Not another
special initiative!

Another day, another policy on safeguarding. Sounds familiar? Well this is the US experience. **Howard S. Adelman** and **Linda Taylor** argue that knee-jerk reactions of creating policy in response to calamitous events are overkill and counter-productive. Instead, integrated school policies provide a better alternative.

Schools are constantly confronted with requests and mandates for another initiative – for example, another pilot project, another program to address a specific learning, behaviour, or emotional problem. Most schools are stretched thin by the many programmes already underway. As a result, a common reaction of professionals is: Enough – we can't take on another thing!

Despite this state of affairs, advocacy for doing more usually follows any event that increases public concern about matters such as violence at schools, child abuse or neglect, trauma, bullying, and other mental and behavioural health problems. And, when funds are attached, budget-starved schools find special initiatives almost irresistible. Increasingly, however, concerns are being raised about the pernicious effects on school improvement of the ad hoc addition of special initiatives.

While addressing specific problems in schools may be well-intentioned, policy research shows that increasing attention to a new initiative tends to reduce attention to other concerns – especially when budgets are tight. Moreover, many such initiatives are directed at a relatively few students and are short-lived projects. The unrelenting pursuit of special projects and pilot demonstrations has been characterised as "projectitis".

The tendency to implement new initiatives in a piecemeal manner increases what is an already highly fragmented approach to tackling problems at school, home, and in the community. Even worse, this type of systemic tinkering contributes to the ongoing marginalisation of efforts to develop a unified, comprehensive, systemic, and equitable approach to addressing a full range of overlapping learning, behaviour, and emotional concerns.

Providing safeguarding support for students and staff

The good news is that there are many schools where the majority of students and staff are safe and successful, and in all schools, one can find young people who are doing just fine. The bad news is that in too many schools, particularly those serving lower income families, large numbers of students are in harm's way, academically in trouble, and dropping out. And the impact on teachers and teaching is detrimental.

Besides needing to reduce dropout rates and excessive absences of students (and staff), almost every school is caught up to some degree in addressing bullying, harassment, and a variety of other community, family, school, peer, and individual factors that interfere with learning and teaching. Any combination of such factors can put a student at risk, but the higher the concentration of risk factors, the greater the number of students manifesting learning, behaviour, and emotional problems. And the reality is that schools cannot achieve their mission as long as such matters are ineffectively addressed. Thus, schools are concerned about any factor that can interfere with learning and teaching.

Concern and effective action, of course, are different considerations, and how schools should address such matters is our focus here. We begin with the reality that the first and foremost mission of schools is to educate the young. From this perspective, all efforts to address factors interfering with learning are most productively met by addressing a full range of barriers to learning and teaching and doing so in ways designed to enhance equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond.

Emphasising barriers to learning and teaching in no way is meant as an excuse for poor school performance. As schools and districts move to high–quality, rigorous, grade–level standards and teaching, school and student success often will depend on addressing interfering factors.

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New directions

The complex array of factors interfering with schools achieving their mission calls for embracing an expanded vision for school improvement policy and practice that establishes new directions in providing support for students and staff.

In response to the number of schools and students in trouble, there is movement toward new directions for student and learning support. For example, our approach to transforming student and learning support focuses on four interconnected concerns. These involve:

■ *Expanding the policy framework* for school improvement to fully integrate, as primary and essential, a student and learning support component.
■ *Reframing student and learning support interventions* to create a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports in classrooms and school-wide.
■ *Reworking the operational infrastructure* to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.
■ *Enhancing approaches for systemic change* in ways that ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability.

Given sparse resources, the emphasis is on weaving together and redeploying existing school and community resources and taking advantage of natural opportunities at schools for addressing problems and promoting student, staff, and other stakeholder development.

This is not the place to cover each of the four interrelated concerns. Rather, in what follows, we briefly highlight frameworks for expanding school improvement policy and for guiding development of a unified and comprehensive intervention system. At the end of this article, references are provided to the other related concerns and to more detailed presentations.

Better support means better outcomes

Prevailing education policy stresses two components for school improvement. One component emphasises enhancing instruction; the other intends to improve the management/governance of schools. Some attention, of course, also is given to student and schooling problems. However, in most school systems, these matters are at best a secondary concern in school improvement planning.

An expanded vision adds an emphasis on addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a unified, primary, and essential third component in school improvement policy and planning. Ironically, the term "barriers to learning" is commonly used by many stakeholder groups recommending policy changes. Unfortunately, the recommended changes typically fail to include calls for expanding the overall policy framework.

In contrast, trailblazing education leaders are **pioneering a three-component school improvement framework**. The third component, dedicated to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, usually is referred to as a comprehensive system of learning supports. Moving to a three−component policy framework provides a driver for transforming what schools do in dealing with factors interfering with student success.

A framework for improving schools

Where a three-component policy framework has been adopted, the third component provides the basis for:

- reframing the existing wide range of initiatives, programs, and services and redeploying resources to develop a comprehensive and cohesive system for enabling learning
- developing both in classroom and school-wide approaches that reinforce individual student interventions – including interventions to support transitions, increase home and community connections, enhance teachers' ability to respond to common learning and behaviour problems, and respond to and prevent crises
- realigning district, school, and school-community infrastructures to weave resources together with the aim of enhancing and evolving the learning supports system
- pursuing school improvement and systemic change with a high degree of policy commitment to fully integrate supports for learning and teaching with efforts to improve instruction and school governance
- expanding accountability systems both to improve data-based decision-making and to reflect a comprehensive picture of student and school performance that incorporates efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

Re-framing intervention

In practice, the third component involves addressing interfering factors and re-engaging disconnected students in classroom instruction. As operationalised to date, the intervention framework combines both an integrated and systemic continuum of school and community interventions and a multifaceted and cohesive set of content arenas. This framework embeds consideration of the many specific problems to which advocates want schools to attend.

Promoting wellbeing and addressing problems

Interventions that schools and communities offer fit along a continuum. Such a continuum encompasses efforts to:

- promote positive development and prevent problems
- intervene as early after the onset of problems as is feasible
- provide special assistance for severe and chronic problems.

This range of interventions has the potential to enable academic, social, emotional, and physical development and improve learning, behaviour, and emotional problems.

In education, the continuum is described simply in terms of *tiers* or *levels* of school intervention. In contrast, we emphasise that the continuum is one of two facets of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable intervention system. Specifically, we view this facet in terms of three *subsystems* embracing both school and community resources. The other facet, described next, stresses *arenas of intervention content*.

Currently, the tendency in schools to focus on the most severe (e.g. diagnosable disabilities) skews the focus of intervention so that too little is done to prevent or at least intervene early after the onset of a problem. For example, with respect to problems such

as child neglect or abuse, the aim should be to prevent the majority of problems, deal with another significant segment as soon after problem onset as is feasible, and end up with relatively few students needing specialised assistance and other intensive and costly interventions.

Framing intervention content to address problems at a school

Most districts – or local authorities in the UK – and schools currently have no listing of all that is being done to address barriers to learning and teaching. Making such a list requires talking to a variety of school and community stakeholders, and the end product usually is a laundry list of programs, services, and special initiatives.

Our research has tried to bring coherence to what schools are doing about student and school problems. We analysed and then grouped the activity into clusters. The resulting six general arenas capture the essence of the multifaceted ways schools address barriers to learning and teaching. Schools, districts, and state education agencies often refer to this facet as the content or 'curriculum' of a component of school improvement that focuses specifically on learning supports.

Six arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching at a school

1. *Enhance regular classroom strategies* to enable learning (e.g., ensure that instruction is personalised for all students and especially those manifesting mild-moderate learning and behaviour problems. There is a focus on enhancing the range of learning options, extending learning opportunities, and providing learning support, accommodations, and special assistance as needed and within the context of implementing a 'Response to Intervention.' Special attention is given to re-engaging those who have become disengaged from learning at school).
2. *Support transitions* (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate hurdles to enrolment, adjust to school, and stages in their education, make daily transitions before, during, and after school, access and effectively use supports and extended learning opportunities, and so forth).
3. *Increase home involvement and engagement* (e.g., increasing and strengthening the home and its connections with school).
4. *Respond to, and where feasible, prevent school and personal crises and traumatic events* (including creating a caring and safe learning environment and countering the impact of out-of-school traumatic events).
5. *Increase community involvement, engagement, and support* (e.g., outreach to develop a greater community support from a wide range of entities. This includes agency collaborations and use of volunteers to extend learning opportunities and help students in need.)
6. *Facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance* (on campus and in the community as needed).

The unified framework

Combining the continuum with the six arenas provides a unified, "big picture" intervention framework for student and learning supports (see Figure 1). The resulting matrix guides rethinking and restructuring of daily work to enable learning at a school. And it is within this context that all proposed initiatives are judged in terms of priority of need and current feasibility for integrating the work cohesively into the appropriate arena. Moreover, given the likelihood that many problems are not discrete, this approach minimises tendencies to develop separate initiatives for every designated problem.

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The matrix framework is especially useful as an aid in mapping and analysing resources, identifying gaps and redundancies, enhancing coordination and integration of resources, and developing a unified, comprehensive, systemic, and equitable approach. Effectively implementing the framework facilitates adherence to the principle of using the least restrictive and nonintrusive forms of intervention required to appropriately respond to problems and accommodate diversity.

As an example of how concerns about specific problems can be readily embedded into the framework, note that concerns about safety at school and responding to abuse or neglect of a specific child fall appropriately into the content arenas designated as crisis/emergency assistance and prevention and student and family assistance. Furthermore, interventions in each of the other four arenas play a role in promoting a positive school climate.

Figure 1

Framework for a Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports

Integrayed Intervention *Continuum*

Six Arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching at a school		Subsystem for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	Subsystem for Early Intervention	Subsystem for Care
	In Classroom			
	Support Transitions			
	Increase home involvement and engagement			
	Respond to, and where feasible, prevent school and personal crises and traumatic events			
	Increase community involvement, engagement and support			
	Facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance			

In general, development of a unified, comprehensive, systemic approach is intended to increase impact, reduce the number of individuals who require specialised supports, and enhance cost-effectiveness. This encompasses a focus on promoting the wellbeing of teachers and other school staff so that they can do more to promote the wellbeing of students. For individual students, this means preventing and minimising the impact of as many problems as feasible and doing so in ways that equitably maximise school engagement, productive learning, and positive development. For the school and community as a whole, the intent is to contribute to a safe, healthy, nurturing environment characterised by respect for differences, trust, caring, support, social justice, and high expectations. All this is essential in enhancing a nurturing school climate and establishing a comprehensive community school.

Concluding Comments

It is not enough to say we want to address child and adolescent problems, focus on the total child, ensure equity of opportunity, have safe and drug-free schools, reduce the achievement gap, increase graduation rates, create community schools, and all the other ideals set forth for public education and public health. Ideals that are proposed must be understood as emergent qualities. Healthy children, increasingly positive school climates, community schools, world-class outcomes etc. emerge from a well-conceived, big-picture vision and effective capacity building – pursued every day with common sense, wisdom, commitment, and perseverance.

Analyses of school improvement policy and plans underscores how far away most schools are from playing an effective role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and enabling equity of opportunity. And they are unlikely to play a more effective role if they continue to pursue every designated problem as a separate initiative.

It is time to fundamentally transform student and learning supports into a comprehensive and cohesive system. Such a system encompasses a full continuum of interventions and covers a well–defined and delimited set of classroom and school-wide supports and is directly accountability for whole child indicators. Moreover, the new directions policy and intervention frameworks we have formulated avoid the trap produced by specific problem initiatives and are designed to counter "reforms" that mainly tinker with fundamental systemic change.

Transforming student and learning supports, of course, is an enormous challenge. To do less, however, is to maintain an extremely unsatisfactory status quo.

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Suggested further reading

Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2000). Looking at school health and school reform policy through the lens of addressing barriers to learning. Children Services: Social Policy, Research, and Practice, 3, 117-132.

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006). The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Adelman, H. S. & Taylor, L. (2009). Ending the marginalization of mental health in schools: a comprehensive approach. In R. Christner & R. Mennuti (Eds.), School-based mental health: A practitioner's guide to comparative practices. Routledge Publishing.

Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2010). Mental health in schools: Engaging learners, preventing problems, and improving schools. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

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Another initiative? Where does it fit? A unifying framework and an integrated infrastructure for schools to address barriers to learning and promote healthy development. Los Angeles: Author. Available at: smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infrastructure/anotherinitiative-exec.pdf

Center for Mental Health in Schools (2012). Establishing a comprehensive system of learning supports at a school: Seven steps for principals and their staff. Los Angeles: Author. (see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf).

Taylor, L., & Adelman, H.S. (2000). Toward ending the marginalization of mental health in schools. Journal of School Health, 70, 210-215.

Also see the system building toolkit on the website of the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA – smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm