Moving Forward

Addressing Barriers to Learning

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Disregarding Inequities Fuels Victim Blaming

Serious concerns are being raised about the growing number of students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Public discourse increasingly cites these concerns as evidence that schools are failing.

What receives far too little attention is the role that societal and school inequities play in shaping both student difficulties and school performance outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2010; 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Reardon, 2013). When inequities are ignored, problems are misattributed – either to individual deficits or to institutional failure. In both cases, attention is diverted from opportunity-limiting conditions and, in effect, shifts blame onto those most affected (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ryan, 1971).

Reframing to Move Beyond Blaming Students

Many students struggle in school. In some settings, more than half experience significant difficulties and eventually disengage and drop out (Attendance Works, 2025). Understanding why this occurs requires moving beyond a narrow focus on student deficits.

Explanations generally fall into three categories (Adelman & Taylor, 2018):

- Person-centered causation – looking at internal deficits
- Environment-centered causation – looking at external factors
- Transactional – focusing on the ongoing transactions between individuals and their environments.

A transactional perspective recognizes that some students bring vulnerabilities, some environments create barriers, and most difficulties emerge from person-environment transactions (Adelman & Taylor, 2018; Bandura, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sirin, 2005). This lens shifts the focus from diagnosing deficits to addressing mismatches between a person and environmental factors.

To underscore this point, we apply a transactional framework to differentiate student problems along a continuum (Adelman & Taylor, 2018). See Exhibit A.

Exhibit A: Applying a Transactional View of the Primary Causes of Student Problems

Type I – Environment	Type II – Environment↔Person Transactions	Type III – Person
Problems primarily caused by environmental factors	*Problems caused by transactions between environment and person*	*Problems primarily caused by factors within the person*
Examples - Poverty and chronic stress - Inadequate instruction - Family instability - Bias and discrimination	Examples - Person vulnerabilities exacerbated by nonaccommodating instruction - Behavior problems triggered by school climate - Cultural and language mismatches	Examples - Neurological disorders - Severe learning disabilities - Serious emotional disorders
Primary Focus of Intervention Improve environments and reduce inequities	*Primary Focus of Intervention* Address environment factors *and* individual supports	*Primary Focus of Intervention* Personalize specialized interventions

To further clarify the exhibit: Problems caused primarily by environmental factors are placed at one end of the continuum and designated as Type I problems. For many students – particularly those growing up in conditions of poverty, discrimination, or hostile environments – these conditions should be the first focus when hypothesizing about the origins of learning, behavior, and emotional difficulties. And they should be the first focus for intervention.

At the other end of the continuum are Type III problems, which stem primarily from factors within the individual, such as significant disabilities or disorders.

Along the continuum are Type II problems, with difficulties arising from varying degrees of a transactional mismatch between the environment and the individual. That is, these problems are best understood as the product of individual characteristics and environmental failure to respond appropriately. These are students whose learning, behavior, or emotional problems are not inevitable, but emerge because their differences are not accommodated – or are responded to in ways that exacerbate the problem.

Of course, at every point along the continuum, problems reflect transactions between person and environment; what varies is the relative contribution of each. The midpoint represents situations in which difficulties arise equally from a mismatch.

When Differences Are Seen as Deficits, Labeling and Blame Follow

Students do not need to live in poverty to experience mismatches with school expectations. Developmental variability ensures that some will not be ready for specific academic demands at prescribed times (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Reardon, 2013).

When schools fail to accommodate such variability, typical developmental differences can become sources of various forms of failure. Students who might catch up under more responsive conditions instead fall behind and are increasingly viewed as deficient, setting the stage for labeling and blame.

As students struggle academically, they often develop secondary behavior and emotional problems. At this point, system responses often shift toward diagnosis and labeling.

Diagnostic labels can be useful, but they must be used with caution. They carry powerful meanings that shape expectations, opportunities, and interventions. For example, they tend to:

- Emphasize symptoms rather than causes
- Focus attention on the individual rather than the context
- Reinforce deficit-based interpretations
- Contribute to self-fulfilling prophecies

Bias and systemic inequities further shape how students are labeled and treated, contributing to disparities in discipline, expectations, and opportunity (Gregory et al., 2017; United Way, 2025).

In systems that overlook inequities, labeling becomes a mechanism for institutionalizing blame. Students are treated as the problem, while the conditions contributing to their difficulties remain largely unaddressed.

