

Students & Schools: Moving Forward

(September, 2026 Vol. 30 #12) – 41 Years & Counting

Featured

Enabling School Adjustment: INVEST NOW . . . OR PAY LATER!

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Enabling School Adjustment: INVEST NOW . . . OR PAY LATER!

***Which students are experiencing difficulties adjusting
as the school year gets underway?***

New classes, new schools, new teachers, new classmates-it's too much for some students. When adjustment problems are not addressed promptly, motivation often declines, disengagement increases, and behavior problems emerge. In many cases, misbehavior is a reaction to learning difficulties, frustration, or a lack of support.

Within the first few weeks of school, teachers can usually identify which students are not making a successful adjustment. This time is a critical window for proactive intervention.

Staff development should focus on strategies for addressing adjustment problems before they become severe. Student and learning support personnel should work collaboratively with teachers in classrooms to identify concerns early and provide assistance before students require more intensive and costly out-of-class interventions.

The ideas below are designed to strengthen student engagement and support successful adjustment to school. Links to additional prevention and early intervention resources are provided at the end.

Some Guidelines for Intervening Early

Reach out and invite the youngster and family to meet as a step toward building a positive working relationship.

- Focus first on identifying assets (e.g. positive attributes, outside interests, hobbies, what the youngster likes about school).
- Identify what the youngster doesn't like at school.
- Explore the reasons for "dislikes" (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? uninteresting? Is the youngster embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments? Is the youngster picked on? rejected? alienated?)
- Identify other possible factors that are interfering with school adjustment.
- Problem-solve with them about how to make things better (what to change, what extra support might help, etc.).

Some Basic Strategies to Support Student Success

Based on the best information about what is causing the problem, enhance student engagement through (a) building on learning opportunities that reflect the student's interests, strengths, and preferences and (b) reducing for now emphasis on tasks that currently are not of interest and/or generate frustration or disengagement. Consider the following:

If a student seems easily distracted, the following might be used:

- Identify any specific environmental factors that distract the student and make appropriate environmental changes
- Place the student in groups with peers who are focused and engaged
- Arrange for a volunteer, peer mentor, or classroom aide to provide support during transitions or periods of distraction.
- Allow brief, planned breaks when needed.
- Interact with the student in ways that will minimize confusion and distractions (e.g., keep conversations relatively short; talk quietly and slowly; use concrete terms; express warmth and nurturance)

If a student needs more guidance and support, the following might be used:

- Provide clear, specific prompts, checklists, schedules, multiple methods of communication, and organizational aids (e.g., multisensory cues, oral, written, and other guides) related to specific learning activities, materials, and daily schedules
- Ensure someone checks with the student frequently throughout an activity to provide additional support and guidance in concrete ways (e.g., model, demonstrate, guide, coach)
- Support student's efforts related to self-monitoring and self-evaluation
- Provide nurturing feedback keyed to the student's progress and next steps.

If the student has difficulty finishing tasks as scheduled, the following might be used:

- Adjust the length and time demands of assignments and assessments
- Modify expectations for how students demonstrate learning. Allow the use of technology and alternative formats such as:
 - >Oral presentations
 - >Audio or video products
 - >Graphic displays
 - >Arts-based projects
 - >Computer-generated products

To Accomplish the Above

(1) Mobilize Available Resources

A comprehensive approach requires making better use of any assistance available. This might include

- Classroom aides
- Volunteers
- Peer tutors and peer coaches
- Mentors
- Family members
- Student and learning support staff
- Resource specialists

Such resources can help address barriers interfering with effective classroom performance and learning. They can also provide tutoring designed to enhance student engagement in learning and facilitate development of specific academic and social skills.

(2) Encourage Professional Learning About Enabling School Adjustment

Plan structured staff discussions and staff development about enhancing school adjustment for all students -- strengthening classroom support systems, addressing barriers to learning, coordinating efforts among teachers, support staff, mentors, and families.

What If the above Strategies Don't Work?

If initial efforts do not produce the desired results:

- Seek advice from colleagues who have successfully addressed similar concerns.
- Request coaching, mentoring, or additional professional learning opportunities.
- Participate in collaborative problem-solving teams and professional learning communities.
- Observe effective classroom practices used by colleagues.

Only after the above efforts have been fully implemented and found insufficient should the school's referral process be used to seek additional support services. And when such services are provided, it is essential to ensure they are well coordinated with classroom instruction and interventions, school-wide supports, and family efforts so that all assistance works together effectively.

