School Boards Must Pursue New Directions to Help Schools Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students.
But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.

Carnegie Council on Education Task Force

Most school board members are aware that the number of students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems far outstrips the ways schools deal with these matters. And they know, existing programs, services, and special initiatives tend to be fragmented (see Exhibit 1) and often engender fights over turf and counterproductive competition for sparse resources. Policy makers and administrators are aware of how costly all this is. When the outlays are totaled in some schools, it has been estimated that as much as 25% of the resources are used to address barriers to learning and teaching.

Research indicates the fragmentation is a result of the marginalization of student and learning supports in school improvement policy. The nature and scope of need and the deficiencies in prevailing approaches underscore how essential it is to adopt a transformative perspective. From such a perspective, we highlight new directions for schools and districts and ways school boards can mobilize to help them move forward to end the marginalization of student/learning supports and unify available resources for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and develop them into a comprehensive and equitable system.

Exhibit 1
A Fragmented Approach to Addressing Barriers to Learning
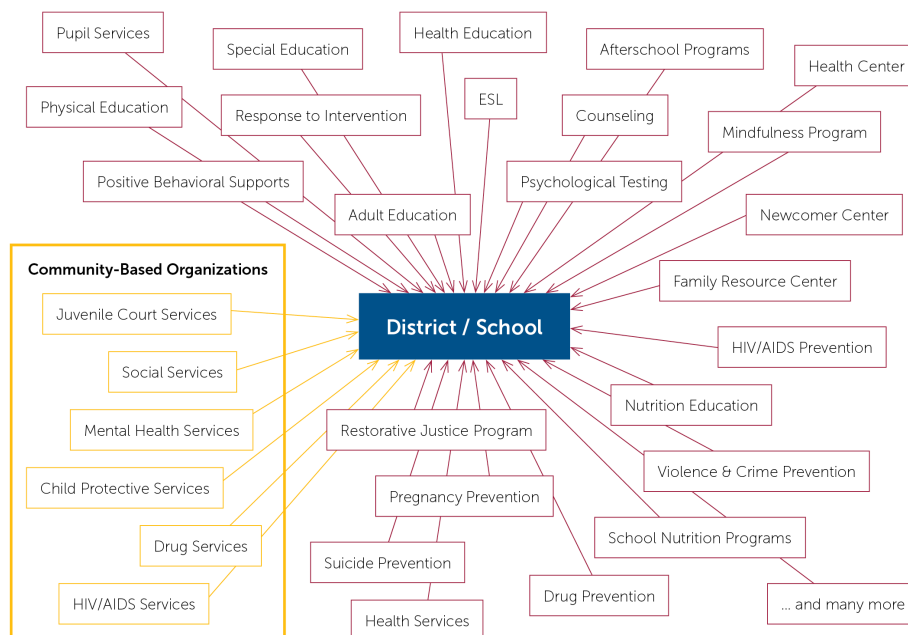
The COVID-19 pandemic increased the focus on factors that interfere with reducing the achievement and opportunity gaps. Concerns about mental health and learning loss have received particular attention. In too many schools, the number of students manifesting problems far outstrips the ways schools deal with the matters. Reports are everywhere underscoring these matters and discussing ways to meet the needs.

Efforts to improve the situation mainly have focused on enhancing coordination and integration of services and bringing more community resources to school sites. However, these efforts have not proven to be a solution.[2] Pandemic relief funds were used to hire additional personnel to meet the increased need, but as always, the need was greater than could be met, and when the special funding ended, some cut backs and lay-offs followed.

The prevailing proposals for improving how schools can play a major role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching tend to bypass the underlying question which is:

How can districts and schools use whatever resources are available in the best way?

The answer requires fundamental rethinking and transformation of student/learning supports. To aid such rethinking, our Center's analyses have stressed that

- the fragmentation is an indication of the marginalization of student and learning supports in school improvement policy
- community resources are too often brought into schools in ways that increase fragmentation and counterproductive competition among those trying to help students and their families
- ending the fragmentation and significantly improving how schools provide student/learning supports involves much more than focusing on coordination and integration of services.

