining Narrative Approaches Through Comics for Systems-Involved Youth
- >>School Vouchers Were Supposed to Save Taxpayer Money. Instead They Blew a Massive Hole in Arizona's Budget.
- >>Preparing Schools for Educational Change: Barriers and Supports
- >>Why are kids still struggling in school four years after the pandemic?
- >>Schools have made slow progress on record absenteeism, with millions of kids still skipping class

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"The key to fostering collaboration between K-12 and higher education lies in adopting a user-centric approach. By viewing education from the perspective of the student—mapping out clear, seamless pathways from high school through higher education to careers—both sectors can better identify and address gaps and barriers. This shift in perspective would lead to more cohesive educational journeys that prepare students more effectively for the future." Diane Tavenner

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**Here's what was discussed in the *Community of Practice* during August**

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

Note: *All community of practice editions contain Links to relevant shared resources.*

- >Student voice and mental health in schools
- >Prevention, promotion, & strength-based approaches to youth mental health
- >What's involved in recruiting and retaining school professionals?
- >Need resources on students transitioning from group homes, those in foster care, and others who may have vulnerabilities
- >Is flexible learning an essential student support?
- >Behavioral/mental health evidence based interventions for use in schools
- >Does MTSS contribute to the marginalization of disabled students?

If you missed the resources and news in previous issues of the *Community of Practice*, see <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

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**>For more resources in general, see our website**

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

**>For info on the status of upcoming conferences**

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upconf.htm>

**>For info on webinars**

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

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**>Calls for grant proposals**

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upcall.htm>

**> job and training opportunities  
when available**

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/job.htm>

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Sign in local botanical garden:

*Dogs -- Please keep your owner on a leash while visiting the garden.*

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**National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports**  
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Our Center emphasizes the opportunity to start now to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

**Let Us Know about what ideas are being proposed for moving in new directions for transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.**

And if anyone is thinking about increasing the capacity of a district or school with respect to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help. Send all info to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

**>A Few News Stories** (excerpted from various news sources)

**Reinventing Report Cards: Reading, Writing, Collaboration and Other Work Skills.** Five states and the creator of a mastery report card join an ETS and Carnegie effort to ditch A-F grades and highlight work skills with academics. The hope of the “Skills for the Future” collaboration is to make it easy for schools to treat so-called “durable” skills such as critical thinking, teamwork and perseverance the same as traditional subjects like math and English. That includes giving students new tests and a new report card that shows how well they have mastered those other skills as they apply to colleges or jobs.

**Did Tri-Cities schools really manage to dodge COVID’s fiscal bullet?** Public school districts in the Tri-Cities (WA) appear to have dodged a widespread “blood letting” of teacher and staff layoffs thanks to a mix of smart fiscal strategies. Local districts have slowly been curbing spending, cutting positions by way of staff turnover and retirements, and reorganizing classrooms in the years since COVID decimated student enrollment. While substantial budget cuts are often context-specific to each school district, many say they’ve struggled with a loss of state funding caused by precipitous drops in enrollment.

**Almost Authors Encourages Young Writers.** Almost Authors, a program of Jackson Hole (WY) Writers, is hosting its third program leading students ages 9-14 on a “creative freedom” journey. “Writing is a way for kids to explain things they struggle to say out loud,” Almost Authors Director Nanci Steveson said. Steveson also wants to ensure any student interested has the opportunity to participate. When she stepped in to lead the program eight years ago, her first priority was to make all Almost Authors programming free. “We students to explore the stories they hold inside themselves,” Almost Authors Director Nanci Steveson said. “Our job is to help kids transfer those stories inside of them onto the page.”

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From the story above on New Report cards

“We are convinced that there’s a lack of social and economic mobility in the U.S., and that we’ve moved from a knowledge economy to a skills economy. We want a portable transcript or wallet that shows where students are in their development, skills and abilities that they can use with employers, they can use to open the doors to college, and that are fair and reliable and meaningful for kids.” Laura Slover

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## >Comments and sharing from the field

Responses to 8/1/24 commentary: *Problems have surged since schools reopened: but schools continue to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems with limited effectiveness -- Why?*

1. "As an educator in Iowa for 35 years I would say keep funding public education. ... In addition, fund mental health staff and interventions appropriately so that, if effective, the efforts can be sustained. Educate legislators and communities regarding what constitutes effective youth mental health supports. Iowa's public education support is rapidly disintegrating. It almost appears that the priority for many is to let students, who need extra supports, and their families make it on their own."

2. "I congratulate you on your perseverance and long-term effort to build and sustain a more comprehensive student support system. I share your frustration that so little progress has been made. I looked at your PDF titled "What's in Place and What's Missing". If you search my <http://tutormentor.blogspot.com> blog for "what's missing" you'll find I've been asking this same question since 2005. ... How many other people across the country are interested in this work, may already be doing something, but are not connected to each other? As I looked at your PDF I thought of a recent article where I shared some examples of network mapping using tools like Kumu and NodeXL. I really hope you'll look at this. <https://tutormentor.blogspot.com/2024/07/understanding-complex-problems-using.html>

In my article I point to some recent projects done in the UK, New Zealand and Botswana. On their LinkedIn page they share more on a daily basis....

Imagine using your surveys to create network maps showing who's involved and who's missing, that could be sorted by city and state. Then used to recruit those who need to be involved, but are missing. It's possible. It could help answer the "Why don't more people do the needed work?" questions. ... In 2009 one of my Northwestern University interns created a concept map showing departments in the university who share the same interest, and who should be interacting and helping each other. See it at <https://chrispip.blogspot.com/2009/07/mapping-northwestern-university-for.html>

Unfortunately, as with all intern programs, he moved on and no one picked up on the ideas he shared while he was working with me. However, it's an example of what you might try to do to find resources within the university who might help you create network analysis and GIS maps, showing "who's involved, who's missing" which will help answer "What's in Place and What's Missing". I suspect that you could not only map who's doing related work at UCLA, but at universities across the country. That's possible.

I've been writing about network building, ecosystems, social capital and network analysis for many years on the <http://tutormentor.blogspot.com> site. Students working with you, and at other universities, could use my ideas as a resource to stimulate their own thinking, as well as the links I point to. If they knew they existed.... My daily thought is finding someone who will take ownership of my archives, and keep using them to help build systems that reach kids in every high poverty area with comprehensive, long-term support. You probably have a similar concern for the huge library that you have built. I continue to be available to talk about these ideas and work with you and others to implement them."

In the 8/1/24 commentary, we asked: *What's your view of what needs to happen so that many more students (and teachers) will receive the supports needed to succeed at school and beyond?*

Here is a response:

"It must be easier for everyone to get to school - bussing for everyone, more childcare options before and after school that are affordable.

The school day must include time for professionals to collaborate. Right now that time is nil or squeezed into tiny slivers which is not effective.

Principals must be given control over their faculty meetings, so the entire staff can learn together. Being given control over only 30-40 minutes of it is not enough.

There must be a way to provide efficiently and cost effectively embedded PD. If teachers are to keep up with the latest research on best practices, they must be able to try them and get feedback as they are learning by folks who are already specialists in that given area.

We need examples - in videos - of what education can look like. We keep hearing it shouldn't look like it used to, but not what it should look like and the research that supports that."

### 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 130,000 on our listserv.)
- **For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto: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!*

Send to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

### THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF ENEWS

Who Are We? Recently renamed the Center for MH in Schools and Student/Learning Supports, 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.

**For more information about the Center and its many resources, go to the website at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> or email [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu) or [adelman@psych.ucla.edu](mailto:adelman@psych.ucla.edu)**

**Send info to share with others or ask for specific resources by email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**