

The Role of Schools in Promoting Whole Child Development and Learning*

Given all the discussion about whole child development and learning, we want to share our perspective about the need to attend to (1) context, (2) facilitate learning and teaching to promote positive knowledge, skills, and *attitudes*, and (3) proactively work against interfering factors and reengage disconnected students. We also stress that the focus in schools is on *all* students. With these matters in mind, we suggest that a guiding question for school improvement is:

What should and shouldn't happen in classrooms, school-wide, and out-of-school to promote success and well-being at school and beyond FOR ALL CHILDREN?

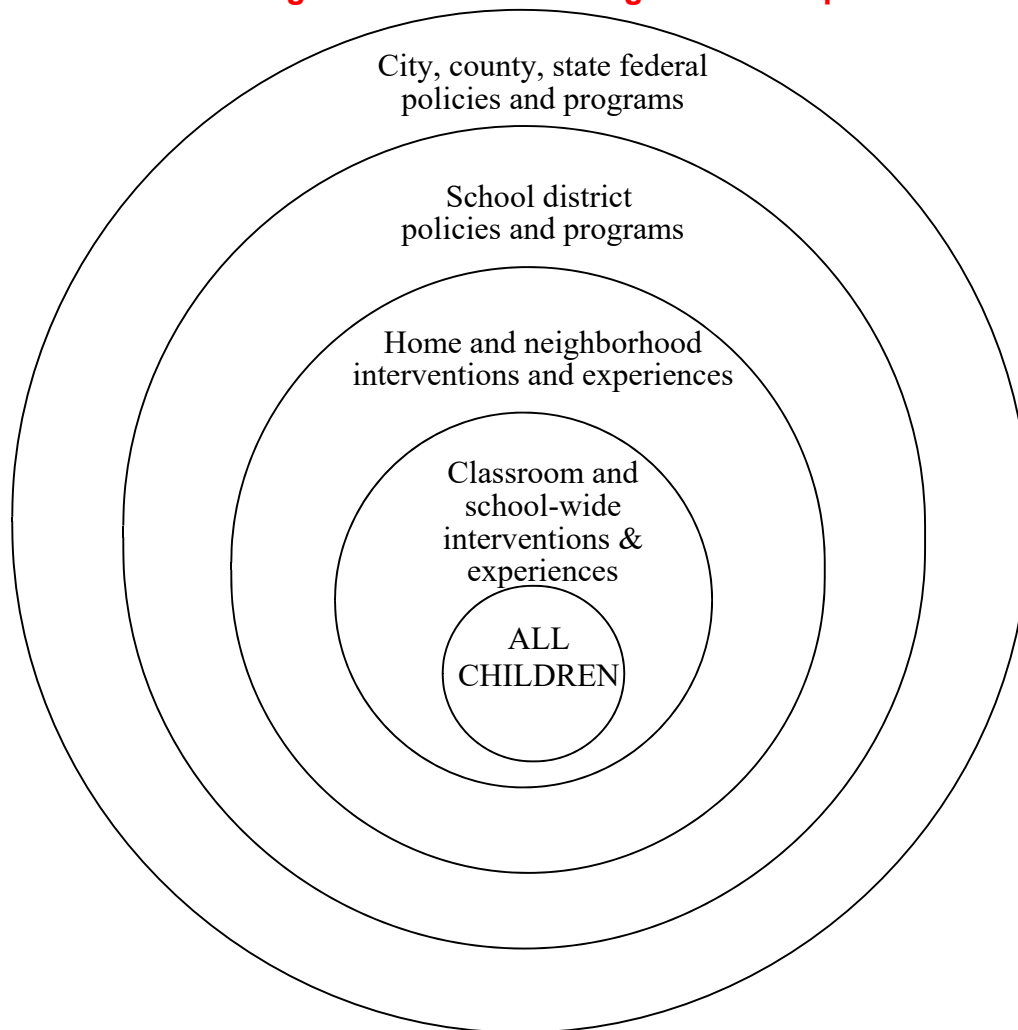
And finally in this discussion we emphasize that major school improvements require a change process that produces transformative innovations that are replicable to scale and sustainable.