Watch Out for the Labels

Diagnostic labels can shape how young people are seen – and how they see themselves – for better or worse. While labels may help identify patterns and guide support, they also can stigmatize, narrow expectations, and even contribute to "blaming the victim" by focusing attention on the student rather than on systemic inequities. Traditional diagnostic practices tend to overemphasize symptoms and individual pathology while underestimating environmental and contextual factors. Given the strong interplay among learning, behavior, and emotional concerns, a more equitable approach is to use labels cautiously and adopt a transactional perspective that addresses both the individual and their context.

What are Inequities?

Inequities are systematic, socially produced differences in access to resources, opportunities, and supports (AERA & Brown University, 2025; Bellwether Education Partners, 2025). Unlike differences that reflect natural variability among individuals, inequities arise from conditions that advantage some while constraining others.

For individuals, inequities are reflected in disparities related to:

- Economic conditions and the stressors associated with them
- Access to quality early learning opportunities
- Availability of high-quality instruction and learning supports
- Effectiveness of teaching and learning experiences
- Disciplinary practices, labeling, and misidentification
- School climate, including exposure to bias and discrimination
- Cultural and linguistic mismatches between students and educational settings
- Family stressors and broader community conditions, including exposure to adverse or hostile environments

For schools, inequities include disparities related to:

- Community socioeconomic context and student population needs
- Funding levels and resource allocation
- Staffing, class size, and workload
- Leadership capacity and organizational stability
- Policy and accountability pressures
- Access to student and learning supports
- Family and community engagement barriers
- Facilities and infrastructure
- Systemic bias and inequitable practices

Consider this chain of events:

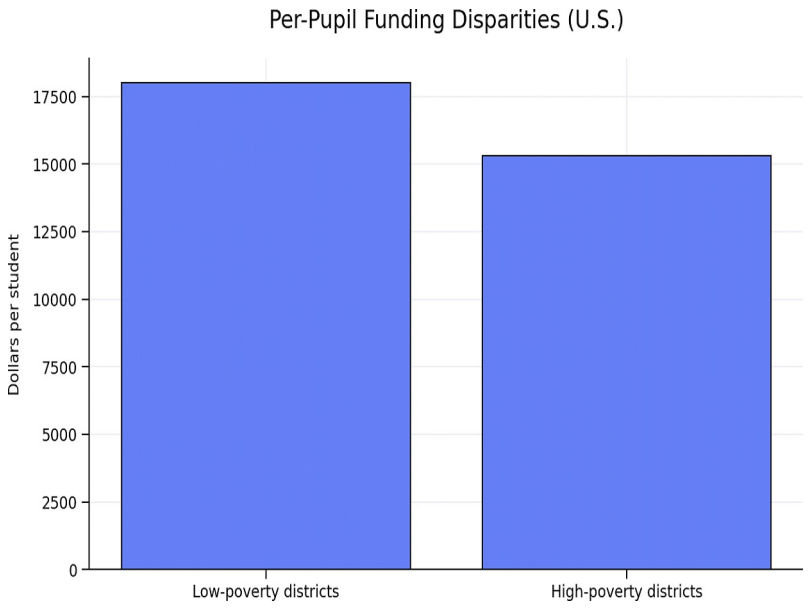
inequities → barriers → disengagement → poor outcomes → labels → blame

This progression illustrates how structural conditions are transformed into individual attributions, ultimately obscuring the role of inequities.

Consider how this process unfolds for students growing up in poverty, along with the resource constraints and instability often associated with the schools they attend (AERA & Brown University, 2025; Bellwether Education Partners, 2025.) See Exhibit B.

Exhibit B: Funding Inequities (NCES-Based Data)

- U.S. average: ~$16,526 per pupil
- High-poverty districts often receive less funding
- ~ $2,700 less per student in higher-need districts



Inequities as a Central Causal Force for a Student Not Doing Well

A transactional lens highlights the powerful role of inequities – especially those associated with poverty and group marginalization.

Children growing up in poverty often have fewer opportunities to develop the foundational skills and dispositions that schools assume (Opportunity Insights, 2018; Sirin, 2005). Families may lack access to high-quality early learning, health care, and enrichment experiences. Many also contend with chronic stressors that undermine both learning and well-being.

Poverty and instability are associated with problems in attention, memory, and emotional regulation

Many students arrive at school not having equal access to early learning, health care, stability, or enrichment. These inequities affect readiness, engagement, and performance. When schools lack the capacity to address such barriers to learning and teaching, achievement gaps widen (Reardon, 2013). The result of inequities is predictable: barriers lead to disengagement, disengagement leads to poor outcomes, and those outcomes are then treated as evidence of student deficits. Labeling follows – not as a neutral act, but as a misinterpretation.

Yet there is a striking irony.

These same students frequently possess cultural, linguistic, and adaptive strengths that schools are ill-equipped to recognize or build upon. When schools fail to leverage these assets, they contribute further to student disengagement and under-performance.

Of course, a youngster does not have to live in poverty or be a recent immigrant to lack readiness for elementary school. Some just develop a bit slower than their peers. When early school demands do not accommodate a wide range of developmental differences, these youngsters are vulnerable. For example, kindergarteners who simply have not yet developed the visual perceptual capacity to discriminate between letters or make the auditory discrimination between words are in trouble if the teacher demands they do so. And months later, when their development catches up to that demand, the class has moved on, leaving them behind.

Implicit in democratic ideals is the commitment to ensuring that *all* students succeed in school (e.g., as reflected in the Every Student Succeeds Act and its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act). If all students came to school ready and able to benefit from "high standards" curricula, achieving this ideal would be far less problematic. However, all includes many students who face external and/or internal factors that interfere with their ability to benefit from from what the teacher is offering currently – factors that contribute to significant inequities.

Providing every student with equity of opportunity to succeed requires more than calling for higher standards, increased accountability, better instruction, enhanced discipline, and safer schools. *It also necessitates addressing the broader social inequities that affect learning.*

When students and schools do not perform well, attention typically focuses on individual student deficits and school effectiveness. Far less attention is directed toward the underlying inequities that shape both learning opportunities and outcomes.

Exhibit C highlights major arenas of inequity that frequently go unaddressed – and illustrates how their effects are often misinterpreted as problems inherent to students.

Exhibit C: Commonly Overlooked Inequities Affecting Student Learning and Performance

Arena	Often-Ignored Inequities	Impact on Students	Common Misinterpretation (Blaming the Student)
Economic Conditions	Poverty, unstable housing, food insecurity, limited healthcare	Chronic stress, absenteeism, reduced readiness to learn	**Unmotivated; family doesn't value education**
Early Learning Opportunities	Limited access to preschool, literacy exposure, enrichment	Gaps in language, cognitive, and social development	**Slow to learn; developmentally behind**
School Resources	Underfunded schools, large classes, limited staff	Less individualized attention, lower instructional quality	**Low ability; cannot keep up**
Instructional Quality	Ineffective or rigid instruction, little differentiation	Mismatch between instruction and student needs	**Learning disability; attention problems**
School Climate	Unsafe, punitive, or disengaging environments	Anxiety, disengagement, behavioral issues	**Defiant; conduct problem**
Cultural and Linguistic Mismatch	Lack of culturally responsive teaching, language barriers	Misunderstanding, low participation	**Language deficit; limited ability**
Bias and Discrimination	Stereotyping, inequitable discipline and expectations	Reduced opportunities, negative feelings abour self	**Problem student; behavioral disorder**
Family Stressors	Caregiver stress, instability, trauma exposure	Emotional distress, inconsistent engagement	**Irresponsible; emotionally disturbed**
Community Conditions	Violence, lack of safe spaces/ services	Chronic stress, poor concentration	**Disruptive; at risk**
Policy Constraints	High-stakes testing, narrow accountability	Neglect of whole-child supports	**Student failure equals school failure**

Key Take-Aways

- Inequities are systemic conditions, not student deficits.
- Many performance concerns reflect contextual barriers rather than inherent ability.
- Misinterpretations often lead to inappropriate labeling instead of needed supports.
- Addressing inequities requires changes in systems, practices, and resource allocation.

Inequities as a Central Causal Force for a School Not Doing Well

The same logic applies not just to students, but to schools themselves.

Schools do not operate under equal conditions. Those serving high need populations confront greater challenges while often having fewer resources to address them (Darling-Hammond, 2010; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023). High rates of teacher turnover in such settings further disrupt instructional continuity and undermine student outcomes (Sorensen, 2019).

As inequities increase, performance predictably declines – not because schools are inherently ineffective, but because the conditions required for success are unevenly distributed. Inequities are not peripheral influences; they are central causal forces shaping both student outcomes and overall school performance. Critics who cite low achievement as evidence of school failure rarely grapple with such fundamental realities.

At its core, the problem is the unequal distribution of opportunity. Students do not arrive at school equally prepared. Differences in early learning experiences, exposure to language and literacy, access to health care, and levels of chronic stress all shape readiness to learn. Schools, in turn, vary widely in their capacity to respond. Some have the staff, time, and resources to provide individualized, enriched supports; others do not.

The result is a consistent and predictable pattern: *where inequities are greatest, outcomes are lowest*. This pattern does not demonstrate that schools are failing; it demonstrates that the necessary conditions for success are not equitably provided.

