

Students & Schools: Moving Forward

(July, 2026 Vol. 30 #10) – 37 Years & Counting

Featured

Staff Development to Reduce Unnecessary Referrals for Special Assistance

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Staff Development to Reduce Unnecessary Referrals for Special Assistance

At one time or another, most students come to school with problems that affect their learning and may interfere with effective teaching. In many communities, large numbers of students experience overlapping challenges related to poverty, family stress, mobility, language barriers, community violence, substance abuse, limited health care, and lack of enrichment opportunities.

When such barriers are not addressed, they are often internalized as frustration, disengagement, and poor academic performance. Teachers, in turn, may respond too quickly by making referrals for specialized interventions—including special education placement.

To stem the tide of unnecessary referrals, schools must equip all staff to create a caring, inclusive, and effective learning environment and to strengthen a comprehensive system of student/learning supports. This system should address barriers to learning in classrooms, schoolwide, and in collaboration with families and communities.

Preparing for the coming school year requires that personnel development focus on these priorities – using summer planning time, when possible, to build essential knowledge and skills.

Areas for Personnel Development

1. *How to enhance collaborative practices, especially in the classroom*
 - >Strengthening collaboration among teachers, student support staff, and volunteers
 - >How student/learning support personnel can spend productive time working in classrooms
 - >Building effective communication and shared problem-solving routines with all concerned
2. *How to organize a classroom to enable personalized teaching and support*
 - >Organizing classrooms into smaller, more personalized learning units
 - >Establishing flexible grouping and differentiated supports
 - >Using response to interventions to guide instruction and special assistance
3. *How to foster intrinsic motivation*
 - >Moving away from overreliance on extrinsic rewards and control strategies
 - >Increasing student engagement through enhancing feelings of autonomy and connectedness
 - >Building a climate that promotes feelings of safety, competence, and community
4. *How to prevent problems and respond quickly when they arise*
 - >Identifying early signs of disengagement and learning difficulty
 - >Using proactive classroom strategies to prevent escalation
 - >Implementing timely, personalized supports before referral

5. *Developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports*

- >Coalescing and aligning available student/learning supports
- >Connecting and organizing classroom and schoolwide supports
- >Strengthening and systematizing connections with community resources

Examples of Formats for Personnel Development

- Interactive workshops with modeling and practice
- Team-based planning sessions (teacher + support staff workgroups)
- Case-based problem solving focused on real student scenarios
- Action planning for implementation when the new school year begins
- Follow-up mechanisms to sustain progress

Include the Whole-Staff

Student/learning supports are not the responsibility of a few; therefore, personnel preparation must involve the entire staff..

Teachers need to

- Expand their repertoire for addressing barriers to learning in the classroom
- Learn to work more effectively with support staff and families
- Integrate engagement and prevention strategies into daily instruction

Student and Learning Support Staff need to learn more about

- Effectively collaborating with teachers, especially within classrooms
- Strengthening prevention-oriented and intervention for responding quickly when problems arise
- Enhancing connections with district and community resources

Administrators need to learn more about

- Aligning priorities and policy for addressing barriers to learning and teaching
- Reworking infrastructure for implementing student/learning support system improvements
- Redeploying and braiding existing resources to improve student/learning supports

Minimally, the payoff should include increased collaboration, a stronger system of student/learning supports, greater student and family engagement, and a more positive school climate. With more common barriers addressed early in classrooms, these outcomes should lead to significant reductions in unnecessary referrals.

Center Resources to Aid in Staff Development

The Center has a wide range of resources online for free access. Some were developed specifically for personnel development, and most of what's available can be used for independent study by individuals or small groups of learners.

>Enhancing Student/Learning Supports in Classrooms

>Teachers Can't Do it Alone!

>Enhancing Classroom Climate for All Students

>Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide

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We cannot allow fear to isolate us from one another. We must continue building spaces where students feel connected.... We have to make the conscious decision every day to choose community over division, empathy over indifference and hope over fear. - Naomi Hammonds

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>Quick Links to Online Resources

- >>Red, White, and Blue Learning: Seven Resources for Independence Day
- >>A Lesson Plan for Independence Day, the Fourth of July
- >>Exceptional Spaces: Diverse Learning Environments in a Public High School
- >>Integrating self-determination theory and collaborative problem solving to improve parent-child relationships
- >>Inclusivity in Postsecondary Preparation: Fostering Success for Each and Every Student
- >>APA guide to navigating AI-generated advice thoughtfully and safely
- >>The Cycle of Disinvestment in Public Schools: How Public-School Criticism Drives Policy and Disinvestment
- >>Suicide Prevention in K-12 Schools: Introduction to the Special Issue

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

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

- >Can we reduce polarization in our school?
- >Summer learning and social-emotional functioning
- >Pros and Cons of Universal Mental Health Interventions in Schools
- >Teaching about mental health: Much more than mental illness
- >So the school has done a threat assessment (or screened for some other problem) –
WHAT COMES NEXT?
- >Working Collaboratively to Improve Student/Learning Supports
- >About evaluating school mental health programs/services
- >Cell phone bans are just a bandaid

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

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Rather than treating social-emotional learning as a separate initiative, schools can embed social-emotional learning competencies into everyday instruction to strengthen students' engagement, persistence, and learning outcomes. – Yang Caroline Wang

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>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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Intentional or not, all this tech has been a huge experiment on kids, and experiments can go wrong, We need to take stock so we can do what we know is right. - Randi Weingarten, AFT President

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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>

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

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)

Younger Students' Test Scores Bounce Back After the Pandemic. After years of dire test scores coming out of the pandemic, new national test results offered a glimmer of hope — at least for younger students. The nation's 9-year-olds, who were in preschool when the pandemic hit, have made a significant recovery in reading since 2022, and are now caught up to where 9-year-olds were immediately before the pandemic, according to a key federal exam. They are getting closer to being caught up in math. But for American 13-year-olds, whose elementary school years were disrupted by the pandemic, there has been no recovery. And overall, many students are worse off than they were in the early 2010s, when U.S. test scores peaked.

Senior Prom Bridges Gap Between Generations. Brick Township, NJ: Members of the town's 65+ senior community gathered for a night of dining, dancing, and other sorts of entertainment for the Senior Prom. The event was put on by the coordinator for the mayor's student advisory committee and the high school students who take part in it. The Student Advisory Committee partners heavily with the senior service department.

Student-Led Group for Community Tree Nursery. Students from several Los Angeles schools will plant the region's second tree nursery as part of a growing effort to restore landscapes damaged by the 2025 Palisades Fire. The event is set to involve transplanting about 30 young oak, sycamore and blue elderberry trees. This is a student-led initiative inspired by Dr. Jane Goodall that aims to plant 5,000 trees.

Teachers union president calls for limits on AI and screen time in schools. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, declared that students "are drowning in tech." She proposed an independent research consortium to study the effects of AI and screens on student learning. In response to the rise of AI, Weingarten argues that public education ought to focus on skills like communication and collaboration and should teach students ways to apply knowledge.

Summer jobs, camps and more available for Philadelphia youth in 2026. Philadelphia Mayor Cherelle Parker said she is making it easier for young people, parents and guardians to find safe and enriching activities this summer. Parker and other city officials on Monday afternoon announced details of the effort called "It's a Summer Thing" for 2026, which includes more than 130 summer camps, 150 rec centers with hundreds of free activities, 200 play streets and an estimated 10,000 summer jobs across the city.

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Summer should never be a season where our children are left behind. It should be a season where they are engaged, supported, and quite frankly, inspired. Philadelphia Mayor Cherelle Parker

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>Comments and sharing from the field

>>We were asked to share the following:

"We would greatly appreciate you sharing the following opportunities with colleagues or networks who may be interested.

Training Program

We partner with TrestleLink to offer a training program for students and early-career researchers. This program provides hands-on experience in research translation, policy engagement, and evaluation.

We are currently accepting applications and considering placements for the fall, with the potential for some summer in-person policy engagement opportunities. We especially welcome applicants based in the DMV area, Texas, Iowa, Indiana, Arkansas, Nebraska, and Utah, as these locations align particularly well with project needs.

If you know of students or postdocs who may be interested, we would appreciate you sharing this opportunity with them: <https://trestlelink.org/get-involved/trainees/>

We're Hiring

Our team is currently hiring for a part-time Research Data Analyst and a full-time Postdoctoral Scholar to support our research translation and evaluation work. These roles will contribute to advancing and studying models that strengthen connections between researchers and policymakers. These positions are remote, with some in-person travel required. We will be prioritizing applicants who are located in (or willing to relocate to) the DMV area.

You can learn more here:

- **Part-time Research Data Analyst (master's degree or higher)**
- **Postdoctoral Scholar**

TrestleLink Blog Series

Our partners at TrestleLink host a blog featuring perspectives, experiences, and practical lessons related to connecting research and policy. We encourage you to explore recent posts on research

translation, policy engagement, and evidence-informed decision-making.

TrestleLink is also launching a new collaboration-focused blog series and is looking for contributors from across the Rapid Response Network. If you're interested in co-authoring a post, sharing lessons from your work, or highlighting a successful partnership, please reach out to katie@trestlelink.org to discuss potential collaboration opportunities."

>>Feedback on the Center report: ***Are Initiatives to Improve School-Based Mental Health Services Hindering Efforts to Transform Student/Learning Supports?***

(1) "Your tagline for the report (or mainly layering more programs onto an already too-fragmented system?) is resonating. I worked with the Commission for Behavioral Health to conduct a landscape analysis on universal mental health screening in the state, and remember feeling concerned about the fragmentation between efforts arising out of CDE and DHCS. My colleague at the Commission, who is leading the screening grants, created a helpful table as part of the final report that shows how several initiatives in the state support various elements of comprehensive school mental health systems and screening."

(2) "Thank you for sharing your report and for your continued leadership and advocacy in support of student mental health and learning supports. We appreciate you forwarding this important analysis and highlighting the broader considerations related to system coherence, equity, and the intentional redesign of student supports. We look forward to reviewing the report and sharing it with our team as we continue advancing this important work across Los Angeles County. Thank you again for your partnership and for contributing valuable research and insight to the ongoing conversation surrounding student wellbeing and school-based mental health services." - from a county superintendent

(3) "In my daily practice as a school leader, I frequently observe how these initiatives (when implemented ineffectively) end up causing more harm to student support systems as it becomes overloaded with disjointed goals, procedures, and data-tracking. Ultimately, the opportunity for positive impact on student mental health and well being is hindered because of a lack of a coherent system. The implications for system redesign outlined in the article is particularly useful in considering how a school leader can shift priorities and build systems that will be more sustainable and effective in developing support for students"

>>Response to ***With Appreciation as the School Year Concludes***

"Thank you for helping us stay centered and informed. Thank you for the encouragement that we might not receive from the trenches."

>>Response to - ***Can we reduce polarization in our school? Summer learning and social-emotional functioning***

"Reduce online web news and social media.... It is a weapon to manipulate and divide us. Seek peace."

>>Response to ***Reflecting at the end of the school year***

"Thank you for the resources and support. I look forward to every communication.

I will review and use the resources as I plan professional development for the 2026-27 school year. In gratitude."

>>Responses to ***Follow-Up Caution About Premature Adoption by Schools of Universal Mental Health Screening Initiatives***

(1)"I just scanned your latest eblast.... Realizing the correlation between the misdiagnosis of learning disabilities and childhood trauma as well as the culminating and lingering effects leading to mental illness/mental health challenges, I have been creating and architecting solutions, frameworks, models, and training etc. to address. We can't see the solution for looking at the problem (normalization of dysfunction).... If poverty is the number one indicator of trauma, and trauma can be misinterpreted as a disability, then it stands to reason that if we encounter someone from poverty suspected of an LD, we would call time out and exhaust our efforts to ensure developmental capacity has been addressed, but the legislation, at the moment, doesn't allow for that. The tool developed by Dr. John Lyons and others, the CANS (Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths) is used in social service (downstream) scenarios in all 50 states, why not education? I am currently in conversations with legislators around

this topic having drafted my legislative thoughts. I will be at the Summit for the National Conference for State Legislatures at the end of July spreading the word.”

(2) “For good reason, you have cautioned states and school districts about combining MTSS with PBIS, which in reality is more like MTSS absorbing PBIS.

I don’t if you’ve heard that now there is a push to combine MTSS, PBIS, and Behavioral Threat Assessment Management (BTAM). Some support connecting BTAM, MTSS, and PBIS, but they caution against treating them as the same system. The new 2025 guidance from the U.S. Secret Service NTAC and the Center on PBIS says BTAM can be aligned with MTSS/PBIS to improve safety, wellbeing, and school climate, but the purpose is coordination—not merging missions or replacing one process with another or diluting one to support the other. I think confusion will emerge with this as it has with merging MTSS and PBIS, but with more significant negative outcomes.

It seems to me that schools could align BTAM with MTSS and PBIS, but should not collapse them into one unified tiered system. MTSS and PBIS are broad prevention and support frameworks; BTAM is a fact-based, time-sensitive violence-prevention and risk-management process. When these systems are blended without clear boundaries, schools risk delaying threat response, misclassifying safety concerns as ordinary behavior problems, or treating students under assessment as discipline or intervention cases rather than as individuals requiring structured inquiry, risk management, and support.

The National Association of School Psychologists describes BTAM as a fact-based, systematic process for identifying, assessing, and managing potentially dangerous or violent situations. The Center on PBIS describes PBIS as an evidence-based tiered framework supporting students’ behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs. Those are compatible, but not interchangeable.

The caution is this: BTAM could be embedded within a comprehensive support system, but it cannot be subordinated to ordinary MTSS/PBIS timelines. The National Center for School Safety notes that threat assessment can be part of a comprehensive safety plan, but it also requires attention to equity, student rights, resources, discipline practices, and trained implementation.

Bottom-line: Align BTAM with MTSS/PBIS for referral pathways, supports, and follow-up — but keep BTAM as a separate, trained, multidisciplinary, fact-based process with its own procedures, urgency, documentation, and risk-management responsibilities.”

>>Feedback from a colleague:

“I met you at the American School Health Association several years ago. ASHA is celebrating its 100 years in October in Indiana. Since you were and still are assisting schools, would you write about the relationship with us, for posting at the conference? I still read your emails and forward to teachers in the community. I was a school board member for 52 and 1/2 years and was always using your work and sharing it with my community.”

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