The nature and scope of need and the deficiencies in prevailing approaches underscore how essential it is to adopt a transformative perspective. Our Center's approach is to embed learning, behavior, and emotional concerns into a broad and transformative focus on the school's role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching.[1]

From such a perspective, we highlight in what follows new directions for schools and districts and ways school boards can mobilize to help them move forward to end the marginalization of student/learning supports and unify available resources for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and develop them into a comprehensive and equitable system.
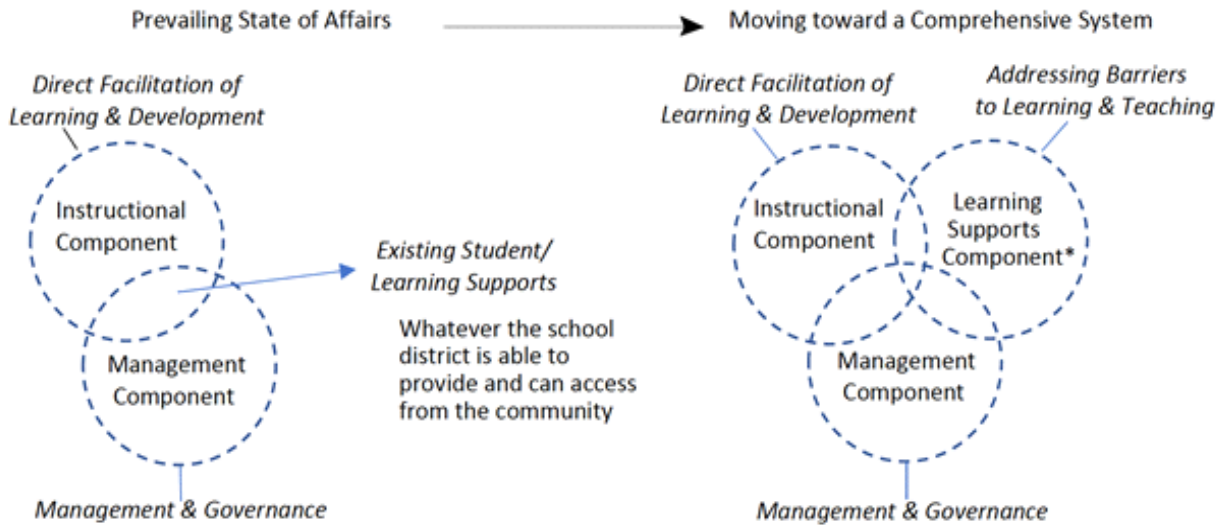
About New Directions

Ending the marginalization of student/learning supports requires expanding the framework for school improvement policy. Unifying such supports involves expanding frameworks such as MTSS (multi-tiered student supports) in ways that coalesce school and community interventions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and organize the domains of student/learning supports.

Our Center has developed prototype frameworks to illustrate these new directions.[3] The intent of these frameworks is to

(1) coalesce all school efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students into a unified component and integrate the component as a primary and essential facet of school improvement policy (see Exhibit 2)

(2) move beyond a limited MTSS framework to build the continuum of interventions into a consolidated set of subsystems weaving together school and community resources (see Exhibit 3)

(3) organize the supports needed each day at schools into a delimited set of domains that cross over the continuum to establish a framework for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports over several years (see Exhibit 4)

Exhibit 2

Expanding the Framework for School Improvement Policy and Practice*

*Notes:

Expanding school improvement policy into a three component framework provides a path to ending the marginalization and improving outcomes. Establishing learning supports as a fundamental and primary policy commitment can help focus schools on the need to (a) unify all student/learning supports, (b) develop the component over time into a comprehensive and equitable system, and (c) expand the framework for school accountability.
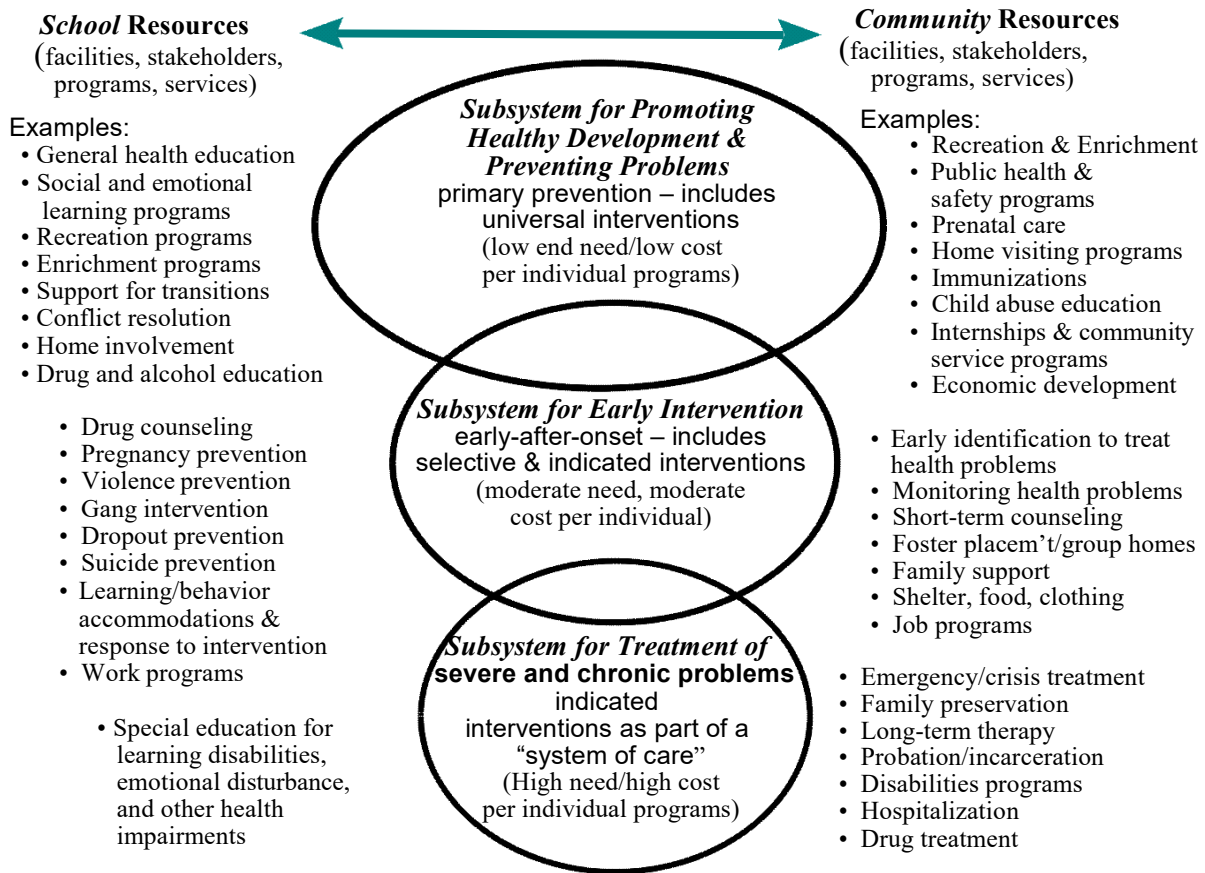
The transformation of student/learning supports also requires rethinking the roles and functions of student/learning support staff.[7]

The learning supports component overlaps the instructional component by bringing learning supports into the classroom. In doing so, it stresses a psychological approach to personalization and a sequential and hierarchical approach to special assistance.

The transformation of student/learning supports requires a dedicated infrastructure for daily operation of the component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Such an infrastructure calls for administrative and team leadership in addition to workgroups that are responsible and accountable for the successful development and daily operation of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. Examples of assigned functions include: aggregating data across students and from teachers to analyze school needs; mapping school and community resources; analyzing resources; identifying the most pressing program development needs at the school; coordinating and integrating school resources and connecting with community resources; establishing priorities for strengthening programs and developing new ones; planning and facilitating ways to fill intervention gaps; recommending how resources should be deployed and redeployed; developing strategies for enhancing resources; and social marketing.

For a detailed discussion, see H. Adelman & L. Taylor . (2019). *Improving school improvement*. Los Angeles: Center for MH & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

Exhibit 3

Framing a School-Community Intervention *Continuum* of Interconnected *Subsystems*

School **Resources**
(facilities, stakeholders,
programs, services)

Examples:
• General health education
• Social and emotional
  learning programs
• Recreation programs
• Enrichment programs
• Support for transitions
• Conflict resolution
• Home involvement
• Drug and alcohol education

• Drug counseling
• Pregnancy prevention
• Violence prevention
• Gang intervention
• Dropout prevention
• Suicide prevention
• Learning/behavior
  accommodations &
  response to intervention
• Work programs

• Special education for
  learning disabilities,
  emotional disturbance,
  and other health
  impairments

Community **Resources**
(facilities, stakeholders,
programs, services)

Examples:
• Recreation & Enrichment
• Public health &
  safety programs
• Prenatal care
• Home visiting programs
• Immunizations
• Child abuse education
• Internships & community
  service programs
• Economic development

• Early identification to treat
  health problems
• Monitoring health problems
• Short-term counseling
• Foster placem't/group homes
• Family support
• Shelter, food, clothing
• Job programs

• Emergency/crisis treatment
• Family preservation
• Long-term therapy
• Probation/incarceration
• Disabilities programs
• Hospitalization
• Drug treatment

***Subsystem for Promoting
Healthy Development &
Preventing Problems***
primary prevention – includes
universal interventions
(low end need/low cost
per individual programs)

Subsystem for Early Intervention
early-after-onset – includes
selective & indicated interventions
(moderate need, moderate
cost per individual)

***Subsystem for Treatment of
severe and chronic problems***
indicated
interventions as part of a
"system of care"
(High need/high cost
per individual programs)

Adapted from H. Adelman, & L. Taylor, (2018), *Addressing barriers to learning: In the classroom and schoolwide*. Los Angeles: Center for MH & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

Note: The multi-tier student support (MTSS) model as emphasized in federal legislation and as widely portrayed in school improvement plans usually is illustrated simply in terms of levels rather than as a system of intervention. The simplicity of the tiered presentation is appealing, and the framework does help underscore differences in levels of intervention. However, this is not a strong way to depict the intervention continuum, and it is an insufficient framework for organizing student/learning supports. Specific concerns are that (1) the framework mainly stresses levels of intensity, (2) does not address the problem of systematically connecting interventions that fall into and across each level, and (3) does not address the need to connect school and community interventions. As a result, adopting MTSS as a major facet of school improvement is just a beginning in advancing efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students..

Exhibit 4

Intervention Framework for a Third Component of School Improvement*

Integrated Intervention *Continuum* (levels)

	Subsystem for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	*Subsystem for Early Intervention*	*Subsystem for Treatment ("System of Care")*
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 & providing social/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 family in 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 & problem solving capability)	(e.g., providing consultation, triage, and referrals)	(e.g., ongoing management of care related to specialized services)

Categories of Classroom and School-wide Student/ Learning Support Domains

Accommodations for differences & disabilities

Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., Special Education & School-Based

*The above matrix provides a guide for organizing and evaluating a system of student and learning supports and is a tool for mapping existing interventions, clarifying which are evidence-based, identifying critical intervention gaps, and analyzing resource use with a view to redeploying resources to strengthen the system. As the examples illustrate, the framework can guide efforts to embed supports for compensatory and special education, English learners, psychosocial and mental health problems, use of specialized instructional support personnel, adoption of evidence-based interventions, integration of funding sources, and braiding in of community resources. The specific examples inserted in the matrix are just illustrative of those schools already may have in place. For a fuller array of examples of student/learning supports that can be applied in classrooms and schoolwide, see the set of surveys available at https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/surveys/set1.pdf

For guides for using the matrix to map and analyze available resources and gaps, see

>Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006c)**. Mapping a school's resources to improve their use in preventing and ameliorating problems.** In C. Franklin, M. B. Harris, & P. Allen-Mears (Eds.), *School social work and mental health workers training and resource manual.* New York: Oxford University Press.

>Center for Mental Health in Schools (2006 rev). *Guide to resource mapping and management to address barriers to learning: An intervention for systemic change*. Los Angeles: UCLA.

Properly implemented, these new directions can reduce the numbers of and costs incurred by unnecessary referrals for specialized assistance and special education.[4]

A Few Implications for School Boards to Consider

As board members well know, schools have a variety of staff involved with student/learning supports. Examples include psychologists, counselors, social workers, attendance workers, nurses, compensatory and special education teachers. These and other staff pursue initiatives to improve dropout prevention, school readiness and early intervention, health and human services, safe and drug free schools, parent and community engagement, and more.

Board members also are aware that the work done to address barriers to learning and teaching is fragmented and costly (again see Exhibit 1). And despite efforts to improve student/learning supports, outcomes are less than satisfactory.

The current widespread adoption of some form of a multi-tiered continuum of interventions (commonly designated as MTSS) is a partial step in the right direction. That framework recognizes that a full range of interventions includes (a) promoting whole student healthy development, (b) preventing problems, (c) providing immediate assistance when problems appear, and (d) ensuring assistance for serious and chronic special education concerns. Moving forward, as illustrated in Exhibit 3, our research has clarified the need to reframe each level of intervention in ways that systematically weaves together school and community resources (including whatever those at home can add).

At the same time, we stress that districts and schools need to rethink how they organize the practices used to ameliorate learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Our research indicates that the various programs, services, initiatives, and strategies can be grouped into six domains of classroom and schoolwide student and learning support. Organizing the activity in this way helps clarify what supports are needed in and out of the classroom to enable effective teaching and engaged student learning by addressing interfering factors (again see Exhibit 4).

A Recommendation for Boards Ready to Move Forward

Given the importance and complexity involved in transforming student/learning supports, we recommend that boards establish a *standing* committee dedicated to working on the matter. The charge to such a group is to focus on what the board can do to *transform* (a) how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and (b) how districts can facilitate such a transformation.

Why a standing committee?

While the pandemic forced everyone to react with a crisis orientation, the move to endemic thinking brings us back to the reality that addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems is a chronic concern for schools and policy makers. A standing committee is the type of mechanism needed to ensure a regular and high level agenda focus on advancing policy and developing guidance related to transforming how districts and schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

What are the committee's functions?

The primary functions of the committee are to
- provide an analyses of what needs to be done related to transforming the role played by schools in addressing factors that interfere with learning and teaching

- recommend policy changes to facilitate moving effectively in the new directions
- draft potential guidance information and prototype examples to aid districts and schools in moving forward[5]

The above tasks are not simple ones. They include essential capacity building strategies (e.g., administrative restructuring, leadership and staff development, budget reorganization, well-trained change agents, monitoring and accountability). To accomplish all this, the committee will need to develop workgroups. Workgroups are essential to accomplishing specific tasks and bringing the products to the full committee for amendment and ratification and timely placement on the board's agenda.

Who should be on the committee? The nature and scope of the work calls for a committee that encompasses
- one or more board members who chair the committee (all board members are welcome and specific ones are invited to particular sessions as relevant)*
- administrator(s) in charge of relevant programs (e.g., student support services, Title I, special education)**
- several key staff members who can represent the perspectives of principals, union members, and various other stakeholders (e.g., parents, students, representatives from the community)***
- several stakeholders whose jobs and expertise make them invaluable contributors to the tasks at hand (e.g., persons steeped in public health, mental health, social services, recreation, juvenile justice, relevant school research)****

The functions with which the committee is concerned overlap those of other board committees. Without effective linkages between committees, fragmentation is inevitable (e.g., communication of committee agendas and minutes, cross-committee participation or joint meetings when overlapping interests are discussed).

*It can help if more than one board member sits on the committee to minimize proposals being contested as the personal/political agenda of a particular board member. Obviously, school boards are political entities. Therefore, besides common interpersonal conflicts that arise in most groups, differences in ideology and constituent representation can interfere with a committee accomplishing its goals. At the outset, it is wise to identify political and interpersonal factors that might undermine acceptance of the committee's proposals. Then steps can be taken to negotiate agreements with key individuals in order to maximize the possibility that proposals are formulated and evaluated in a nonpartisan manner.

**Critical information about current activity can be readily elicited through the active participation of an administrator (e.g., an associate/assistant superintendent) responsible for student/learning supports.

***A few other staff usually are needed to clarify how efforts are playing out at district and school levels and to ensure that site administrators, line staff, and union considerations are discussed. Also, consideration should be given to including representatives of parents and students.

****The board should reach out to include members on the standing committee from outside the district who have special expertise and who represent agencies that are or might become partners with the district in addressing barriers to learning. For example, in a pilot with the Los Angeles Unified School District, the committee included key professionals from post secondary institutions, county departments for health, and social services, public and private youth development and recreation organizations, and the United Way. The organizations all saw the work as highly related to their mission and were pleased to donate staff time to the committee.

Concluding Comments

As school boards strive to improve schools, the primary emphasis is on directly improving instruction and holding schools accountable. While necessary, this just isn't sufficient.

It is time for school boards to deal more effectively with the reality that, by themselves, the best instructional reforms cannot produce desired results when large numbers of students are not performing well. Teachers can't and shouldn't be expected to work alone when it comes to reducing achievement and opportunity gaps.

It is essential to transform (not just tinker with) the way every school site addresses barriers to learning and teaching. Progress currently is hampered by the marginalized status of programs and personnel whose primary focus is on enabling learning by effectively addressing barriers. Each school needs policy support to help evolve a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports – and to do so in ways that weave the work seamlessly with the school's efforts to enhance instruction and school management.

School boards can be the catalyst and guide for changing this state of affairs.[6] As a first step, they can establish a standing committee that focuses exclusively on improving the way student/learning resources are used and develops recommendations for transformative policy and practice. That is the next step toward every student succeeding.

Endnotes

1 See *Policy & Program Reports & Briefs* ; also see *Lessons Learned from Trailblazing and Pioneer Initiatives*

2 In response to limited outcomes and the fragmented and redundant implementation of student supports, one policy response has been to fund initiatives focused on integrating student supports. See Anderson Moore, K., Caal, S., et al., (2014). *Making the grade: Assessing the evidence for integrated student supports*. Child Trends.
Also see our discussion of the problems associated with such initiatives, Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. (2014). *Integrated student supports and equity: What's not being discussed?*

3 Recent detailed discussions include:
>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
>*Improving School Improvement*
>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
>*Restructuring California Schools to Address Barriers to Learning & Teaching in the COVID 19 Context & Beyond*

4 Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2011)*. Expanding school improvement policy to better address barriers to learning and integrate public health concerns. Policy Futures in Education, 9*(3), 431–436.

5 Guidance could include prototype examples of not only of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, but of the type of reworked operational infrastructure that can garner economies of scale, ensure effective implementation, and facilitate system changes. See, for example, the Center's report on *Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure*
Also, given the increasing attention to community schools, see our discussion of how such schools can evolve and play a role in transforming student/learning supports – *Evolving Community Schools and Transforming Student/Learning Supports*

6 For a general discussion about making transformative system changes, see our 2021 report*: Implementation Science and Complex School Changes* and the 2024 discussion of *Implementation Science and School Improvement*; also see the center's *System Change Toolkit*.

About References

A list of references to the Center's research is available at
https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/materials/resources.htm

from Adobe stock

"What if we don't change at all ... and something magical just happens."

(Our center's website regularly features *Hot Topics*. Here is a recent addition.)

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE & SCHOOL THERAPEUTIC COUNSELING

S tephen Hawking stressed that AI will be "either the best, or the worst thing, ever to happen to humanity."

Folks are arguing the pros and cons of using AI, but AI not only isn't going away, it is rapidly changing our lives. And the questions that need answering are about how best to maximize uses and minimize harm.

For schools, a variety of issues arise related to mental health therapeutic counseling. Here are *examples* that are widely discussed of positive uses and potential problems:

Positives

AI is seen as helping with
>doing administrative and clerical tasks
>producing apps/aids/tools
>training counselors and other school staff to identify and assist students in need
>gathering and analyzing data to identify a student's needs
>planing and implementing personalized counseling
>making counseling more available and accessible to everyone, especially
     underserved populations
>reducing costs

> The **American Counseling Association** has concluded: *The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), including machine learning and natural language generation, in counseling practice offers significant potential for enhancing efficiency and effectiveness. Embracing AI in counseling practice has the potential to revolutionize the field, increasing efficiency and effectiveness while maintaining ethical standards.*
>   The Association offers a set of guidelines to help counselors "navigate the integration of AI in a way that maximizes benefits for both clients and practitioners, all while upholding the highest standards of professional conduct ... to enhance the quality of care and support provided to clients."

Concerns

>the need more evidence on cost-effectiveness, including ethical matters
>counselors using technology without proper training
>maintaining confidentiality of sensitive student information and other privacy
     issues
>truly informed consent
>lack of human connection and relationship building
>countering misdiagnoses and misprescriptions.
>algorithm biases related to race, culture, gender, age, disabilities
>perpetuation pathological biases
>underemphasis on factors external to students that cause emotional, behavior,
     and learning problems
>technology malfunctions during a session
>system hacking

Olawade and colleagues (2024)* caution that AI "advancements are accompanied by ethical challenges concerning privacy, bias mitigation, and the preservation of the human element in therapy.

*See "**Enhancing mental health with Artificial Intelligence: Current trends and future prospects**, *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health, 3 –* Explores the integration of AI into mental healthcare, elucidating current trends, ethical considerations, and future directions.
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2949916X24000525

For references relevant to this discussion, see the Center's Quick Find on
>*Technology as an Intervention Tool*

What's your view? And what do you recommend schools do about AI?

We look forward to hearing from you. Send your responses to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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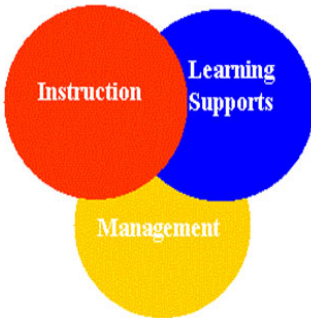
For information about the

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

go to https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html

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Invitation to Readers:

Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and mental health. This is a critical time for action. Send this on to others to encourage moving forward.

AND let us know about what you have to say about related matters.

Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

If you're not directly receiving our resources such as this quarterly e-journal, our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS), our weekly Practitioners' community of practice interchange, and other free resources, send a request 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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. . . and a host of students