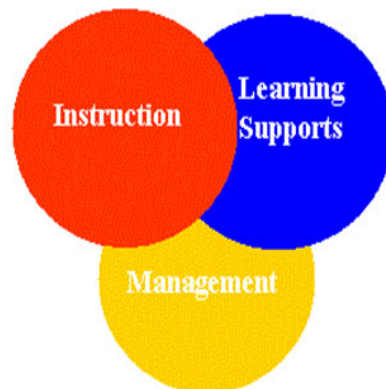


Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Starting the Process

(2024)

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To facilitate efforts to address barriers to learning, this resource is freely accessible online.
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/1ststeps.pdf>

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*Initially, the Center was named the *Center for Mental Health in Schools*; in 2017, to more fully underscore the breadth of the work, the Center name was expanded.

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Preface

In 2022, the Center sent out a document entitled: *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*. In that guide, we discussed the need for system changes to end the fragmentation, overspecialization, and marginalization of student/learning supports and outlined *first steps* to take in pursuing the changes.

As the 2022 guide emphasizes, significantly reducing the achievement gap requires a laser-like focus on closing the opportunity gap by transforming the role schools play in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. In essence, the need is for fundamental changes in the way student and learning supports are conceived and structured. And as the 2022 guide clarifies, for us that means unifying student/learning supports and developing them into a comprehensive and equitable system.

This companion document provides a detailed discussion of the first steps for moving forward, suggests a monthly schedule, and provides links to resource aids for pursuing them. We also offer a few cautions to help avoid potential pitfalls.

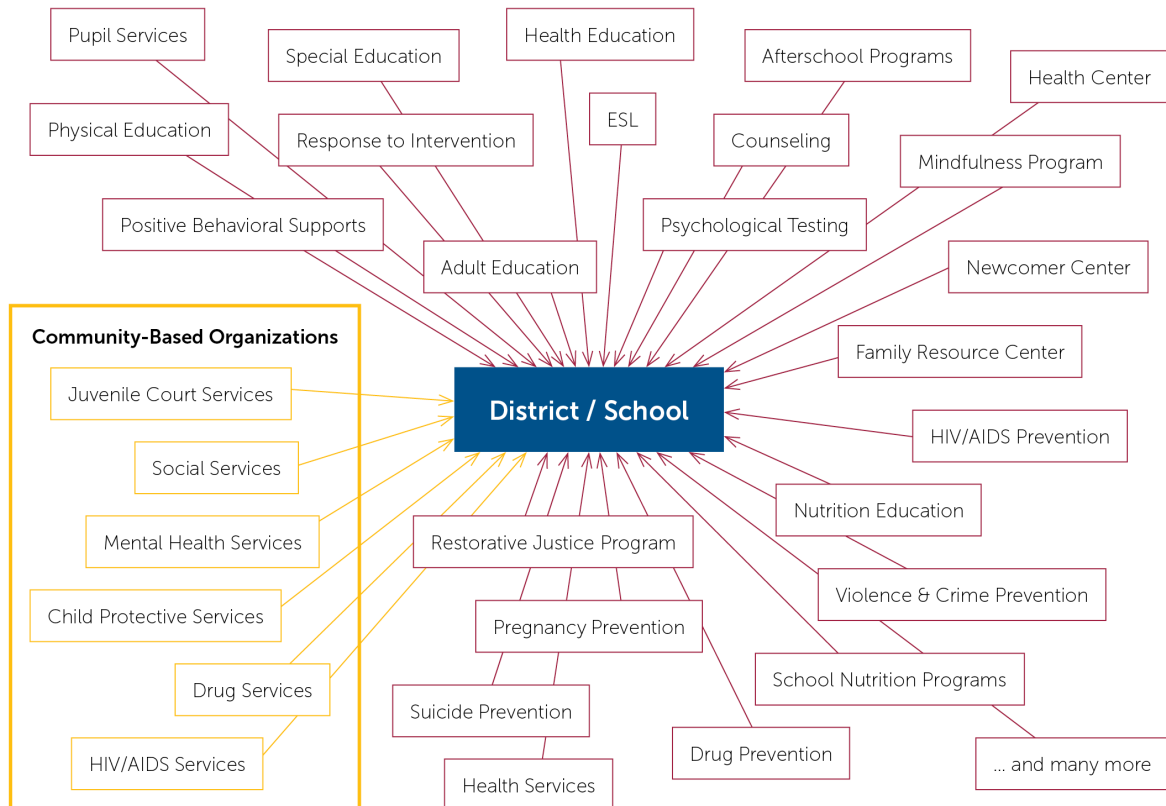
As always, we want to take this opportunity to thank the many school and community stakeholders, students and families, and the staff at our center for their continuing leadership in moving the field forward and for all that they have taught us. Their contributions are reflected in every aspect of our work.

Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor

Introduction

[This introduction provides excerpts from:
Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions.]

Awareness of the many factors that can interfere with student success at school and beyond has given rise to a variety of school programs and services and school-community collaborative initiatives. As a result, as depicted below, a great amount of activity is in play to support students, families, and staff.



Across a district, while some schools have a range of student and learning supports in place, others mainly provide whatever is mandated. In large districts, psychologists, counselors, social workers, and other specialists often are organized into separate units. Such units overlap regular, special, and compensatory education. In general, districts plan and implement student and learning supports in a fragmented and piecemeal manner – generating a variety of specialized programs and services that deal with the same common barriers to learning and teaching. Federal and state funding streams have exacerbated this state of affairs.

At many schools, student support staff tend to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with a great deal of the work oriented to discrete problems and with an overreliance on specialized services for individuals and small groups. In some schools, a student identified as at risk for grade retention, dropout, and substance abuse may be assigned to three counseling programs operating independently of each other. Such fragmentation, specialization, and redundancy not only is costly, it works against developing cohesiveness and maximizing effectiveness, and it leads to counterproductive competition for sparse resources – all of which works against reducing redundancy and enhancing availability.

Schools confronted with a large number of students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems rarely have enough resources to meet the demand. And in most schools, teachers simply do not have the supports they need when they identify students who are having difficulties.

Improvements that call mainly for more resources generally are unrealistic. School budgets always are tight; cost-effectiveness is a constant concern. In some schools, principals report that up to 25% of their budget already is consumed by efforts to address barriers to learning. Analyses of current approaches indicate extremely limited results, redundancy in resource use, and counterproductive competition among support staff and with community-based professionals who link with schools.

Over many years, increasing concern about fragmented approaches has produced calls for "integrated services" and recently for "integrated support systems." However, by focusing primarily on fragmentation, policy makers and school improvement advocates fail to deal with a core underlying problem. What drives the fragmentation is the *marginalization* in school improvement policy of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching *in a direct, unified, comprehensive, and equitable way* (see the Appendix).

The intended aim of the 2022 guide and this companion document is to make *significant improvements* in how barriers to learning and teaching are addressed at least at some schools and better yet at all schools in a district.

Moving Forward to a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Student and Learning Supports

In our experience, there always are school and district personnel who want and are ready to make major improvements in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. They are a natural pool from which a *student/learning supports workgroup* can be mobilized to initiate a process for moving forward.

Whether the focus is on improving student and learning supports at one school or all schools in a district, the process can be conceived in terms of four overlapping *phases of system change* that are strategically pursued over several years. The phases are featured below:

First Phase – Introduction and creating readiness, commitment, & engagement

(e.g., heightening a climate/culture for system change through enhancing the motivation and capacity of a critical mass of stakeholders)

Second Phase – Start-up and phase-in: Expanding operational infrastructure and Capacity and pursuing initial implementation

(e.g., reworking operational infrastructure and job descriptions to ensure effective leadership, guidance, collaboration, and support for proposed system changes)

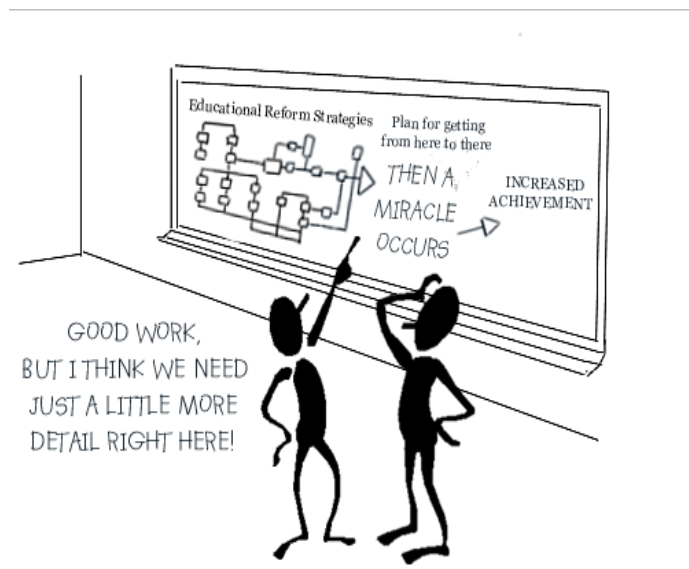
Third Phase – Institutionalizing, replicating to scale, sustaining, and evolving to enhance system change outcomes

(e.g., enhancing capacity to ensure quality improvements, adaptive scalability, and sustainability)

Fourth Phase – Ongoing Evolution and Generating Creative Renewal

(e.g., enabling system stakeholders to become a community of learners and expanding accountability to support creative renewal)

Presentation of the strategic tasks associated with each phase can be found in Chapters 16 and 17 of [Improving School Improvement](#).



With respect to the *first two phases* noted above, we highlighted seven steps in *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions* for creating readiness and moving forward. The steps are adaptable at school, district, or state agency levels. At each level, the process is envisioned as beginning with establishment of a *workgroup* of interested and concerned stakeholders (hopefully, including key administrators).

The steps have been refined for this document as follows.

First Steps in Transforming Student/Learning Supports

The assigned *student/learning supports workgroup* pursues tasks related to Steps 1-3.

Step 1. delineating what is in place & recommending system changes – Specifically
(a) mapping existing student support activities and operational infrastructure,
(b) analyzing what has been mapped,
(c) identifying priorities for and clarifying the benefits of system changes,
(d) developing recommendations for system changes,
(e) building a critical mass of support

Step 2: submitting recommendations for approval by appropriate authorities and policy makers with a written supportive policy commitment

Step 3: facilitating establishment of a high level steering group as part of the temporary change agent mechanisms for championing, facilitating, and monitoring the improvements in student/learning supports

Once established, the *Steering Group* pursues tasks related to Steps 4-7.*

Step 4: establishing a permanent administrative position to transform and lead a student/learning supports component of school improvement

Step 5: establishing a student/learning support leadership team as a permanent operational infrastructure mechanism to work with the administrative lead

Step 6. designating temporary mechanisms for facilitating system changes (e.g., change agents, coaches)

Step 7. facilitating formative evaluation and accountability of the above steps

*Examples of tasks related to Steps 4-7 include:

- >identifying and training change agents, coaches
- >building staff capacity related to system changes
- >reworking the existing operational infrastructure to ensure effective planning
- >initial implementation of the changes
- >initiating formative evaluation
- >ongoing development of the transformation of student/learning supports
- >*permanent mechanisms* for system development/improvement (i.e., an administrative leader and a leadership team for student/learning supports).

What follows is an expanded discussion of first steps, a suggested monthly scheduling, and links to resource aids for pursuing the tasks involved. We also offer a few cautions to help avoid potential pitfalls.

Getting Started

The process can be started at the grassroots level or with a decision made by education leaders (e.g., at a school, LEA, SEA).

In what follows, the first steps are discussed with specific respect to *school level* activity. However, keep in mind that the steps can readily be adapted at the district and state agency levels.

The first steps are designed to be carried out over a period of months. We suggest beginning the process by doing several steps during the summer and pursuing the remaining steps after the school year begins. If summer work is not feasible, begin the process early in the school year using about a month to do Step 1.

The initial mechanism for moving forward is a *student/learning supports workgroup*.

Such a group can be initiated with relatively few people as long as they are motivated and able to carry out the necessary tasks. The group might include an administrator, a school board member, a couple of student/learning support representatives, a teacher, a designated system change facilitator, and as appropriate and feasible, a student.

The workgroup is a temporary system change mechanism that is replaced once it facilitates establishment of a Steering Group (Step 3).

In carrying out its tasks, the group can draw on many resources that the Center has developed and placed online (e.g., see the [*System Change Toolkit*](#)), and we also provide free distance **coaching and technical assistance**.

STEP 1

About a month or two to complete

Step 1. *delineating what is in place & recommending system changes*

Specifically

- (a) *mapping existing student support activities and operational infrastructure,*
- (b) *analyzing what has been mapped,*
- (c) *identifying priorities for and clarifying the benefits of system changes,*
- (d) *developing recommendations for system changes,*
- (e) *building a critical mass of support*

a) Mapping.* The focus is on

- >all current school activities used for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students(including those accessed at the district and those the community brings to the school)
- >clarifying the names, roles, functions, and schedule of student and learning support staff working at and with the school
- >delineating the current leadership and operational infrastructure for student/learning supports

Mapping is best done using a template. In this respect, there is a tendency simply to use a multi-tiered framework (e.g., MTSS). However, given the limitations of such a framework, we suggest a more comprehensive intervention framework, as well as a three component framework for mapping the operational infrastructure. See the following aids.

>>*Mapping Learning Supports*

>>*An Aid for Initial Listing of Current Resources Used at a School*

>>*Leadership Infrastructure: Is What We Have What We Need?*

*The information produced by the mapping is essential for undertaking the next task (i.e., making analyses). And the mapping alone is useful as information that can be shared in various ways with different stakeholder groups. Products can be developed to facilitate planning, to clarify available resources and how to access them, and to publicize school efforts to enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. Some schools simply reproduce their mapping products and post and distribute them to staff and other stakeholders. Others expand the process to ensure there is greater awareness and enhanced appreciation of the work by including major, strategically placed public displays (e.g., in halls and staff rooms) and highlight the work in newsletters provided to a wide range of stakeholders.

b) Analyzing. The focus is on

- >*what's working* – accessing available “data” on effectiveness of current interventions, general system status, and infrastructure for leadership and operations
- >*what's not working* – clarifying which are worth improving and which are wasted resources (including redundancies)
- >*gaps* – identifying current gaps with specific reference to pressing needs
- >*fragmentation* – degree to which the approach is uncoordinated
- >*policy support* – is the emphasis on student/learning supports marginalized in school improvement policy? how much is being spent on addressing barriers to learning and teaching?
- >*implications for intervention improvements* – which are and are not worth keeping; which are worth taking steps to improve; which gaps need immediate attention; what is needed to increase cohesion and enhance policy support
- >*needed operational infrastructure changes* – identifying weaknesses in the operational infrastructure for student/learning supports

Done properly, mapping and analyses of resources provide a foundation for making decisions about how to move forward in improving student/learning supports. The objectives are to (a) clarify gaps with respect to assessed needs, (b) identify immediate priorities for improvement and system development, and (c) recommend (re)deployment of resources to best meet priorities and to do so in a cost-effective manner.

c) Identifying priorities and benefits of system changes. The focus is on

- >*clarifying immediate priorities for moving forward* – schools differ in terms of pressing needs and priorities; these must be identified and accounted for.

Examples of priorities include delineating what supports and resources are available for schools to reduce absenteeism, maintain the well-being and connection of engaged students, ensure special education IEPs are met, help teachers and families quickly when they identify students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems, help all staff address barriers to learning and teaching, and outreach to disengaged students in ways designed to re-engage them in instruction. **At the same time** – since immediate needs at a school often are mainly discussed in terms of reacting to student and teaching problems, it is important to add in a focus on practices that can prevent problems. And with respect to system transformation, consideration must be given to organizational changes that enable effective pursuit of student/learning supports.

- >*delineating benefits of making improvements* – an extensive and growing body of literature underscores the need for a potent system of student/learning supports at schools, especially those with a significant number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems and high teacher turnover. Current approaches have been grossly inadequate. Our research emphasizes the need to move toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that directly addresses barriers to learning and teaching. Such a system is essential for schools to play their role inclosing the opportunity and achievement gaps and preparing students to be effective citizens.

See:

- >>[*Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure*](#)
- >>[*Eight Points to Consider about Why Schools Need to Transform Student and Learning Supports*](#)
- >>[*Moving Prevention From the Fringes into the Fabric of School Improvement*](#)

d) Developing prioritized recommendations for proposed system changes. The focus is on

- >*addressing a school's/district's priorities* – Major system changes usually have to be made over times beginning with addressing priorities. Some priorities may only involve operational changes that can be made administratively; others can be implemented by redeploying resources and/or integrating funding streams*
- >*highlighting ways existing resources can underwrite improvements* – Given how limited funds are for schools, major system changes initially must rely on existing resources to underwrite the work. This includes redeploying funds from ineffective and redundant practices, reframing the roles and functions of existing student support staff, reducing fragmentation and redundancy, weaving together resources from different funding streams, achieving economies of scale by working with a family of schools, integrating school and community resources related to overlapping concerns, using professionals-in-training, expanding the roles of volunteers, and eventually making savings as the need for expensive services is reduced.

See:

>> ***What will it cost? – No New Dollars!***

>> ***About Funding Stream Integration***

Also see:

>> ***Lessons Learned from Trailblazing and Pioneer Initiatives***

*In making recommendations, the tendency usually is to propose

- >adding a few more personnel to help address learning loss and MH problems
- >simply embracing the MTSS framework
- >adopting/adapting the Full Service Community Schools model
- >enhancing coordination and integration of services

Such approaches clearly are relevant and can be built upon, but they are insufficient in meeting the needs at too many schools for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families. And by themselves these efforts ignore and too often impede making essential changes in school improvement policy and guiding transformative system improvement in student/learning supports.

Included in the recommendations and highly prioritized should be the type of system changes that are needed to make a significant dent in the increasing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems schools encounter every day.

Systemically conceived and implemented, such a transformative approach can

- enable teachers, support staff, administrators, and all other personnel at a school to work together to reduce learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- develop classroom, school-wide, and community interventions that enhance efforts to personalize learning and address student problems, promote a safe and nurturing school climate, and promote academic success and general well-being
- facilitate school, home, and community collaboration to weave together resources (including human and social capital) in order to enhance system development, coordination, and cohesion, garner economies of scale, and enhance outcomes
- reverse the unrealistic and often inappropriate trend toward more and more one-on-one direct services by schools.

(e) **Developing a plan to build a critical mass of support for the recommendations among key stakeholders.** The focus is on

- > *introducing key stakeholders (at school, community, district levels) to why major changes are essential and what is involved (e.g., benefits, basic ideas, relevant research, costs).* To these ends, a brief introductory overview can be prepared. It is particularly helpful if a prototype design document has been adopted or adapted (e.g., see the “brochures” and design documents developed by pioneering efforts across the country <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaidsA.htm>).
- > *providing opportunities for interchange & additional in-depth presentations*
- > *ongoing assessment until a critical mass of stakeholders indicate readiness/commitment to move forward*

About Creating readiness

In the rush to implement innovations, it is all too common to give short shrift to enhancing readiness. Any move toward substantive system change calls for devoting sufficient time to building a *critical mass* of support among key stakeholders. Too often, proposed changes are thrust upon school staff and other stakeholders with little attention to ensuring sufficient readiness and commitment.

Creating a supportive climate for major system changes requires taking time to develop substantive understanding of and commitment to recommended improvements. The road to successful implementation begins with key stakeholders putting aside old ideas and committing to moving forward. And keep in mind that enhancing understanding and commitment are ongoing concerns.

Note: In many ways, this step involves the use of “social marketing” strategies. Social marketing is an important tool for fostering a critical mass of stakeholder support for efforts to change programs and systems. This form of marketing draws on concepts developed for commercial marketing. But in the context of school and community change, we are not talking about selling products. We are trying to build a consensus for ideas and new approaches that can strengthen youngsters, families, and neighborhoods. So think about the concept in terms of influencing action by key stakeholders. See: *Social Marketing as a Spiraling Facet of Program and Systemic Change* .

STEP 2

Plan on another month for Steps 2 and 3.

Step 2: *having prioritized recommendations approved by appropriate authorities and policy makers with a written supportive policy commitment.* The emphasis is on

- >presenting the recommendations for approval and asking that the system changes be written into policy and given high level commitment and support (e.g., ensuring that there is leadership, staff, space, budget, time, capacity building)
- >stressing the importance of developing regulations that ensure the improvements are planned in ways that phase in changes using a realistic time line and with clear incentives for change (e.g., intrinsically valued outcomes, expectations for success, recognitions, rewards, protections)*

*Part of having recommendations acted upon involves decision makers enacting them into formal policy. Effective implementation is associated with policy assigned a high level of priority and translated into a set of regulations that assures committed leadership, well supported capacity building, positive incentives and elimination of most disincentives, and that emphasizes supportive accountability.

To these ends, regulations should include a directive to translate implementation plans into detailed and realistic multi-year (e.g., 3-5) year strategic and action plans that are fully integrated into the overall plan for school improvements. As highlighted by Steps 3-7, such plans need to delineate how necessary changes will be accomplished, who will steer and lead the development of the work, what the new staff responsibilities are, and what will be used as accountability indicators.

See:

>[*Board Policy– a Unified, Comprehensive, & Equitable System of Learning Supports*](#)

>[*General Guide for Strategic Planning Related to Developing a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*](#)

Note: If the decision is to “pilot” the improvements, we recommend against having the work referred to as a pilot, project, or demonstration.

School staff involved in piloting improvements commonly think about their work as a time limited demonstration. And, other school stakeholders also tend to perceive the work as temporary (e.g., “I’ve seen so many reforms come and go; this too shall pass.”). This mind set (often referred to as “projectitis”) adds to the widespread view that new activities will be fleeting, and it contributes to fragmented approaches and the marginalization of initiatives. It also works against the type of system changes needed to sustain and expand major school improvements. For more on this, see: [*Turning a Project or Pilot into a Catalyst for Systemic Change and Sustainability*](#)

STEP 3

Step 3: *facilitating establishment of a high level steering group as part of the temporary change agent mechanisms for championing, facilitating, and monitoring the improvements in student/learning supports.* The emphasis is on

>ensuring that decision makers have convened an official Steering Group of *high level* power leaders to champion, steer/guide, problem solve, clear barriers, and overcome indifference or resistance to the work. The aim is to ensure that personnel making the improvements maintain a big picture perspective, have sufficient capacity (support and guidance), and make appropriate progress.*

*As noted, the steering group is a *temporary* mechanism. At a school level, the group might consist of a school board member, a district administrator, the principal, a member from the leadership workgroup, the administrative lead for student/learning supports, a community leader, a system change facilitator, and as appropriate and feasible, a student.

It is essential that group members are up-to-date on all relevant information related to what needs to be done and how to make it happen.

Initially, the group probably needs to meet formally once a week, with informal contacts as needed. To work against the perception that it is a closed, elite group, it can host "focus groups" to elicit input and feedback, provide information, and problem solve.

The Steering Group pursues the following steps related to reworking the existing operational infrastructure to ensure effective planning, initial implementation, capacity building, formative evaluation, and ongoing development of the proposed improvements. It ensures the initiation of *temporary mechanisms* for facilitating system changes (e.g., change agents, coaches) and *permanent mechanisms* for system ongoing development/improvement (i.e., an administrative leader and a leadership team for student/learning supports).

As discussed in the system change literature, the support of such a group makes an invaluable contribution to innovation success.

See: *Change Agent Mechanisms for School Improvement: Infrastructure not Individuals*

The Steering Group pursues Step 4 to ensure appointment of an administrative leader for student/learning supports in the school's (district's) permanent operational infrastructure. Once appointed, the administrative leader joins the Steering Group and proceeds to form a leadership team that also becomes part of the permanent operational infrastructure (Step 5). Step 6 adds temporary mechanisms for facilitating proposed system changes.

STEP 4

Use another month to pursue Steps 4-6.

Step 4: *establishment of a permanent administrative position to transform and lead a student/learning supports component of school improvement*

The Steering Group focuses is on

>facilitating assignment of an administrative-level *Student/Learning Supports Lead* and ensuring this leader is at administrative planning and decision making tables so that the system's ongoing improvement and effectiveness is a regular part of the agenda*

*The person chosen must be someone who sees this as an opportunity for the school (district) to move from mainly reacting to student problems and who understands the aim is to develop a transformative system of student/learning supports. Small schools (districts) may not have enough administrative personnel and will need to assign a lead from the staff who focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

The leader's job description must reflect the responsibilities and accountabilities associated with the proposed system changes and appropriate professional development and resources must be provided for accomplishing the work.

See: *Leadership at a School Site for Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*

STEP 5

Step 5: *establishment of a student/learning support leadership team as a permanent operational infrastructure mechanism to work with the administrative lead.* The emphasis is on

>identifying members for the team and having the assignments approved

>working with team to develop a *system design document and strategic and action plans*, have them approved and fully integrated into the school improvement plan

>helping others to understand what is involved in the planned system changes

>guiding the ongoing development and implementation of the transformed student/learning supports

See: *What is a learning supports leadership team? **

*Members of the initial workgroup who want to continue are natural core members of a student/learning support leadership team; other key staff can be assigned. Team members' job descriptions must reflect the responsibilities and accountabilities associated with the proposed system changes and must be provided appropriate professional development and resources to do the job.

Critical first tasks involve adopting/adapting the system design "document," preparing the strategic and action plans, ensuring that the work is fully integrated into the school's

(district's) overall strategic plan. As the work proceeds, the team helps clarify, analyze, identify priorities; recommends resource redeployment; establishes and guides workgroups for developing each facet of the system over a period of time.

Each year, based on updated resource mapping and analyses with respect to critical needs, a set of realistic developmental priorities must be formulated. The priorities are essential guides for planning and budgeting to improve how the school (district) addresses barriers to learning and teaching.

Eventually, Learning Supports Leadership Team representatives from a cluster of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern, a geographic proximity) can meet together to form a family of schools. This will allow for cross-school analyses with a view to coordinating and integrating interventions and capacity building and braid resources with a view to enhancing effectiveness and garnering economies of scale.

It is noteworthy that when we mention a Learning Supports Leadership Team, some school staff quickly respond:

We already have one!

When we explore this with them, we usually find what they have is a *student case-oriented team* – that is, a team focused on individual students who are having problems. (Such a team may be called a student study team, student success team, student assistance team, teacher assistance team, and so forth.) A related team, of course, is the IEP team. The functions of student case-oriented teams include triage, referral, and care monitoring/ management, progress review and reassessment.

Clearly, an emphasis on specific students is warranted. However, as the primary focus associated with student and learning supports, this approach tends to sidetrack development and implementation of improvements at schools that can prevent many individual problems and help many more students.

So, we designate the student case-oriented teams as one type of standing work group and contrast them with standing and ad hoc workgroups that focus on the functions related to system improvement. This involves pursuing tasks related to developing and implementing schoolwide and classroom student/learning supports and ensuring they are implemented in a unified, comprehensive, and equitable manner.

Establishing an administrative-level lead for and a leadership team as key mechanisms for driving the development and implementation of a transformed system involves a significant reworking of the school's (district's) operational infrastructure.

See a prototype example on the following page.

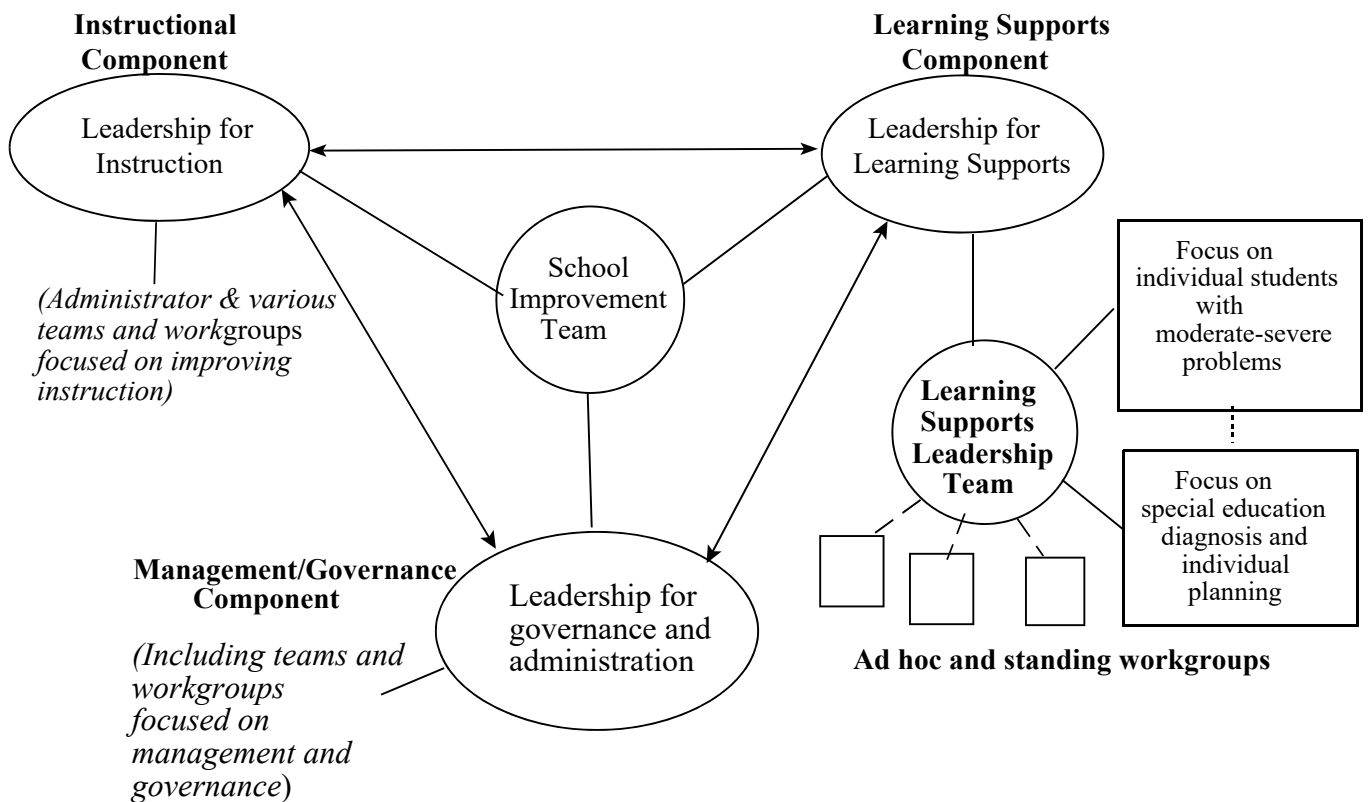
This is discussed in more detail in

- >Part II of *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
- >*Key Leadership Infrastructure Mechanisms for Enhancing Student & Learning Supports*

The following figure illustrates an operational infrastructure at the school level that fully emphasizes and integrates student/learning supports. This prototype was designed to ensure the type of interconnected leadership and workgroups necessary for daily operation and ongoing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.

Prototype for an Integrated Operational Infrastructure at the School Level

(This operational infrastructure should be paralleled at the district level, see https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf.)



Note: Each of the three primary and essential components for school improvement requires

- administrative leadership and other advocates/champions with responsibility and accountability for ensuring the vision for the component is not lost,
- a leadership team to work with the administrative lead on system development,
- standing workgroups with designated ongoing functions and occasional ad hoc workgroups to accomplish specific short-term tasks.

To ensure coordination and cohesion, the leaders for the instructional and learning supports components are full members of the management/governance component, and if a special team is assigned to work on school improvement, the leaders for all three components are on that team.

STEP 6

Step 6. *designating additional temporary mechanisms for facilitating system changes* (e.g., change agents, coaches to carry out the many tasks involved in the first and second phases of making system changes). The emphasis is first on working with the steering group and then the leadership team to

- >introduce and create readiness, commitment, and engagement among a critical mass of stakeholders (e.g., heightening a climate/culture for change through enhancing stakeholder motivation and capacity)
- >expand operational infrastructure and pursuing initial implementation (e.g., reworking operational infrastructure to ensure effective leadership, guidance, and support for the system changes)

The many tasks involved here are outlined in Chapters 16 and 17 in
>>*Improving School Improvement* .

As an example of a specific change agent role and functions, see
>>*Organization Facilitators: A Key Change Agent for Systemic School and Community Changes*

About coaching and mentoring, see
>>*Guide for Planning Coaching for SEAs/LEAs to Establish a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*

For a overview discussion of major system changes, see
Implementation Science and School Improvement.

STEP 7

On going

Step 7. *facilitating formative evaluation & accountability of the above steps.* The emphasis is on

>ensuring regular gathering of data on progress and challenges and taking any needed actions*

On the next page, see

Assessing Readiness -- Key Examples of Benchmark Indicators for First Steps.

*Initial data gathering should focus on benchmarks and be designed to provide guidance and support to foster progress. This means monitoring and analyzing all factors that facilitate and hinder progress and then ensuring actions are taken to deal with interfering factors and to enhance progress.

Once significant progress is made in developing the system, the monitoring can be expanded to evaluate *direct* student outcomes indicators of the effectiveness of learning supports (e.g., increased attendance, reduced misbehavior, improved learning).

Note: **About celebrating progress.** While it seems obvious that progress should be publicized and celebrated, every day demands make it all too easy to ignore this matter. Celebrations of progress with recognition of those who produced it should be a regular agenda and calendar item. And as improvements are made, they should be shared with all concerned stakeholders in highly visible ways.

Assessing Readiness – Key Examples of Benchmark Indicators for First Steps

Location:	Date Started	Date Completed	Current Status
<p>Step 1. Mapping, Analyses, Recommendations, Readiness – Documents providing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> >a listing of all student and learning support staff and what they do >an indepth and structured map of all school resources currently used and that the community adds to address barriers to learning and teaching >an analysis of general system status, intervention effectiveness, efforts needing improvement, critical gaps, and current redundant efforts and wasted resources >a listing of current priorities for improving the system >a set of specific & feasible recommendations for resource allocation >several indicators of how the system is being made visible >a plan (e.g., schedule, process) for updating the analyses >basic ideas and relevant research base have been introduced to key stakeholders using “social marketing” strategies >opportunities for interchange have been provided, with additional in-depth presentations made to build a critical mass of consensus for improving student and learning supports >an indication that a critical mass of key stakeholders understands as an imperative and ratifies the necessity for the system improvements <p>Step 2. Recommendations approved with policy commitment – Documentation that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> >indicates that recommendations were approved by appropriate authorities with a written policy and committed supports (e.g., for leadership, staff, space, budget, time, capacity building) >incentives for change are in place (e.g., intrinsically valued outcomes, expectations for success, recognitions, rewards, protections) 			

Continued

Step 3. *Steering group* –

Documentation that

- >a Steering Group is in place that is advocating for, guiding, and supporting efforts for system improvements

Steps 4, 5, & 6. *Operational Infrastructure* –

Documentation that

- >an administrative-level lead for the improvement effort is in place
- >a job description for the roles and functions of the administrative lead has been established
- >The lead has a general understanding of the intended improvements and is familiar with resources for preparing others to understand what is involved
- >the lead is a member of the school’s decision making and planning teams, and the work is on the agenda regularly
- >the lead has established and is leading a permanent leadership team to guide the work
- >team members have a broad understanding of the intended improvements and their specific functions
- >team has prepared a design document
- >team has prepared strategic and action plans designed to ensure effective planning, initial implementation, capacity building, formative evaluation, and ongoing development of the proposed improvements
- >the action plans includes procedural options that reflect stakeholder strengths and from which those expected to implement change can select strategies they see as workable
- >proposed student/learning supports improvements are fully integrated into the school improvement plan and any other strategic operational plans (with a realistic developmental timeline)
- >the agency’s operational infrastructure has been reworked to include the administrative lead and the leadership team for student/learning supports
- >the team is establishing workgroups to carry out facets of the strategic and actions plans
- >temporary infrastructure mechanisms for facilitating system changes are in place and effective (e.g., change agents, coaches, continuous technical assistance)

Continued

Step 7. Using Formative Evaluation to Support Progress –

Documentation that

- >mechanisms are in place for conducting formative evaluation
- >data related to key benchmarks are regularly gathered and analyzed
- >actions are taken to provide guidance and support in ways that counter interfering factors and enhance facilitation of progress
- >progress is publicized to interested stakeholders and celebrated in ways that commend those responsible

Concluding Comments

The COVID-19 pandemic and growing concerns about social justice mark a turning point for schools in how they address barriers to learning and teaching. Those adopting the prevailing MTSS framework have made a start, as have the initiatives for community schools, integrated student supports, and school-based health centers. Given the growing challenges, however, schools need to develop and implement a more transformative and comprehensive approach to student/learning supports.

We know from experience how hard it is to achieve school improvements. And, given the scale of public education, proposals for transformative system change give rise to many complications. For example, major changes in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching call for significant reworking of the operational and organizational infrastructures. They also call for enhancing in-classroom supports by retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., student and learning support personnel – psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, Title I staff, special educators, dropout/graduation support staff, etc.).

Certainly, the challenges are daunting, especially when folks are caught up in the day-by-day pressures of their current roles and functions. Everyone is so busy "doing" that there seems no time to introduce better ways.

One is reminded of Winnie-the-Pooh who was always going down the stairs, bump, bump, bump, on his head behind Christopher Robin. He has come to think it is the only way to go down stairs. Still, he wonders whether there might be a better way if he could only stop bumping long enough to figure it out.

Since maintaining the status quo is untenable, and just doing more tinkering will not meet the need, we hope this brief guide helps folks who are ready to stop “bumping their heads.” The key is to set some time aside for taking first steps to move in new directions. Hopefully, this brief guide will provide some impetus and assistance.

A Few Additional Resource Aids

Big Picture Preparation & Capacity Building

- > *Examples of State and District Design Documents*
- > *Q & A Talking Points .htm*
- > *New Directions for School Improvement Policy*
- > **And some recent books to browse**
 - >> *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
 - >> *Improving School Improvement*
 - >> *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

About Enhancing Readiness

- > *Creating Readiness and Commitment for Developing a Unified and Comprehensive Learning Supports System*

Other Aids and Guides related to getting started

- > *social marketing and public relations*
 - > *personnel development*
 - > *job descriptions*
 - > *reframing roles and functions of support staff*
 - > *blending funding streams*
 - > *benchmarks and monitoring*
- Links to the above are at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb4.htm>

About Preparing Design and Strategic Plan Documents

- > *Preparing a Design Document*
- > *General Guide for Strategic Planning*
- > *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*

For more aids, see the System Change Toolkit

- <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>
- > provides brief big picture overviews and related system improvement matters
- > provides guides for designing and planning improvements
- > guides for phasing in improvements
- > addressing the problems of system change
- > link to on-line clearinghouse *Quick Finds*

Finally, note that the UCLA Center offers free online mentoring, coaching, & technical assistance
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>

Appendix

[The following sections from *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions* is reproduced here to clarify our conceptualization of a transformed system of student/learning supports.]

Rethinking Student/Learning Supports

Ending the marginalization and fragmentation of student and learning supports includes reformulating how such supports are framed and used in confronting barriers to learning and teaching. The aim is to unify the supports and develop them into a comprehensive, and equitable approach.

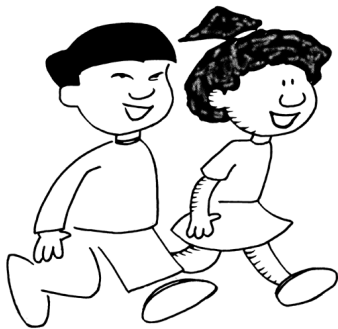
Because the multi-tiered support system (MTSS) framework has been widely adopted, Part II of this brief guide begins with a discussion of the limitations of MTSS. Where MTSS has been adopted, efforts to move forward can indicate that the framework is a move in the right direction but represents only a first step in developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach.

Here we illustrate a prototype framework for student/learning supports that can guide expansion of MTSS. The framework combines classroom and schoolwide supports into (1) an interconnected *continuum of subsystems* that weaves school and community resources together with (2) organized *domains* of student and learning supports.

The last section emphasizes that the mechanisms constituting operational infrastructures at district and school levels are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. A prototype to guide strengthening the current operational infrastructure is illustrated.

Why do you think we'll do better at school this year?

Because I heard that Congress passed a law that says every student will succeed!



Section A: Building on MTSS to Enhance the Continuum of Interventions for Addressing Learning, Behavior, and Emotional Problems

As a framework for preventing and addressing behavior and learning problems, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers a school-wide tiered model (also referred to as a multi-tier system of supports). Emphasis on the tiered model is a carryover from previous federal policy guidelines related to “Response to Intervention” and “Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.” Federal guidelines note that the tiered model is to be coordinated with similar activities and services carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The result has been that states, districts, and schools increasingly are framing student and learning supports in terms of tiers or levels.

In ESSA, 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 framework is being referred to widely as MTSS and has proven to have considerable appeal for a variety of reasons, including its conceptual simplicity.

Unfortunately, while a full continuum of interventions is essential, it is just one facet of a truly *comprehensive intervention system*. So, system building requires moving beyond the limitations of the way MTSS generally is conceived.

Limitations of MTSS in Framing Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning

Analyses indicate that the term MTSS is being adopted widely as a planning convenience often without detailing how it will be translated into practice at schools. As the term becomes yet one more set of initials, the risk is that it simply will become another school improvement buzzword. If so, it will do little to enhance a school’s effectiveness in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. Enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond requires going beyond how MTSS generally is conceived and implemented.

From this perspective, we note that most discussions of MTSS do not account for the framework’s serious limitations. Analyses indicate that MTSS is an inadequate depiction of a continuum of student/learning supports. By mainly delineating levels of intensity of school interventions, the framework does not include a focus on:

- systematically connecting the *school with community* interventions that fall into and across each level
- developing each level as a school/community *subsystem* of student and learning supports
- organizing the many fragmented approaches to addressing barriers to learning and teaching into a cohesive and circumscribed set of *domains of student and learning supports*.