The long-standing "achievement gap" illustrates this point. Rather than reflecting student deficits or school ineffectiveness alone, it is more accurately understood as an opportunity gap – a consequence of unequal access to the supports and conditions that enable learning (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Reardon, 2013).

Importantly, most students attending adequately supported public schools do not underachieve. Their success underscores a crucial point: when sufficient opportunities and supports are provided, public education works.

Failure narratives obscure this reality. By focusing narrowly on outcomes while ignoring context, these narratives reinforce the mistaken belief that schools – and by extension, students – are the primary source of the problem. In doing so, they divert attention from the systemic inequities that must be addressed to achieve meaningful and sustained improvement.

National data reinforce these patterns, showing widening disparities and uneven recovery trends (NAEP, 2025; Stanford CEPR, 2025). Broader analyses attribute long-term declines to systemic conditions rather than isolated instances of school failure (Stanford SIEPR, 2026).

See Exhibit D for examples of major arenas of inequity affecting schools – factors that are pervasive in practice yet frequently overlooked in school improvement efforts.

Exhibit D: Major School-Level Inequities Affecting Performance and Improvement

Arena	Often-Ignored Inequities	Impact on Schools	Common Misinterpretation (Blaming the School)
Funding and Resource Allocation	Inequitable funding, reliance on local property taxes	Inadequate staffing, limited programs, outdated materials	**Inefficient use of funds; poor management**
Teacher Workforce Stability	High turnover, shortages, underprepared staff	Disrupted instruction, weak continuity	**Low instructional quality = public education failure**
Leadership Capacity	High principal turnover, limited leadership support	Inconsistent improvement efforts	**Poor leadership = public education failure**
High Concentration of Students with Problems	High poverty, language needs, support needs	Strained resources, higher demand for services	**Overwhelmed school = public education failure**
Learning Supports Availability	Few student/ learning supports	Unaddressed barriers to learning and teaching	**Disorganized school = public education failure**
Curriculum and Instruction Supports	Lack of quality curriculum, coaching	Inconsistent instruction	**Teachers are the main problem**
School Climate and Safety	Unsafe environments, punitive discipline	Reduced engagement, absenteeism	**Chaotic school = public education failure**
Facilities and Infrastructure	Poor buildings, overcrowding, weak technology	Constraints on learning	**Neglected schools indicate public education is no good**
Family and Community Engagement	Barriers to engagement, limited outreach	Weak connections, low family participation	**Families don't want to be involved with public schools**
Policy and Accountability Context	High-stakes testing, limited flexibility	Narrow focus, neglect of whole-child supports	**Failure to meet standards = public education failure**

Key Take-Aways

- School performance is strongly shaped by system-level conditions.
- Schools serving the highest need populations often have the fewest supports.
- Failure labels obscure structural inequities.
- Improvement requires addressing systemic conditions, not just pressure.

In discussing the claims that public schools are failing, Jabbar and Espinoza (2026) strike a balance:

"Critiques of public education have intensified in recent years. While some of these criticisms have merit—public education has many areas in need of growth and improvement—many of today's critiques are generated and trumpeted by organizations seeking to manufacture crises. These critical narratives about public school failure often ignore counterevidence, instead employing deceptive language to persuade the public that the system as a whole is problem-ridden, perhaps hopelessly. While honest critiques of public education can drive beneficial reforms and investments necessary for school improvement, these claims of purported school crises have led to a weakening of the public system and are attached to attempts to undermine that system."

Policy Implications: Addressing Inequities as a Central Causal Force

If inequities are a primary driver of student and school performance, then meaningful improvement in public education depends on systematically addressing those inequities – not simply intensifying efforts to change students or holding schools accountable for outcomes they cannot fully control.

Strengthen Student and Learning Supports

Many barriers to learning are non-instructional in origin, including external stressors and, physical and mental health problems (Adelman & Taylor, 2018). Policies that focus narrowly on instruction overlook these realities.

A comprehensive school improvement approach requires:

- Moving school improvement from a two- to a three-component framework, with the third component – addressing barriers to learning – established as primary and essential and fully integrated with the instructional and management components
- Developing this third component into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that includes a full intervention continuum and a well-designed set of student and learning supports
- Strengthening school-community collaborations to braid resources addressing shared concerns

These policy directions align with a transactional framework that addresses both individual and environmental contributors to student problems. This includes (a) prioritizing the reduction of environmental barriers and (b) strategically intervening across Type I, II, and III problems.

Allocate Resources Based on Need, Not Equality Alone

Equal distribution of resources is insufficient in the face of unequal need. Schools serving high concentrations of students affected by poverty, trauma, and other barriers require greater – not equal – levels of support (Bellwether Education Partners, 2025; AERA & Brown University, 2025).

Policy priorities should include:

- Implementing weighted funding formulas tied to student need
- Expanding investment in high-poverty schools
- Increasing access to student and learning supports and enrichment opportunities
- Weighted funding formulas tied to student need

Such investments are not compensatory extras; they are essential conditions for equitable learning outcomes.

Strengthen Early Childhood and Out-of-School Supports

Inequities begin well before formal schooling and extend beyond the school day and year. Addressing school performance therefore requires a broader, continuous system of support (Opportunity Insights, 2018). Policy should prioritize:

- Universal access to high-quality early childhood education
- Family support programs
- Expanded access to alternative schooling, as well as after-school and summer learning opportunities

Reducing disparities in early development and in extended learning opportunities is critical for preventing later schooling difficulties.

Counter Deficit Narratives in Policy Discourse

Public policy is shaped by how problems are framed. Narratives that portray students and schools as failing – without acknowledging inequities – often lead to solutions that emphasize punishment, privatization, or withdrawal of support.

Policymakers and educational leaders must:

- Promote a more accurate public understanding of school performance
- Highlight the central role of inequities in shaping outcomes
- Use data responsibly to avoid colluding with misleading or deficit-oriented conclusions

Shifting the narrative is essential for building public and political support for equitable and effective policy solutions.

Expand the School Accountability Framework

Current accountability systems rely heavily on achievement test scores. While these measure outcomes, they do not capture the conditions that produce those outcomes. Consequently, schools serving the most disadvantaged students are often labeled as failing and subjected to sanctions.

Policy must expand accountability frameworks to include indicators that reflect efforts to improve equity in opportunities to learn (Adelman & Taylor, 2018).

The focus should be on direct measures of effectiveness in addressing barriers and enhancing engagement, such as:

- Increased attendance and reduced chronic absenteeism
- Reduced tardiness
- Improved student engagement and re-engagement of disconnected students
- Reductions in misbehavior, bullying, and sexual harassment
- Fewer referrals for specialized assistance and special education linked to preventable factors
- Decreases in suspensions, expulsions, and dropouts

Expanding accountability in this way shifts the emphasis from labeling failure to improving the conditions that enable learning, thereby encouraging preventive, systemic approaches rather than reactive, punitive responses.

Concluding Comments

Are some students and schools not doing well? Unfortunately, that is the reality in far too many communities. The question that is not being adequately addressed is: why? Until greater attention is given to the inequities that make such outcomes predictable, those who are most affected will continue to be blamed.

Addressing inequities is not peripheral to improving public education – it is fundamental. Policies and practices that fail to confront inequities will continue to yield disappointing results, no matter how strongly they emphasize accountability or reform. By contrast, efforts that strengthen equitable conditions for learning offer a credible path toward both improved outcomes and greater fairness.

When inequities are ignored, responsibility is misplaced. Students and schools are blamed for outcomes shaped largely by conditions beyond their control. Confronting these inequities is therefore essential – not only for improving performance, but also for ensuring that public education fulfills its promise of providing genuine equity of opportunity and sustaining democratic ideals.

As our Center's work has long emphasized:

- Equity of opportunity is fundamental to securing civil rights
- Transforming student and learning supports is essential to whole child development, social justice, and a positive school climate

The frameworks and prototypes developed by the Center underscore a central conclusion: addressing inequities requires systemic transformation of student and learning supports. By shifting the focus from student deficits to environmental barriers – and from blame to system change – schools can create conditions in which all students have a genuine opportunity to succeed.

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I hear your school has adopted a new motto?

Unfortunately it has. It's "Do more with less… again."

Center Resources Update

Efforts to address inequities in student outcomes are closely tied to how student and learning supports are designed and delivered. Our latest Center report highlights this matter. See

>***Are Initiatives to Improve School-Based Mental Health Services Hindering Efforts to Transform Student/Learning Supports?***

While the initiatives discussed in the report are in one state (California), the analyses have relevance for every state concerned with improving the way barriers to learning and teaching are addressed.

For more on equity and inequity, see our Center Quick Finds:

>Racism, Equity, Social Justice, and School
>Diversity, Disparities, and Promoting Equity

Want resources? Need technical assistance? Coaching?

Start with the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Finds:

https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm

Or send us an E-mail request: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange?*

Send requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Thinking about improving student/learning supports? See

>Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions

For those involved in making system changes, you might be interested in our work on:

>Implementation Science and School Improvement

AND please share your thoughts about any matters of mutual concern.

Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

The *Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports* operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

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