Context

As Exhibit 1 highlights, development and learning are embedded in a complex set of socio-political-economic arenas. Ideally, pursuit of whole child development and learning in each arena would be guided by a shared vision and a cohesive set of policies and practices (e.g., a focus on societal and personal needs for the 21 century, liberal arts). The reality is that fundamental differences in vision prevail and major conflicts are commonplace. And those directly intervening with students have relatively little impact on many of the major policy decisions that shape daily practice at schools.

Exhibit 1

Some of the Complex and Transactional Context Affecting Whole Child Learning and Development



About Facilitating Learning and Teaching at School

Learning at school is a function of how the learning environment fits with the learner’s accumulated capacities and attitudes, current state of being, and the ongoing transactions between the learner and the learning environment (e.g., formal teaching, extended day, enrichment opportunities, and various other experiences during the school day and year). All school staff, students, and volunteers play a role. To enhance positive working relationships, structural changes have been recommended (e.g., cooperative learning, team teaching, Block scheduling, looping, small schools).

Differentiated instruction is basic to good teaching in a classroom. And, while “meeting students where they are” in terms of current knowledge and skills is necessary, it is evident that differentiated instruction also requires factoring in motivation (e.g., attitudes) with special attention given to intrinsic motivation. We view the emphasis on motivation as the key to *personalization*. Moreover, from a psychological perspective, we stress that the learner’s perception is critical in evaluating whether a good match exists between the learner and the learning environment.

For in-depth discussions of personalized learning and instruction with a focus on the whole child and all students, see Chapter 7 of *Improving School Improvement*

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5288v1c1>

and Chapter 3 of *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/55w7b8x8>

Working Against Interfering Factors and Reengaging Disconnected Students

Most policy makers and administrators know that good instruction delivered by highly qualified teachers cannot ensure successful whole child learning or equity of opportunity for success at school. There are always barriers to learning and teaching that result in some students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Even the best teacher can’t address these interfering factors alone. Minimally, teachers need student and learning supports in the classroom and school-wide in order to personalize instruction and provide special assistance when necessary.

Unfortunately, student and learning supports have long been marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. As a result, such supports are developed in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner. Implementation is fragmented and at times redundant. The professionals involved often are counterproductively competitive, especially when funding is sparse (and when isn’t it?).

All this needs to change. Yet, most of the widely circulated reports about improving schools pay scant attention to these concerns.

And while the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers opportunities for change, it also continues the piecemeal approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families. Its emphasis on a multi-tiered system of supports falls far short of delineating a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

For an in-depth discussion of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, see *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/55w7b8x8>

Exhibit 2 highlights practices to facilitate teaching and learning and proactively work against interfering factors.

Exhibit 3 suggests some resources for enhancing home and community engagement with schools.

Exhibit 4 highlights resources that illustrate the need and ways to expand school improvement policy from a two- to a three component framework as a basis for enhancing how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

Exhibit 2

Practices to Facilitate Teaching and Learning and Proactively Work Against Interfering Factors

What to do:

- (1) develop supportive, caring, safe school and classroom environments; make structural changes (e.g., cooperative learning, team teaching, looping, small classes and schools)
- (2) contribute to enhancing home and neighborhood supports for child development
- (3) develop and support teacher ability to personalize instruction
- (4) ensure the curriculum, classroom, and school-wide experiences promote whole child development (physical health, cognition/perception, language, social and emotional)
- (5) develop and support systems for providing special assistance as needed for students (in classrooms as well as out) to address mild-to-moderate learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- (6) provide for a range of specialized assistance as needed (including referrals to outside resources)

What to work against:

- (1) school and classroom environments that threaten students' feelings of self-determination, competence, and relationships with peers and school personnel.
- (2) practices that interfere with home and neighborhood engagement with the school
- (3) an overemphasis on broad band teaching and negative strategies to control behavior
- (4) tendencies to pay too little attention to classroom and school-wide experiences that work against positive learning and development
- (5) making special assistance for common problems primarily an out-of-classroom process; applying special assistance in ways that stigmatize and isolate students
- (6) tendencies to take only minor steps to address the negative "side effects" of specialized assistance

Exhibit 3

Some Resources for Enhancing Home and Community Engagement with Schools

Schools, Families, and Community Working Together: Building an Effective Collaborative
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/buildingeffectivecollab.pdf>

Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling – Chapter 6 in
Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System. Published by Cognella –
<https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html>

Enhancing School and Community Collaboration – Chapter 14 in *Improving School Improvement* – <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5288v1c1>

Enhancing Home Involvement to Address Barriers to Learning: A Collaborative Process
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/homeinv.pdf>

Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling – a self-study survey.
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/toolsforpractice/homeinvolvementsurvey.pdf>

Exhibit 4

Resources that Illustrate the Need and Ways to Expand School Improvement Policy from a Two- to a Three Component Framework

ESSA and Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching: Is there Movement toward Transforming Student/Learning Supports?

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/2018%20report.pdf>

State Education Agencies & Learning Supports: Enhancing School Improvement

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/seals.pdf>

How Well Do State Legislatures Focus on Improving School Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching & Re-engage Disconnected Students?

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Legisanal.pdf>

What are States Doing to Help Schools Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching?

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/statelegis.pdf>

Rethinking District Budgets to Unify and Sustain a Critical Mass of Student and Learning Supports at Schools <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/financebudget.pdf>

District Superintendents and the School Improvement Problem of Addressing Barriers to Learning <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/supt.pdf>

Concluding Comments: Tinkering or Transforming?

A superintendent recently told us his district was doing well without making major changes. We note that his district is rather small and serves a predominately white and economically advantaged student body. So, of course, he probably is right. (We do wonder, however, how well his current system is working for whatever number of students are experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems.)

At any rate, it is clear that things are not working well at many urban and rural schools serving students from economically disadvantaged communities. In addition to changes in instruction and management practices, student/learning supports remedies have tended to be minimal and relatively ineffective (e.g., hiring one or two more support staff, tinkering with current student support practices, adding another program, enhancing coordination, and delineating yet another set of things for teacher to learn in hopes they will be able to cope better with problems).

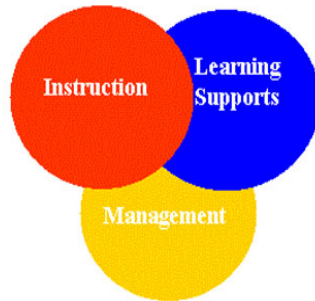
We recognize that proposed changes stem from real needs and usually are well-intentioned. They often follow any event that increases public concern about matters such as achievement gaps, violence at schools, bullying, dropouts, toxic stress, student trauma, depression, anxiety and other mental health concerns, and so forth.

The problem is that tinkering with school improvement tends to undermine efforts to make fundamental systemic changes. The reality is that schools are constantly confronted with requests and mandates that can't all be assimilated in the short-run without interfering with what already is in progress and what needs to be developed if significant, long-lasting progress is to be made.

So it is not surprising that a common reaction of many administrators and school staff to proposed school improvements is: *Enough - we can't take on another thing!*

A considerable part of what's wrong with school improvement proposals lies with the reality that prevailing education policy favors two components. One component emphasizes enhancing instruction; the other stresses improving the management/governance of schools. Some attention, of course, also is given to student and schooling problems. However, in most school districts, these matters are at best a secondary concern in school improvement planning and practice.

What most schools need to do is adopt a three component framework and give equal emphasis to each component in planning and implementing improvements. The third component focuses on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. We conceive it as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.



Don't Expect a Miracle! Plan and Implement a System Change Process



Of course, any effort to make fundamental system change requires a change process that produces transformative improvements that are replicable to scale and sustainable.

For more on systemic change, see Chapter 16. *Toward Substantive and Sustainable Systemic Change* and Chapter 17. *Making it Happen* – online in *Improving School Improvement* – <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5288v1c1>

*The national *Center for MH in School & Student/Learning Supports* is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> . Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu