

Moving Forward

Addressing Barriers to Learning

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... the Center's quarterly e-journal

Rethinking and Restructuring Student/Learning Supports

Contents

- >National Award for Work on Transforming Student/Learning Supports
- >Major Reasons for Transforming K-12 Student/Learning Supports
- >Why Are So Few Educators Focused on Transforming Student Supports?
- >Moving Forward: A New Era for Student/Learning Supports
- >How is all this related to mental health in schools?



National Award for Work on Transforming Student/Learning Supports

As part of the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports*, our Center remains committed to advancing comprehensive, equitable, and effective systems of support for all students.

This year the Center established an annual award to recognize a school making significant efforts to improve student and learning supports in ways that better address barriers to learning and promote student well-being.

We received 28 nominations from across the country. In selecting the recipient, we applied the principles and frameworks outlined in our guide:

Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions

We are pleased to announce:

**the 2025 National Award for
Transforming Student and Learning Supports**

has been given to

Crosswell Drive Elementary School (Sumter, SC)

This school has shown exceptional commitment to making classroom and schoolwide systemic changes using existing resources in innovative ways to address barriers to learning and teaching and engage students. (See brief description on page 4.)

Congratulations to

Crosswell Drive Elementary School

**for moving forward in developing a supportive and
inclusive learning environment for all students!**

All 28 nominators* expressed feelings of pride about how well those nominated were doing in working to strengthen student/learning supports.

- (1) The nominees shared a common understanding that
 - prevailing approaches to student/learning supports needed rethinking in order to more effectively address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnect students
 - prevention begins with fostering an empowering school climate that enhances interpersonal connections and produces a caring sense of community
 - students who are not doing well require personalized supports that address specific needs and build on their assets and interests
 - community collaboration and family engagement are invaluable supports
 - improvements benefitted from available R&D efforts.
- (2) Nearly all referred to specific programs/focus of their work
(e.g., improving attendance, personalizing learning, mentoring, student/family resources and family engagement, mental health services, outdoor learning, service learning, community partnerships, staff wellness, afterschool programs)
- (3) Most indicated they had some form of a work groups that met together on a regular basis
(e.g., a wellness committee, student support team, mental health workforce, intervention team, threat assessment team, problem solving team, multi-disciplinary team).
- (4) Nine referred to using a multi-tiered continuum of supports framework, citing specific programs at each level.
- (5) Nine shared data on improved outcomes for students
- (6) Six specifically mentioned professional development related to enhancing student/learning support.

In terms of some immediate next steps, we consistently find schools (LEAs and SEA's) need to

- enhance *communication and public relations* by adding a *dedicated section* covering *Learning Supports System* to their websites that clarifies and highlights work underway to provide and transform student/learning supports (For us, the emphasis is on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that ends fragmented and marginalized student/learning supports.)
- rework *system transformation mechanisms* – rather than relying on narrowly focused workgroups, major improvements call for designating an administrative leader and establishing a leadership team that focuses on development and implementation of the system transformation.

*Nominations were made for public and private, urban and rural schools, as well as for several schools districts and for personnel at local and state education agencies. The nominations came from superintendents, principals, support directors and staff, and university faculty.

A brief description of the awardee's student/learning support efforts*

Crosswell Drive Elementary School (Sumter, SC)

As described by Principal Shawn Hagerty, over the past 8 years, the school has "undertaken a comprehensive restructuring of their approach to student supports, moving from a reactive, deficit-based model to a proactive, strengths-based framework that addresses the whole child."

Leadership for the work is guided by the principal and school staff, with the aim of ensuring that "every student has access to the resources and relationships they need to thrive."

The school approached the work through "an equity lens, ensuring that their restructured supports specifically addressed disparities affecting their most vulnerable students. The school's commitment is to systemic change rather than surface-level adjustments and to developing a "model that can and should be replicated across the district and beyond."

The school has:

- *restructured their learning supports' framework* "to integrate academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports seamlessly." Rather than operating in silos, interveners "work collaboratively to identify and address the root causes of student struggles."
- established a *Student Support Hub* "to coordinate mental health services, family resources, basic needs assistance, and community partnerships."
- developed *Flexible Learning Pathways* to redesign the "daily schedule and instructional model to provide flexible learning opportunities, including small-group instruction, personalized learning plans, and intervention blocks that don't pull students from core instruction" (to ensure students receive additional support without missing critical learning time).

With specific respect to reengaging disconnected students and engaging families:

- *Mentorship and Relationship-building* – "Every at-risk student is paired with a staff mentor who maintains consistent contact, monitors progress, and advocates for the student's needs." Additional mentors and tutors are recruited from the community and high school.
- *Interest-based Learning Opportunities* – Projects, clubs, and other special learning experiences are tied to student interests and cultural experiences with a view to "reigniting passion for learning among students who have become disconnected."
- *Family Engagement* – A variety of personalized connections are pursued, including home visits, flexible meeting times, multilingual communications, and literacy nights.

The school attributes the following indicators as related to the work being done to transform student/learning supports:

- chronic absenteeism decreased by 26% over a three year period
- student behavioral incidents declined by 80% over an 8 year period
- academic proficiency rates increased by 30% in reading and 30% in mathematics
- family engagement increased by 68%
- student and family satisfaction on an annual report card rated the school excellent
- 25+ previously disengaged students returned to grade level performance
- staff retention improved by 80%

Principal Hagerty concludes that the work on transforming student/learning supports into a comprehensive, compassionate, and effective system is transforming not just the school, but the lives of countless students and families.

*Over the years, we have identified five essential elements related to work on transforming student/learning supports at a school (LEA, SEA): (1) adopting a three component policy for school improvement, (2) pursuing a transformative intervention framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, (3) reworking operational infrastructure to ensure dedicated system transformation mechanisms, (4) continuous capacity building (especially professional development) to ensure the system is implemented and maintained, and (5) monitoring for improvement and accountability. All nominees were analyzed to determine where they were in their work on transforming student/learning support.

Efforts to transform student/learning supports are works in progress.
The following discussions offer our Center's perspective on moving forward.

Why Transform K-12 Student/Learning Supports?

Stated directly – current student supports are:

- *Fragmented*: leading to redundancy and inefficiency at all levels; at district and state levels, services and programs are siloed across departments (e.g., counseling, school psychology, special education, discipline).
- *Overspecialized*: Staff focus narrowly on specific issues, limiting holistic support (e.g., specific problems, specially funded initiatives).
- *Reactive*: Interventions are triggered mainly after problems escalate (e.g., waiting for problems to be sent to student/child study teams).
- *Under-resourced*: Staff are stretched thin, and supports are inconsistently available (e.g., inadequate school funding, uncertain extra-mural funding).
- *Inequitably applied*: Access to resources varies widely, leaving many students underserved (e.g., poor neighborhoods have sparse resources).
- *Marginalized*: Supports are treated as auxiliary interventions (e.g., added services), not as integral to school improvement and a primary component of school improvement policy, planning, and decision-making.

This state of affairs inevitably hinders school efforts to address the range of barriers to learning and teaching and close the achievement and opportunity gaps. Especially neglected are efforts focused on prevention.

Three Aims in Transforming Student/Learning Supports

1. Ending the Marginalization of Such Supports

Currently, student/learning supports are not treated as a primary concern in school improvement policy and practice. Yet, they are essential for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and for reengaging disconnected students.

Marginalization leads to:

- Limited availability and access for many students and teachers
- Ad hoc, fragmented interventions
- Counterproductive competition for scarce resources
- Disproportionate impact on schools in low-income communities

Modern educational frameworks emphasize educating the whole child — academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. Marginalized supports undermine this vision. Ending marginalization and transforming student/learning supports is central to school improvement and promoting equity of opportunity for success at schools and beyond.

2. Ending the Fragmentation of Current Supports

Most schools provide a range of supports (e.g., counseling, behavior interventions, tutoring, special education). However, because these efforts are marginalized, implementation often is disconnected and reactive, resulting in inefficiencies and gaps.

Transformation enables schools to shift from reactive, crisis-driven actions to a proactive, integrated system. Such a system can build on the type of continuum outlined by MTSS. The intent is to unify and organize supports into a well-defined and delimited set of intervention domains across each tier of the continuum.* The ultimate aim is to develop a system that pursues prevention and early intervention in ways that reduce the amount of specialized assistance needed.

*The next step in building on approaches that emphasize a continuum of interventions (e.g., MTSS) involves organizing the many interventions into a well-defined and delimited set of intervention domains that cross each tier of the continuum. As indicated below and illustrated on the following page, the R&D prototype for these domains developed by our center calls for six interconnected domains of student/learning supports:

- *Classroom-Based Learning Supports*
- *Supports for Transitions*
- *Home Involvement and engagement*
- *Community Involvement and collaborative Engagement*
- *Crisis Response & Prevention*
- *Student & Family Assistance*

3. *Reaching More Students, Families, and Teachers*

Achievement and opportunity gaps persist, particularly for students from low-income families, English learners, and students with special needs.

