Creating Caring Schools

by Howard S. Adelman and Linda Taylor

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 Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents (1989)

"Leave no child behind" is a statement of caring. Caring has moral, social, and personal facets, and when all facets are present and balanced, they can address problems, nurture individuals, and facilitate the process of learning. Good schools are ones where the staff works cohesively not only to teach effectively, but to provide supports that address barriers to student learning. Good teaching paired with comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive learning supports combine to prevent learning, behavior, and emotional problems; address problems quickly and effectively when they arise; and ensure the promotion of positive social and emotional development. Good schools do all this in ways that create an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring, and a sense of community. Schools whose improvement plans do not assign these matters a high priority are unlikely to be experienced as caring institutions.

While such a caring environment enhances the outcomes for all students, staff, and families, it is especially important for students who need additional support to succeed in school, such as students with emotional/behavioral disorders. A caring school anticipates there will be students with such needs for support by introducing programs designed to promote mental health and prevent problems, creating programs that are easily accessible when students show the first signs of needing more assistance, and having interventions that maximize the likelihood that students will be successful in their classrooms and out-of-class activities.

Fragmented and Marginalized Efforts

Looked at as a whole, most districts offer a wide range of programs and services oriented to student needs and problems. Some are provided throughout a district, others are carried out at or linked to targeted schools. Some are owned and operated by schools; some are from community agencies. The interventions may be for all students in a school, those in specified grades, those identified as "at risk," and/or those needing compensatory or special education.

Student and teacher supports are provided by various divisions in a district, each with a specialized focus such as curriculum and instruction, student support services, compensatory education, special education, language acquisition, parent partnerships, and intergroup relations. Such divisions are commonly organized and operate as relatively independent entities. In large districts, this often is the case for counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other specialists. And, at the school level, there is currently a tendency for these student support staff to function in relative isolation from each other and other stakeholders, with a great deal of the work oriented to discrete problems. In some schools, a student identified as at-risk for grade retention, dropout, and emotional/behavior problems may be assigned to three counseling programs operating independently of each other. Such fragmentation not only is costly, it works against developing cohesiveness and maximizing results (Adelman & Taylor, 1997).

Although various divisions and support staff usually must deal with the same common barriers to learning (e.g., poor instruction, weak parent partnerships, violence and unsafe schools, inadequate support for student transitions and for students with disabilities), they tend to do so with little or no coordination and sparse attention to moving toward integrated efforts. Furthermore, in every facet of a school district's operations, an unproductive separation often is manifested between those focused directly on instruction and those concerned with student support. It is not surprising, then, how often efforts to address students' learning, behavioral, and emotional needs are planned, implemented, and evaluated in a fragmented, piecemeal manner. Moreover, despite the variety of student support activities across a school district, it is common knowledge that many schools offer only bare essentials.

Caring Requires Rethinking Supports

Policymakers have come to appreciate the relationship between limited intervention efficacy and the widespread tendency for programs to operate in isolation. Concern has focused on the plethora of piecemeal, categorically funded approaches, such as those created to reduce learning, behavior, and emotional problems; substance abuse; violence; school dropouts; delinquency; and teen pregnancy. Some major initiatives have been designed to reduce the fragmentation. However, policymakers have failed to deal with the overriding issue, namely that addressing barriers to development and learning remains a marginalized aspect of school policy and practice.

The degree to which marginalization is the case is seen in consolidated school improvement plans and certification reviews. It is also seen in the lack of attention to mapping, analyzing, and rethinking how the resources used to address problems are allocated. For example, educational reformers have virtually ignored the need to reframe the work of pupil services professionals and other student support staff. Such reframing would expand their roles to include leadership in developing a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive component for addressing barriers to learning at

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school sites in a way that fully integrates learning supports with instruction. This lack of attention to rethinking resource use seriously hampers efforts to provide the caring assistance teachers and students so desperately need.

Needed: A Policy Shift

Clearly, current policies designed to enhance support for teachers and students are seriously flawed. And, the situation is unlikely to improve in the absence of concerted attention to ending the marginalized status of student learning supports (Adelman & Taylor, 2000, 2002). Increasing awareness of the policy deficiencies has stimulated analyses that indicate current policy is dominated by a two-component model of school improvement. That is, the primary thrust is on improving instruction and school management. While these two facets obviously are essential, effectively addressing problems requires establishing a third component that addresses barriers to learning in ways that enable students to learn and teachers to teach. Such an "enabling" component provides both a basis for combatting marginalization and a focal point for developing a comprehensive framework to guide policy and practice. To be effective, however, it must be established as essential and fully integrated with the other two components.

Various states and localities are moving in the direction of a three-component approach for school improvement (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2004a). In doing so, they are adopting different labels for their enabling component. For example, the Iowa and California Departments of Education call it a "learning supports" component. This is also the terminology used by the New American Schools' Urban Learning Center comprehensive school reform model. Some states use the term "supportive learning environment." The Hawaii Department of Education calls it a "comprehensive student support system (CSSS)." In each case, policy shifts have recognized that, over time, schools must play a major role in establishing a continuum of interventions ranging from a broad-based emphasis on promoting healthy development and preventing problems, through approaches for responding to problems quickly after onset, and extending on to narrowly-focused treatments for severe problems.

Reframing How Schools Address Barriers

School-wide approaches to address barriers to learning are especially important where large numbers of students are not doing well and at schools that are not yet paying adequate attention to considerations related to equity and diversity. Leaving no child behind means addressing the problems of the many who are not benefitting from instructional reforms. Because of the complexity of ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school, policymakers and practitioners need an operational framework to guide development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive enabling or learning supports component. Pioneering efforts have operationalized such a component into six programmatic arenas (Adelman & Taylor, 1997, 2000, 2002; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2004a, 2004b). Based on this work, the intervention arenas are conceived as:

- Enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning (i.e., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with learning, behavior, and emotional problems).
- Supporting transitions (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions).
- Increasing home and school partnerships (i.e., enhancing school capacity to provide families with opportunities for learning, special assistance, and participation).
- Responding to and, where feasible, preventing crises (i.e., school-wide and classroom efforts to prevent, respond to, and minimize the impact of crises).
- Increasing community involvement and support (i.e., outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers).
- Facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed (i.e., providing special assistance as necessary, including direct services and referrals).

As a whole, this six-area framework provides a unifying umbrella to guide the reframing and restructuring of the daily work of all staff who provide learning supports at a school.

Conclusion

A caring school enables learning by addressing barriers. Collaboration and collegiality are key facets in all this. The programs that emerge from a well-designed and developed enabling component are fundamental to enhancing a supportive and caring context for learning by all students. The implications for student and staff well-being, for learning, and for the future of every student are more than evident.

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