

Aligning School Accountability, Outcomes, and Evidence-Based Practices

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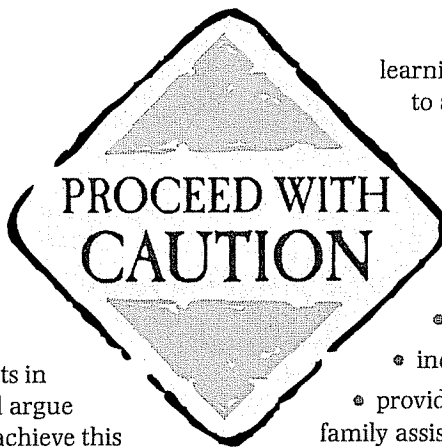
The Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization underscores the pressure on policymakers and practitioners to improve schools utilizing evidence-based practices that promise rapid improvements in student achievement test scores. Few will argue against implementing practices likely to achieve this outcome. However, prevailing reform strategies are not yet comprehensive enough to raise achievement test averages continuously over the long run, particularly in low performing schools. Sustained school improvement outcomes will require (1) developing a more comprehensive approach to education reform, (2) expanding the framework for school accountability and desired outcomes, and (3) rational use of the evidence base.

Expanding School Reform: A Comprehensive Approach to School Improvement

School improvement efforts have been limited to a two-component approach focused on (1) enhancing instruction, and (2) improving governance and management of resources. This approach is limited by:

- failure to reform and restructure school-based and associated activities used to address factors that interfere with student performance and learning;
- piecemeal development and categorical funding of student support programs and services; and
- fragmentation and marginalization of the planning, implementation, and evaluation of efforts designed to enable learning among students experiencing barriers to learning.

School improvement frameworks need to be expanded to incorporate a third "learning supports" component that addresses barriers to learning as a high priority and identifies a continuum of interventions encompassing healthy development, prevention of problems, early interventions, and systems of care. In our work with schools, we translate this continuum into a multi-level approach consisting of student, family and school-wide support programs, services and practices that enable



learning. This enabling component is designed to address barriers to learning and promotes healthy development by encompassing interventions to:

- enhance classroom-based efforts to enable learning
- respond to and prevent crises
- support transitions
- increase home involvement in schooling
- provide individually-tailored student and family assistance
- promote greater community involvement and support, including recruitment of volunteers.

Expanding the Framework for School Accountability

Development of such comprehensive approaches to address barriers to learning also will require adoption of an expanded framework for school accountability. Demands for rapid gains in achievement test scores currently drive school improvement planning. Thus, the prevailing accountability measures pressure schools to narrow their focus and adopt oversimplified and oversold strategies. The focus on test scores disconnects school improvement planning from the realities of what it takes to improve academic achievement in low performing schools.

An expanded accountability framework should encompass a continued emphasis on high academic standards, but it must also include measures of what schools are accomplishing in terms of promoting students' social and personal functioning, as well as benchmarks for measuring progress in addressing barriers to learning (e.g., improved school attendance, fewer behavior problems, increased family involvement).

A Caution About the Evidence Base

Adopting a more comprehensive approach to school reform and expanding our definition of school accountability should stimulate the development of an evidence base that encompasses a broader range of meaningful outcomes and demonstrates the value of education support programs. This is a crucial next step given that existing data to guide comprehensive school improvements are sparse and often only suggest promising directions, particularly with respect to approaches for

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addressing barriers to learning. For example, while there is growing evidence on how to engage students in learning to read, a comparable body of research has not been produced clarifying how to *re-engage* students who have become disengaged from classroom learning. The tendency in such cases is to focus on the misbehavior that often is associated with disengaged students and to rely on evidence-based practices oriented mainly towards social control. However, these practices are not necessarily effective and, in some cases, may be counterproductive with respect to re-engaging students in the learning process.

Given the magnitude of what schools must do each day and the range of learners with whom they must succeed, educators have little choice but to design much of what they do by extrapolating and interpreting a diverse body of empirical and theoretical literature. Clearly, they should always seek out the best practices available; at the same

time, we should continually strive to identify and evaluate outcomes of comprehensive, multi-faceted, and cohesive learning supports to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to succeed. ♦

Contact Howard Adelman, (310) 825-1225, adelman@psych.ucla.edu or Linda Taylor, ltaylor@ucla.edu, or visit our website <<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>> for more information and related resource materials, all of which can be downloaded free of charge.

The following materials available on the website may be of particular interest: *A Sampling of Outcomes from Interventions Related to Addressing Barriers to Learning* (Technical Assistance Sampler); *A Center Brief: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Promoting Healthy Development: A Usable Research Base* (Center Brief); *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning* (Continuing Education Module); and *Evaluation and Accountability*.

Copies of **Data Matters** may be distributed freely. If you would like to contribute to future issues or if you have suggestions/corrections for the mailing list, please send information to:

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Prior and current issues of data matters may be found on our Web site: <www.georgetown.edu/research/gucdc/eval.html>