For more on this, see the following Center resources

- > *Enhancing Student/Learning Supports in Classrooms*
- > *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Classroom-Focused Enabling*
- > *Personalizing Learning and Addressing Barriers to Learning*
- > *Learning Supports: Enabling Learning in the Classroom*

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Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.

John Dewey

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>Quick Links to Online Resources

- >> **School-Based Behavioral Threat Assessment: A Review and Practical Considerations**
- >> **Adolescent public mental health: Why systems need changing and how a public mental health approach can work**
- >> **Neighborhood social environments and mental health among youth and adults in public housing**
- >> **The AmeriCorps Senior Foster Grandparent Program: Building Intergenerational Bridges in Classrooms**
- >> **Neighborhood Deprivation and Adolescent Mental Health: The Protective Role of School Staffing Patterns**

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...we need to achieve the America we dream of: An America where everyone has opportunity and economic security. An America where everyone's dignity and freedoms are respected. An America whose democracy not only endures but finally lives up to its noble ideals. – Randi Weingarten

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Here's what was discussed in the *Community of Practice* during August

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

Note: All community of practice editions contain Links to relevant shared resources.

- >Should screen time be limited in schools?
- >What do students want from schools?
- >Retaining teachers: The role of student and learning supports
- >Can one principal effectively lead more than one school?
- >Report on New Directions to Strengthen Student/Learning Supports
- >How one district's leadership is taking students' advice
- >What's a school' role in helping families meet the new Medicaid requirements?
- >The Case for Systemic Redesign of Student/Learning Supports

If you missed the resources and news in previous issues of the Community of Practice, see
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

>For more resources in general, see our website

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

>For info on the status of upcoming conferences

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upconf.htm>

>For info on webinars

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

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School districts themselves must become learning organizations, with their leaders modeling the learning they expect throughout the organization. No course I took while earning my doctorate truly prepared me to be an instructional leader, and I suspect the same is true for many principals and superintendents. If we are asking educators to fundamentally rethink how schools organize themselves around barriers to learning, we should expect that transformation to require significant learning by the adults leading and implementing the work. – Tony Sanders

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>Calls for grant proposals
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upcall.htm>

**> job and training opportunities
when available**
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/job.htm>

Center Report:

New Directions for Student and Learning Supports: From Fragmented Initiatives to System Transformation

Abstract

“Across the United States, growing attention is being given to addressing the barriers that interfere with students’ learning, development, well-being, and school success. In response, a variety of initiatives have emerged, including whole-child approaches, integrated student supports, community schools, comprehensive school mental health systems, Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), and expansions of student support personnel. While these efforts have increased awareness, expanded services, and strengthened school-community collaboration, they have not resolved a persistent problem: student and learning supports continue to be fragmented, marginalized, and insufficiently integrated into school improvement policy and practice.

This report first reviews seven major arenas of activity currently shaping student and learning supports and analyzes the lessons emerging from these efforts. The analysis concludes that fragmentation is not the fundamental problem but rather a symptom of a deeper policy issue: addressing barriers to learning and teaching has not been established as a primary and essential component of school improvement. As a result, programs, services, personnel, and funding streams tend to operate in parallel rather than as parts of a coherent system.

The report argues that the next major frontier in school improvement is system transformation. It proposes moving beyond the prevailing two-component framework focused on instruction and management/governance to a three-component framework that includes a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports. Such a framework organizes and weaves together existing school and community resources, prioritizes prevention and early intervention, strengthens leadership and infrastructure, and enhances equity of opportunity for all students.

The report concludes with recommendations for policy, practice, operational infrastructure, accountability, and resource integration designed to transform fragmented initiatives into a sustainable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families.”

Please share the report with colleagues. (URL = <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Newdirs.pdf>)

And let us know your perspective on all this.

Here is a sample of first responses to the report:

“Thank you for sharing this with Ohio. I think that this is a great summary of the landscape and the future push towards meaningful systems alignment. I will think about how we can utilize your work as we continue!”

“Thank you for contacting me regarding this approach to learning. I am cc-ing this email to our state Commissioner and staff to see if they would like to put a discussion on the agenda regarding *New Directions for Student and Learning Supports: From Fragmented Initiatives to System Transformation* and your call for a unified system of student and learning supports. I believe that unifying student support initiatives is valuable.”

“Thank you for the recent report on what is needed in schools—it was spot on. I’ve already shared it with several colleagues and know it will remain an important reference.”

“I just sent out a message highlighting that the report you sent me focused on system transformation. This is exactly the focus of my work and I’m glad to see this specifically within youth mental health and schools. My first full-time job out of college was as a second grade teacher in Compton, CA. I left teaching elementary school after two years because of all the systems issues I saw as central to the experiences of my students in and out of school. I pursued public health - prevention and population-level systems change! Thank you for all the work you do. I also have struggled with school systems that didn’t fit my kids. So, again - thank you for this work. I already forwarded this to my close friends who are school administrators.”

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

Our Center emphasizes the opportunity to start now to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

Let Us Know -- about what ideas are being proposed for moving in new directions for transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

And if anyone is thinking about increasing the capacity of a district or school with respect to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help. Send all info to ltaylor@ucla.edu

>A Few News Stories (excerpted from various news sources)

Los Angeles County expands Youth@Work opportunities. The Los Angeles County Department of Economic Opportunity is encouraging young people and employers to participate in its year-round Youth@Work program, which provides paid work experience, job training and career development opportunities for eligible residents ages 14 to 24.

The county aims to place at least 500 participants in jobs with the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, the Los Angeles County Library, YMCA locations and other employers. They also receive job-readiness training, career counseling and connections to education and workforce services. The program serves youth from a variety of backgrounds, including foster youth, justice-impacted youth, LGBTQ+ youth, youth with disabilities, those experiencing housing instability and individuals from low-income households.

Many Children Have Lost SNAP Benefits Under New Rules. More than 1 million children across 19 states have stopped receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits since Congress passed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act in July 2025, according to a new analysis from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Among states where children represented the largest share of overall enrollment losses, New Jersey topped the list, with children accounting for 61 percent of the state's decline. South Dakota followed at 57 percent, New Mexico at 56 percent and Texas at 53 percent. The drop in participation follows a series of changes to SNAP. Among the biggest policy changes was the expansion of work requirements to adults up to age 64.

Desperate for day care: How empty TK-12 classrooms can help fix the care crisis. Declining enrollment at TK-12 schools has opened an opportunity for child-care nonprofits to turn vacant classrooms and even shuttered campuses into child-care hubs. The trend is helping to expand scarce infant and toddler slots. The programs also allow districts to build future enrollment to keeping neighborhood schools open. Opening early learning classrooms on school campuses also provides continuity of care for young families who can build a sense of community.

Schools are testing pepper-spraying, strobe-flashing drones to stop shooters. Several schools in three states will launch the new academic year with a new security measure: drones equipped with pepper spray, strobe lights and other features that their manufacturer says can be used against an active shooter within seconds. The drones are part of the growing business of providing security services to the nation's thousands of K-12 schools amid the scourge of school shootings. American schools now spend about \$4 billion annually on physically hardening their facilities. The primary selling point for these drones is their ability to offer live footage to law enforcement from areas where it previously would not have been available.

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From the news story above about drones:

Overwhelmingly, research indicates that the best way to keep students safe in schools is not just to attend to students' physical safety, but to ensure their psychological sense of safety as well.

Jennifer DePaoli

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Comments and sharing from the field

Response to *Retaining teachers: The role of student and learning supports; Can one principal effectively lead more than one school?*

“The main reason so many teachers leave in the first five years is because they lack the behavior management skills to deal with student acting out behavior (even in affluent schools, but especially in urban schools where so many new teachers start out). What is needed is better models for teaching discipline skills in teacher training programs and for mentoring it in schools. (I have checked out some of the discipline text books used in teacher training programs and they are pretty inadequate.)”

Comment from a colleague:

“I always find your information very informative, and I appreciate the efforts being made to send it out. [The topics] you speak about is what led me to write the book: *Student In/Teacher Out: The Mental Health and Moral Injury Crisis Draining America's Educators*.”

Another colleague bemoaned:

“... The dismantling of the federal level education and mental health structures and systems is shameful, and the diminishment of useful implementation policies, supports, systems, etc. borders on student-abuse....”

To Listserv Participants

- **Please share this resource with others.** (Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and this is a critical time for action.)
- **Let us know what's going on** to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 130,000 on our listserv.)
- **For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly,** send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu
- **Looking for information?** (We usually can help.)
- **Have a suggestion for improving our efforts?** (We welcome your feedback.)

We look forward to hearing from you!

Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF ENEWS

Who Are We? Recently renamed the Center for MH in Schools and Student/Learning Supports, our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor.

For more information about the Center and its many resources, go to the website at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> or email Ltaylor@ucla.edu or adelman@psych.ucla.edu

Send info to share with others or ask for specific resources by email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu