



What is a Unified, Comprehensive, & Equitable Approach to Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching?

Because of the relentless and increasing demands for school improvement, there is a continuing stream of proposals for how to move forward. Given the current difficulties confronting so many schools, more and more leaders are calling for a renewed focus on *student/learning supports*. This is seen in the growing number of statements calling for “a comprehensive approach” to supporting students (and their families).

Too often, however, what is being identified as *comprehensive* is not comprehensive enough, and generally the approach described is not about developing a *system* of supports but a proposal to enhance coordination of fragmented efforts. Many times the emphasis mainly is on health and social services, usually with the notion of *connecting* more community services to schools. In some instances, the focus expands to include a variety of piecemeal programs for safe and drug free schools, family assistance, after-school and summer programs, and so forth.

All these programs and services are relevant. But, most proposals to improve supports still fail to escape old ways of thinking about what schools need both in terms of content and process.



In discussions of *What is a comprehensive approach?*, the following questions commonly arise:

If we coordinate what we have and connect with some community services, isn't that a comprehensive approach?

It's a good start, but focusing only on what is doesn't get us to what needs to be. Analysis will indicate major intervention gaps. And, coordination stops short of establishing the type of expanded policy and practice that is needed as a basis for integrating and fully developing *student/learning supports* as a primary and essential component of school improvement.

A colleague described the needed analysis as “viewing the work from the balcony.” She indicated that when she moved from implementing programs at a school and responding to the daily crises and took a job at the district office she saw the range of separate programs, people, and initiatives and realized that “We couldn't be effective if we kept working this way.” In making changes, coordination was just a first step. Beyond that, her team found a significant mismatch between the data on what the district's students and schools needed to succeed and what they currently were doing. This clarified major systemic gaps, and they set priorities for moving forward in developing a comprehensive system for learning supports. It's this shift in thinking that leads to a long term strategy for building a comprehensive system that can ensure *all* students have an equal opportunity to succeed in schools.

What are the barriers to developing a comprehensive approach?

The main barriers involve escaping old ways of thinking and learning how to reframe and develop understanding of what amounts to a paradigm shift in calling for a comprehensive approach to student supports. In a recent report, we stressed that a paradigm shift is underway with respect to how schools address barriers to learning, development, and teaching.¹ This shift is being accelerated through our public-private collaboration with Scholastic, Inc.

The shift is from a *marginalized and fragmented* set of student support services to development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive *system of learning supports*. Such a system weaves together what schools already are doing and enhances the effort by inviting in home and community resources, with an emphasis on filling high priority systemic gaps.

As indicated in Exhibit 1, the intent goes beyond improving coordination and increasing services. The aim is to develop

- an integrated and systemic continuum of interventions and
- a multifaceted and integrated set of content arenas

into a *cohesive classroom and school-wide component for supporting learning*.

Such a component has two facets:

- (1) *addressing interfering factors* and
- (2) *re-engaging students* in classroom instruction.

(Note: The emphasis on reengagement recognizes that interventions that do not address student disengagement are insufficient in sustaining, over time, student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.)

A related and commonplace barrier stems from the continuing stream of “new” initiatives and priorities. A constant challenge in developing a truly comprehensive approach is to avoid mission drift. This requires using every special project, initiative, pilot, and reorganization in a strategic, system building manner. Those developing comprehensive systems must always ask: “Where does this fit in the broad picture of a comprehensive approach to students supports?” Then, if it fits, they must ensure it addresses current priorities for filling gaps and enhancing the system.

How might a comprehensive approach be framed as a guide for school improvement?

Pioneering districts and state departments of education have found it easy to adapt and adopt the matrix illustrated in Exhibit 2. It integrates the continuum of interventions with the content or curriculum of student support and provides a planning tool to guide school improvement in clarifying where current and proposed activity fits and what is missing.

¹*Moving Toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: The Next Evolutionary Stage in School Improvement Policy and Practice* – online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/paradigmshift.pdf>

Exhibit 1

More Than Coordination/Integration, More than Services

Comprehensive means more than coordination/integration

In contrast to MTSS formulations, the need is for system building and weaving together school-community resources within and across the following subsystems of a continuum of intervention:

- (a) promoting healthy development and preventing problems,
- (b) responding as early after problem onset as is feasible, and
- (c) providing for those whose serious, pervasive, and chronic problems require more intensive assistance and accommodation.

Comprehensive approaches to student and learning supports involve much more than enhancing availability and access to health and social services

or limiting the focus to any other piecemeal and ad hoc initiatives for addressing barriers to learning, development, and teaching.

Just as efforts to enhance instruction emphasize well delineated and integrated curriculum content, so must efforts to address external and internal factors that interfere with students engaging effectively with that curriculum. At schools, the content (or curriculum) for addressing a full range of interfering factors can be coalesced into six classroom and school-wide arenas. These focus on:

- (1) *enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning* (e.g., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems)
- (2) *supporting transitions* (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
- (3) *increasing home and school connections*
- (4) *responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises*
- (5) *increasing community involvement and support* (outreaching to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- (6) *facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.*

The complexity of factors interfering with learning, development, and teaching underscore the need to coalesce efforts to address the variety of factors that interfere with a school accomplishing its mission. A number of institutional indicators and evidence from pioneering work on moving in new directions to enhance student and learning supports all herald a paradigm shift supporting development of a *comprehensive system* encompassing the scope and content outlined above and illustrated in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2

**Matrix for Reviewing Scope and Content of a Component
for Address Barriers to Learning & Teaching***

		Scope of Intervention		
		System for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	System for Early Intervention (Early after problem onset)	System of Care
Organizing around the Content/ “curriculum” (for addressing barriers to learning & promoting healthy development)	Classroom- Focused Enabling			
	Crisis/ Emergency Assistance & Prevention			
	Support for transitions			
	Home Involvement/ Engagement in Schooling			
	Community Outreach/ Volunteers			
	Student and Family Assistance			
		Accommodations for differences & disabilities	Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., Special Education & School-Based Behavioral Health)	

*Note that specific school-wide and classroom-based activities related to positive behavior support, “prereferral” interventions, and the eight components of Center for Prevention and Disease Control’s Coordinated School Health Program are embedded into the six content (“curriculum”) areas.



For additional resources in *Making the Case for a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching and Re-engaging Disconnected Students*, see the National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html> or directly contact us at Ltaylor@ucla.edu



Most Center resources are immediately accessible online at no cost and with no restrictions on use.

website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

The Center for MH in Schools and Student/Learning Supports is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.