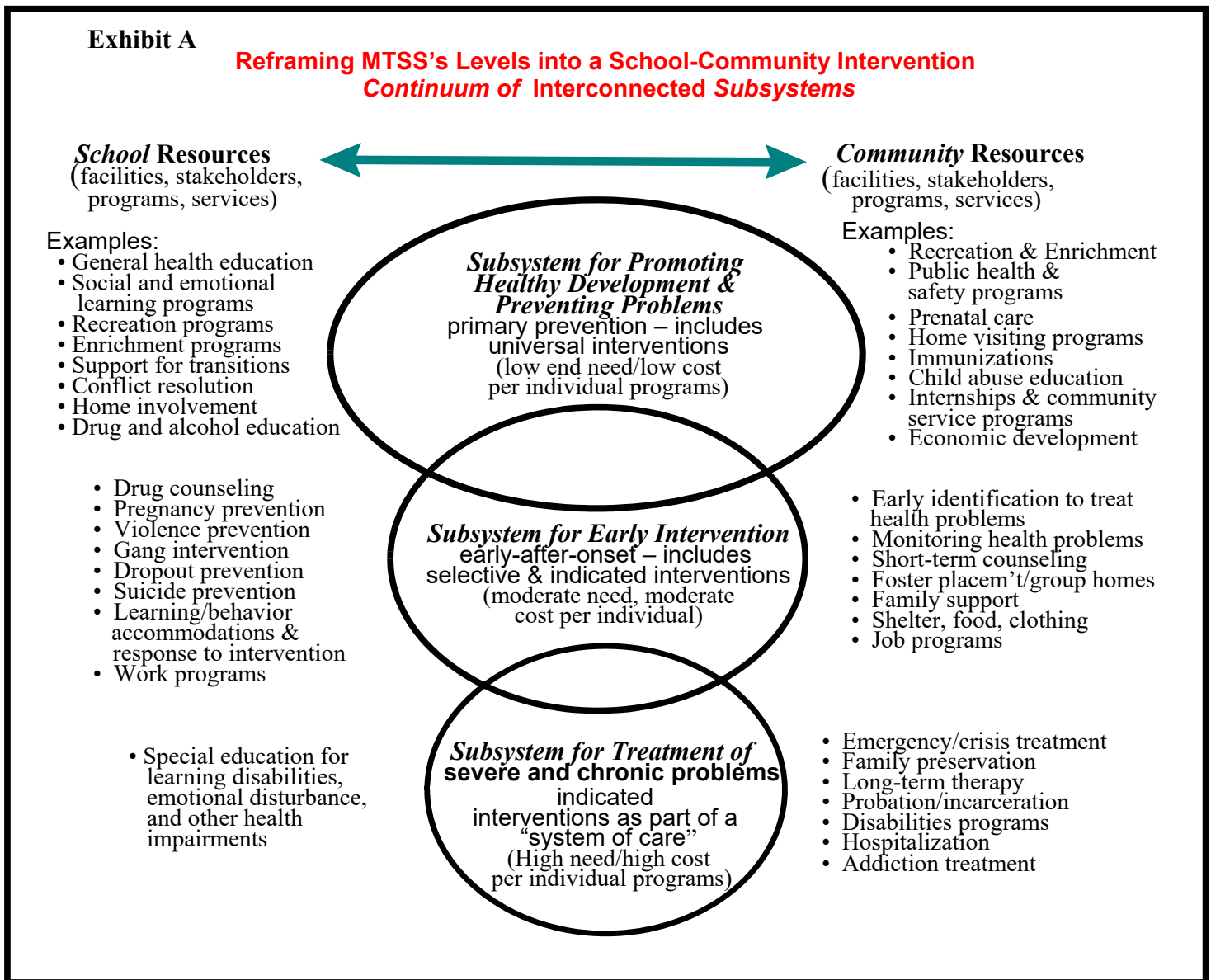
As a result of these limitations, adopting MTSS does little to end the fragmentation, never mind the marginalization, of student and learning supports in school improvement efforts.

Moving Forward Requires Reframing MTSS

A well-designed system of student and learning supports requires more than a continuum of interventions. Simply tweaking prevailing views of a multi-tier framework falls far short of planning and developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of in-classroom and schoolwide student/learning supports.

As discussed below and in the next sections, moving toward such a system involves reframing MTSS into a cohesive, multifaceted, and systemic approach. Such a approach involves both (1) an interconnected *continuum of subsystems* that weaves school and community resources together and (2) student and learning support that are organized cohesively into a circumscribed set of domains (rather than the current trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level).

This section illustrates a reframing of the MTSS continuum (see Exhibit A); the following section lays out a way to organize learning support domains.



As illustrated, the continuum levels are conceived as three subsystems. Each subsystem weaves together a wide range of school with community (including home) resources. The subsystems focus on (1) promoting whole-child development and prevention, (2) identifying and addressing problems as soon as they arise, and (3) providing for students with severe and chronic problems.

The interrelated and overlapping subsystems are illustrated as intertwined and tapering. This is meant to convey that if the top subsystem is designed and implemented effectively, the number of students needing early intervention are reduced and fewer need specialized “deep-end” interventions. (This is critical given that current evidence is that too many students are referred inappropriately for costly deep-end services.)

Points to Emphasize in Making the Case

MTSS is an insufficient organizing framework for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Given this, as states, districts, and schools adopt some version of (MTSS), they tend to box themselves in with old thinking about student/learning supports and miss the opportunity to significantly build a better system.

Those using MTSS as a intervention framework need to build on and expand their intervention framework into a *unified, comprehensive, and equitable system*. Doing so will move beyond the limitations of the MTSS framework and can lead to ending the marginalization and fragmentation of student and learning supports in schools.

The prototype presented as Exhibit 6 conceives the intervention continuum as an overlapping and intertwined set of *subsystems that weave school-community-home resources* together with the aim of

- promoting healthy development and preventing problems
- intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible
- assisting with chronic and severe problems.

The following section stresses that, rather than the current trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level of the continuum, system building benefits from cohesively organizing student and learning supports into a circumscribed set of six domains.

Section B: Categorizing Domains of Classroom and Schoolwide Student/Learning Supports

A system of student and learning supports requires more than conceiving a continuum of intervention. It also is necessary to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that reflect a school's efforts to provide student and learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide.

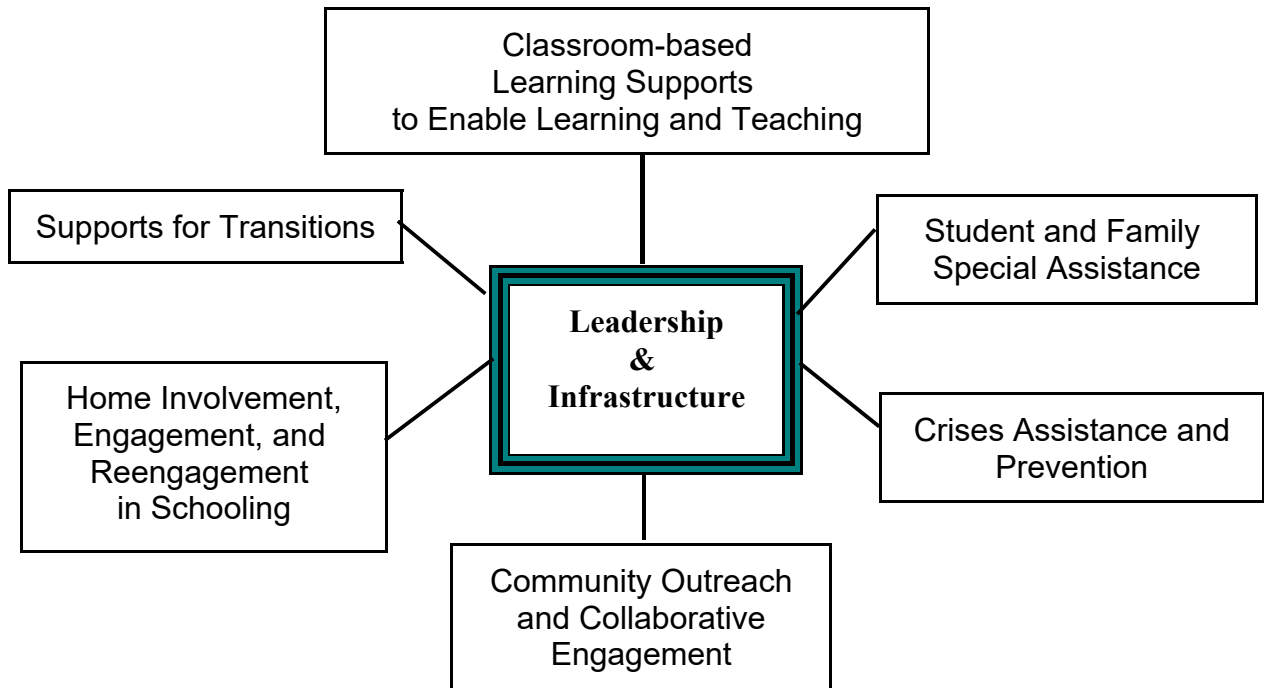
Analysis of typical “laundry lists” of district programs and services used to address barriers to learning and teaching indicates they can be grouped into six domains reflecting basic concerns that schools confront regularly. In organizing the activity, it becomes clearer what supports are needed in and out of the classroom to enable the learning of all students (see Exhibit B), and it promotes efforts to reduce fragmentation and redundancy. The six domains are:

- *In-classroom supports.* Embedding student and learning supports into regular classroom strategies to enable learning and teaching (e.g., teachers working collaboratively with each other and with student support staff to ensure instruction is personalized with an emphasis on enhancing intrinsic motivation and social-emotional development for all students, especially those experiencing mild to moderate learning and behavior problems; reengaging those who have become disengaged from instruction; providing learning accommodations and supports as necessary; using response to intervention in applying special assistance; addressing external barriers with a focus on prevention and early intervention)
- *Supports for transitions.* Supporting transitions that occur daily and over the year (e.g., supporting daily transitions before, during, and after school; assisting students and families as they negotiate the many hurdles related to reentry or initial entry into school; school and grade changes; program transitions; accessing special assistance)
- *Supports to increase home connections and engagement with the school.* Supporting the involvement of those with student caretaking responsibilities including those providing foster care and those outreaching to the homeless (e.g., addressing barriers to home involvement; helping those in the home enhance supports for their children; strengthening home and school communication; increasing home support for the school)
- *Crises responding and prevention* (e.g., preparing for emergencies; implementing plans when an event occurs; countering the impact of traumatic events; providing follow-up assistance; implementing prevention strategies; creating a caring and safe learning environment)
- *Supports to increase community involvement and collaborative engagement with schools* (e.g., outreach to develop greater community connection and support from a wide range of resources – including enhanced use of volunteers and developing a school-community collaborative infrastructure)
- *Facilitating student and family access to special assistance* (e.g., in the regular program first and then, as needed, through referral for specialized services on and off campus).

Each of these domains is discussed in detail in *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>. As aids for system planning, priority setting, and development, a set of self-study surveys is available for each domain, as well as for a general overview of student and learning supports activity, processes, and mechanisms – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/surveys/set1.pdf>.

Exhibit B

Prototype for Six Domains of Support – In Classrooms and Schoolwide



Note: All categorical programs can be integrated into these six domains. Examples include initiatives, programs, and services that focus on positive behavioral supports, responses to intervention, programs for safe and drug free schools, programs for social and emotional development and learning, full service community schools, family resource centers, and school based health centers, CDC's approach to school health, bilingual, cultural, and other diversity programs, compensatory education programs, special education programs, mandates stemming from education legislation, and many more.

Clearly, the intervention domains can be conceived in other ways. The points for emphasis here are that the many activities that schools pursue along the intervention continuum can and need to be further organized.

Over the last decade, versions of the six basic domains have been incorporated in a variety of venues across the country (for examples and lessons learned, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>).

The six domains capture the substance of the multifaceted ways schools are trying to address barriers to learning. As indicated in the next section, combining the domains across each level of the continuum illustrated in the previous section provides the framework for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.

Section C: Framing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System

As illustrated in Exhibit C, combining the continuum and the six domains of supports provides an intervention framework that can guide development of a learning supports component as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that weaves together school and community funding (regular and extramural) budgeted for addressing shared agenda.

The matrix framework is used as a tool for mapping existing interventions, identifying strengths and critical intervention gaps, and analyzing resource use with a view to redeploying resources to strengthen the system of student and learning supports. Based on school priorities, the analyses can be used in strategic planning for system improvement, including targeted outreach to bring in community resources that can fill critical gaps.

The specific examples inserted in the matrix are just illustrative of those that schools already may be using. As the examples illustrate, the framework embeds a wide range of student/learning supports. It encompasses the work of specialized instructional support personnel, compensatory and special education efforts, programs for English learners and homeless students, and interventions for psychosocial, mental health, and learning problems.

Exhibit C

Intervention Framework for the Learning Supports Component

		Integrated Intervention Continuum (levels)		
		Subsystem for promoting healthy development & preventing problems	Subsystem for early intervention	Subsystem for treatment ("system of care")
Categories of Classroom & Schoolwide Student and Learning Support Domains	Classroom-based learning supports	e.g., personalized instruction	e.g., special assistance in the classroom provided as soon as a problem arises	e.g., referral for specialist assistance
	Supports for transitions	e.g., welcoming newcomers and providing social and/or academic supports	e.g., when problems arise, using them as teachable moments to enhance social-emotional development and learning	e.g., personalized supports for students returning to school from incarceration
	Home involvement & engagement	e.g., outreach to attract and facilitate participation of hard-to-reach families	e.g., engaging families in problem-solving	e.g., support services to assist families with addressing basic survival needs
	Community involvement & collaborative engagement	e.g., outreach to recruit volunteers	e.g., developing community links and connections to fill critical intervention gaps	e.g., outreach to reengage disconnected students and families
	Crisis response & prevention	e.g., promoting positive relationships	e.g., immediate response with physical and psychological first aid	e.g., referral for follow-up counseling
	Student & family special assistance	e.g., enhancing coping and problem-solving capability	e.g., providing consultation, triage, and referrals	e.g., ongoing management of care related to specialized services
<i>Accommodations for differences & disabilities</i>				<i>Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., special education, school-based interventions)</i>

A Intervention Framework for Moving in New Directions

With all the criticism of public schools, policy makers have difficult choices to make about improving schools. Ultimately, the choices made will affect not only students and school staff but the entire society. Choosing to continue with old ways of thinking about student/learning supports is a recipe for maintaining the achievement and opportunity gaps. Unifying available resources and starting a process to develop a comprehensive and equitable system of learning supports over the coming years is an alternative.

Establishing a comprehensive and equitable intervention system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students requires coalescing ad hoc and piecemeal policies and practices. Doing so will help end the fragmentation of student and learning supports and related system disorganization and will provide a foundation for weaving together whatever a school has with whatever a community is doing to confront barriers to learning and teaching.

Effectively designed and developed at a school, a learning supports component increases supports for all students. The emphasis is on

- unifying student and learning supports by grouping the many fragmented approaches experienced at school in ways that reduce the number of separate and sometimes redundant intervention responses to overlapping problems
- addressing barriers to learning and teaching by improving personalized instruction and increasing accommodations and special assistance when necessary
- enhancing the focus on motivational considerations with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation as it relates to individual readiness and ongoing involvement and with the intent of fostering intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome
- reengaging disconnected students
- adding specialized remediation, treatment, and rehabilitation as necessary, but only as necessary

In doing all this, a learning supports component enhances equity of opportunity, plays a major role in improving student and school performance and promoting whole child development, fosters positive school-community relationships, minimizes the school's reliance on social control practices, and contributes to the emergence of a positive school climate. And it fully embeds interventions to address mental health concerns.

Implementation of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports as a primary school improvement component is essential to the focus on whole child, whole school, and whole community (including fostering safe schools and the emergence of a positive school climate). Properly implemented, the component increases the likelihood that schooling will be experienced as a welcoming, supportive experience that accommodates diversity, prevents problems, enhances youngsters' strengths, and is committed to assuring equity of opportunity for all students to succeed.