Current supports often fail to meet to the complexity and diversity of student and teacher needs, particularly in underserved communities. Ending the marginalization and fragmentation of student/learning supports helps promote equity of opportunity for success at schools and beyond. Transforming supports is key to address systemic inequities.

Transforming student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system enables schools to

- assist more students, families, and teachers
- strategically restructure and build capacity using existing resources (rather than unrealistically hoping to fund additional personnel)
- make systemic change scalable across districts and states.

Conclusion

Frameworks like Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Whole Child approaches call for cohesive, tiered, and comprehensive systems that address barriers to learning and teaching. These frameworks can be developed into a unified and comprehensive system by addressing marginalization and fragmentation and rethinking student/learning supports. And as such a transformed system is developed, it will provide supports for many more students to succeed at school and beyond.

Student/learning supports are vital in fostering a positive school climate, student engagement, and social-emotional development. A comprehensive transformation of student/learning supports is not just beneficial—it is essential for improving availability, access, equity, cost-effectiveness, scalability, and sustainability.

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
		Accommodations for differences & disabilities		Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., special education, school-based interventions)

Why Are So Few Educators Focused on Transforming Student Supports?

This question points to deep systemic problems in education.

Schools face relentless pressure to raise academic achievement, yet a critical reality is widely given short shrift – barriers to learning and teaching undermine classroom instruction. As every school experiences, students cannot learn effectively when such barriers go unaddressed.

Given this wide ranging reality: *Why Isn't Transforming Student Supports a Priority?*

Several factors explain why most educators haven't made this a major focus:

Instruction vs. Support Divide: Educational culture—and policy—treats “instruction” and “support” as separate components, funding and regulating them differently and, in effect, marginalizing student/learning supports in school improvement efforts.

Accountability Pressures: Standardized test scores dominate accountability systems, pushing schools to prioritize instructional improvement over essential student supports.

Supports as Add-Ons: Student supports are often viewed as peripheral rather than integral to teaching and learning. They're siloed into departments or handled by specialists.

Fragmented Thinking and Actions: Many educators see supports as isolated programs (e.g., PBIS, MTSS tiers) rather than as part of a unified, comprehensive system.

Resource Concerns: Time, staffing, and funding constraints make systemic change feel overwhelming.

Ironically, transforming student/learning supports isn't about spending more—it's about using existing resources more effectively to help students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Current approaches are marginalized, fragmented, and often compete for limited time and resources. Without systemic change, vulnerable students will continue to fall through the cracks. Equity depends on access to a unified and comprehensive system of student/learning supports.

Many agree that traditional supports help, but they're fragmented, reactive, and reach too few students. What's missing is a systemic approach that integrates student/learning supports into the school's core mission which is to effectively teach all students.

Educators can start to address what's missing by:

Adopting Whole-School, Whole-Student Lenses: Reframe student/learning supports as an essential component for effectively instructing all students.

Mapping Existing Resources: Identify all current interventions and personnel (many schools have more than they realize).

Creating a Learning Supports Leadership Team: Include school and community collaborators to develop a plan for (a) unifying supports and (b) building a comprehensive and equitable system.

Starting Small, Thinking Big: Begin with priority needs, then expand systematically to address other barriers to learning and teaching in collaboration with families and communities.

Transforming student/learning supports is about leveraging what we already have to move forward potentially toward ensuring every student can engage, progress, and thrive.

Moving Forward: A New Era for Student/Learning Supports

Maintaining the status quo is no longer tenable. An improved student/learning support system is essential to improving how schools deal with factors that interfere with learning and teaching. We think of this as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports to enable schools to better address barriers to learning, reengage disconnected students, and promote whole child development. See

Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions

At this time, transformation of student and learning supports is viewed as essential for enhancing equity of opportunity, improving school climate, and ensuring all students have the opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. A unified and comprehensive system of student/learning supports is not just beneficial—it is essential for improving availability, comprehensiveness, equity, cost-effectiveness, scalability, and sustainability.

In our experience, there always are stakeholders who want to make major improvements in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. And some can be mobilized as a workgroup to initiate a process for making the type of systemic changes necessary for fundamentally improving student/learning supports.

A month-by-month guide for systemic change with existing resources is available: see

An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports

Highlighted are steps for creating readiness and initially moving forward at a school. A parallel approach is adaptable at district and state agency levels, with additional steps related to replication to scale. At each level, the process is envisioned as beginning with establishment of a leadership workgroup. Outlined below are tasks for the first month.

First Month – Initiating & Planning

Form a Student/Learning Support System Leadership Workgroup to pursue the first steps and guide, support, and monitor the progress of and necessary adjustments to the monthly agenda.

The Workgroup

- reviews and discusses the overview materials
- develops a workgroup action plan
- identifies a feeder pattern of schools that would be good trailblazers
- requests that leadership integrate their efforts to improve student/learning supports into school improvement plans
- introduces the intent to improve student/learning supports to staff and other key stakeholders to obtain a critical mass of endorsement

Student/learning supports can play a vital role in fostering a positive school climate, student engagement, and social-emotional development. By calling for cohesive, tiered, and comprehensive systems that address barriers to learning and teaching, frameworks such as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and the Whole Child approach provide a foundation upon which to move forward.

How is all this related to mental health in schools?

First, it is necessary to clarify the difference between the terms "School Mental Health" and "Mental Health in Schools."

Although these terms often are used interchangeably, they represent quite different approaches to policy and practice in schools.

The key difference:

- School Mental Health (SMH) – focuses primarily on providing mental health services - such as counseling, therapy, crisis response - within schools and/or linked with community providers for identified students. This approach is service heavy and siloed, emphasizing the need for more clinicians, more referrals. It largely addresses MTSS tiers 2-3 and cannot, on its own, meet the scale of need.
- Mental Health in Schools – takes a systemic, schoolwide approach, embedding mental health as a foundational part of the school's overall mission and its operational infrastructure to promote well being and support learning and teaching. It aims to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that provides a full continuum of interventions - from prevention to intensive supports - with an organized set of student/learning support domains across each level. The aim is to support all students, not just those with clinical diagnoses.

For a detailed comparison, see the AI-generated table on the next page.

Why It Matters

Districts are investing in addressing mental health concerns, but much of the effort remains service heavy and fragmented, touching only a fraction of students. The term School Mental Health is tied to this approach - and it is more than evident that services alone can never keep pace with the need at many schools. And, it is noteworthy that School Mental Health has been the target of those stakeholders who argue against schools providing therapeutic services.

By contrast, adopting the term Mental Health in Schools signals a strategic shift that

- reframes addressing mental health concerns at schools and embeds the work into the existing student and learning supports efforts at a school to address barriers to learning and re engage disconnected students
- can be a catalyst for transforming such supports into a third, fully integrated component of school improvement (alongside instruction and management)
- can unify student/learning supports and develop them into a comprehensive, and equitable system.

The focus on mental health in schools is an essential facet of a transformed system for improving how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

For more on this, see [Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change](#).

Comparison Table – School Mental Health vs. Mental Health in Schools*

Dimension	School Mental Health	Mental Health in Schools
Primary Focus	Delivering mental health services within the school setting	Embedding mental health into a transformed system of student/learning supports as a core component of school improvement
Orientation	Clinical/service-driven interventions for mental health problems	Changes in classrooms and school-wide to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that addresses a wide range of mental health concerns
Target Group	Students with identified mental health needs	All students, staff, and families
Typical Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling • Therapy • Crisis intervention • Case management • Staff development • Strengthening policies and practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Classroom-based supports •Transition supports •Home and Community involvement •Crisis prevention and response •Staff development •Supports for individuals with MH problems
Staffing Model	Mental health professionals employed by or community providers integrated into schools	Whole-school approach involving teachers, student support staff, school administrators, and community collaborators
Underlying Assumption	Mental health is a specialized service	Mental health and social-emotional development is foundational to learning and equity of opportunity
Goal	Treat and manage mental health problems	Promote well-being and address barriers to learning and teaching

*Table generated by AI and edited to avoid errors.



Center Resources *Update*

Want resources? Need technical assistance? Coaching?

Start with the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Finds:

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

Or send us an E-mail request: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS)?

Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange*?

Send requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Note: We regularly send out and post *Commentaries*

Here are a few recent examples:

Comparing the Concepts of ACEs and Barriers to Learning and Teaching

The State of K-12 Education in 2025-26: Challenges and Urgent Priorities?

Teacher Survey Highlights Lack of Basic Student/learning Supports

Not Another Team!

Is your School Board Prioritizing a Focus on Helping Schools Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching?

If you are involved in making system changes, you might be interested in our work on:

Implementation Science and School Improvement

AND let us know about what you have to say about related matters. Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

*What the best and wisest parent wants for his (her) own child
that must the community want for all of its children.
Any other idea . . . is narrow and unlovely. John Dewey*

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.

Center Co-Directors
Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor