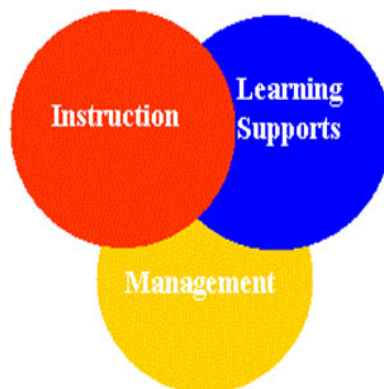


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# Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions

(2022)

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To facilitate efforts to address barriers to learning, this resource is freely accessible online.

<http://smhp.ucla.edu/pdffdocs/briefguide.pdf>

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\*Initially, the Center was named the *Center for Mental Health in Schools*; in 2017, to more fully underscore the breadth of the work, the Center name was expanded.

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

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## Preface

Current reports about the status of students lead simultaneously to hopes and fears.

The bottom line, of course, is that some students are doing just fine; others are not.

We're all glad so many are doing well.

At the same time, our Center continues to emphasize that reducing the achievement gap for the others requires a laser-like focus on closing the opportunity gap by transforming the role schools play in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students.

*In essence, the need is for fundamental changes in the way student and learning supports are conceived and structured*

This has been our focus for some time. The needed changes require the attention of all who have a stake in public education.

Our Center has prepared many resources to clarify the need for change and provide prototypes for a transformed system of student and learning supports. We also have developed resources to guide those who are playing a role in making changes.

At this critical time when there is so much emphasis on supporting students and improving schools, we thought a *brief* guide would be especially useful to stakeholders ready to move forward. This guide provides material for helping others understand the need for major changes, offers a blueprint for rethinking student and learning supports, and delineates first steps in making changes. And it offers direct links to online aids for more in-depth details.

As always, we want to take this opportunity to thank the many school and community stakeholders, students and families, and the staff at our center for their continuing leadership in moving the field forward and for all that they have taught us. Their contributions are reflected in every aspect of our work.

Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor

Note: In 2024, a companion document entitled: ***Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Starting the Process*** was developed. It provides an updated and detailed discussion of the first steps for moving forward, suggests a monthly schedule, and provides links to resource aids for pursuing them. See

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemchangesteps.pdf>

## Introduction: Leaving the Status Quo Behind

Schools have long wrestled with how best to deal with student and schooling problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic and other recent events have increased the number of such problems. This pressing reality along with growing concerns about social injustice and increasing criticism of public education have heightened calls for changes in how schools play a role in addressing such matters. This is a pivotal time for making fundamental system changes.

Advocates differ in what they want to have happen. So, let us state at the outset that our advocacy and this brief guide focuses on making fundamental changes in how districts and schools use student and learning supports to address barriers to learning and teaching. We see a shared role for schools, communities, families, and youngsters in moving forward. In pursuing this shared role, we emphasize weaving together the broadest available set of school, home, and community assets. We also emphasize systemic changes in how student and learning supports are organized as strategic changes are planned, prioritized, budgeted, implemented, and evaluated (e.g., who provides oversight, leadership, capacity building, ongoing support).

Some time ago, John Maynard Keynes cogently stressed:

*The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping old ones.*

His point was that, in order for new ideas to take root, one first has to escape prevailing thinking.

So, before discussing new directions, Part I of this guide highlights the current state of affairs and old ideas that must be escaped. This material is intended as an aid in helping other stakeholders understand why major changes are needed.

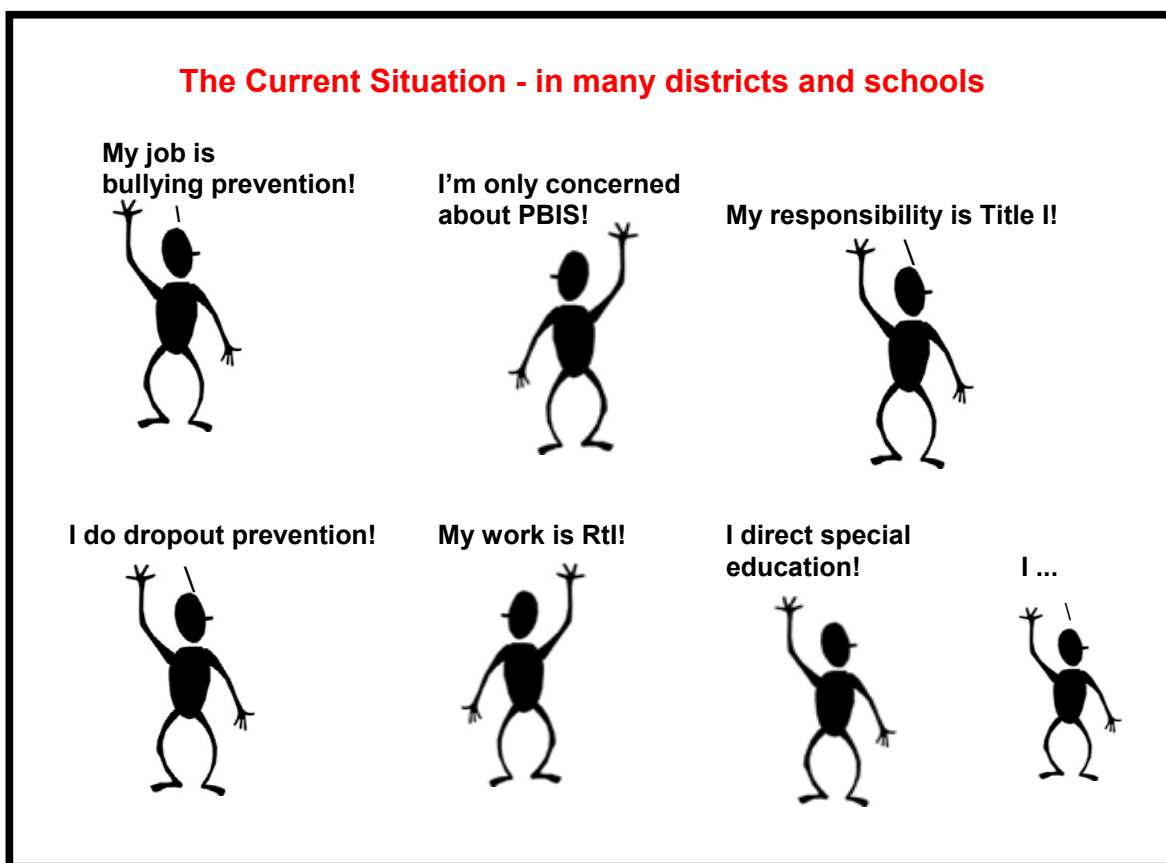
Part II provides prototypes for rethinking how districts and schools – working with communities – address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students and families.

Part III outlines major phases in making sustainable systemic changes and first steps to take in making the changes a reality.

## Part I: Student/Learning Supports: What Others Need to Know About Why Change is Needed

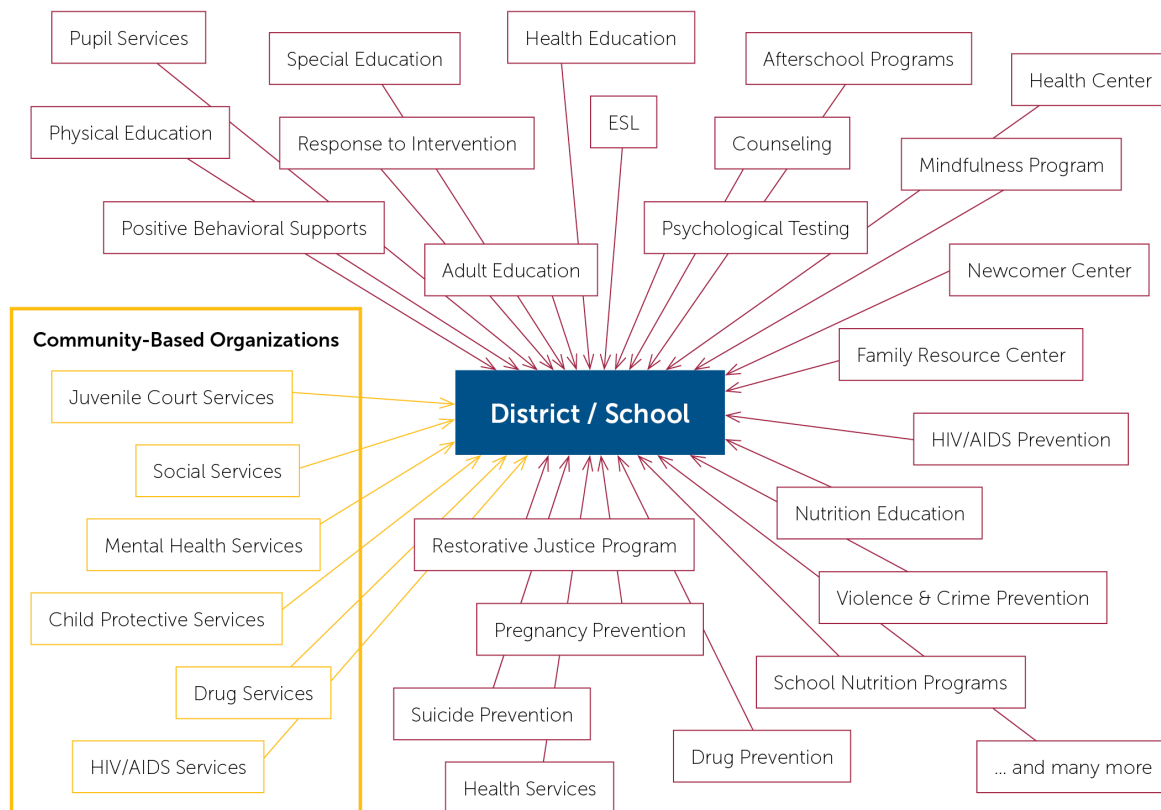
Education decision makers must “escape old ideas” related to how schools address barriers to learning and teaching before major changes can occur. Toward this objective, this part of the guide provides a resource to use in helping others appreciate why changes are essential.

The material can remind them about just how fragmented, over-specialized, and counterproductively competitive student and learning supports are. It stresses the need to understand that the fragmentation and related problems stem from the marginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy. And it can help them see why many of the current efforts to improve the situation actually perpetuate the status quo.



## Section A: Fragmentation, Overspecialization, and Counterproductive Competition for Resources

Awareness of the many factors that can interfere with student success at school and beyond has given rise to a variety of school programs and services and school-community collaborative initiatives. As a result, as depicted below, a great amount of activity is in play to support students, families, and staff.



### What Does It Look Like at Districts and Schools?

Across a district, while some schools have many student and learning supports in place, others mainly provide whatever is mandated. In large districts, psychologists, counselors, social workers, and other specialists often are organized into separate units. Such units overlap regular, special, and compensatory education. In general, districts plan and implement student and learning supports in a fragmented and piecemeal manner—generating a variety of specialized programs and services that deal with the same common barriers to learning and teaching. Federal and state funding streams have exacerbated this state of affairs.

At many schools, student support staff tend to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with a great deal of the work oriented to discrete problems and with an overreliance on specialized services for individuals and small groups. In some schools, a

student identified as at risk for grade retention, dropout, and substance abuse may be assigned to three counseling programs operating independently of each other. Such fragmentation, specialization, and redundancy not only is costly, it works against developing cohesiveness and maximizing effectiveness, and it leads to counterproductive competition for sparse resources – all of which works against reducing redundancy and enhancing availability.

Schools confronted with a large number of students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems rarely have enough resources to meet the demand. And in most schools, teachers simply do not have the supports they need when they identify students who are having difficulties.

### **About School-Community-Home Collaborations**

Schools and the community in which they reside share many interrelated concerns (e.g., child development and socialization, literacy, mental and physical health, violence, crime, safety, substance abuse, homelessness, poverty). Connecting school-home-community has long been seen as a way to (a) enhance the pool of resources for student/learning supports, (b) increase availability and access, (c) address disparities, and (d) improve intervention outcomes.

However, school outreach to the community has been rather circumscribed, and involvement of the home has always been troublesome. For years, policy mainly focused on demonstration projects and contracted services to bring more community-based health and social services and after school programs to a few school campuses (e.g., full service community schools, school-based health centers, wellness centers). Currently, there are major advocacy movements for federal and state funding of more of the same. Such advocacy is bolstered whenever high visibility crises occur such as school shootings and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout all these efforts, concerns have been raised about how to counter widespread intervention fragmentation and deal with the challenges involved in developing and sustaining effective connections. It also has been noted that the connections can have negative effects. For example, when one or two schools capture the resources of agencies in a community, this usually reduces the availability of local resources to other schools in the area.

It is ironic that the calls for collaboration have stressed the need for coordination and integration but have paid relatively little attention to reducing counterproductive staff competition. An indication of this need is the frequent conflicts and turf and budget battles that arise among student support staff employed by schools and between some members of a school's staff and community professionals working on school sites. These conflicts not only work against efforts to coordinate and integrate efforts, it increases fragmentation.

**One aim of school-community-home collaboration is to enhance resources. In this respect, an unfortunate tendency has been to limit thinking about this matter mainly with respect to connecting with service agencies and a few community-based organizations. As the following exhibit highlights, the range of resources in a community is much greater than those usually involved *directly* with schools.**

## Exhibit 1

### Range of Community Resources

#### *County Agencies and Bodies*

(e.g., Depts. of Health, Mental Health, Children & Family Services, Public Social Services, Probation, Sheriff, Office of Education, Fire, Service Planning Area Councils, Recreation & Parks, Library, courts, housing)

#### *Municipal Agencies and Bodies*

(e.g., parks & recreation, library, police, fire, courts, civic event units)

#### *Physical and Mental Health & Psychosocial Concerns Facilities and Groups*

(e.g., hospitals, clinics, guidance centers, Planned Parenthood, Aid to Victims, MADD, "Friends of" groups; family crisis and support centers, helplines, hotlines, shelters, mediation and dispute resolution centers)

#### *Mutual Support/Self-Help Groups*

(e.g., for almost every problem and many other activities)

#### *Child Care/Preschool Centers*

#### *Post Secondary Education Institutions/Students*

(e.g., community colleges, state universities, public and private colleges and universities, vocational colleges; specific schools within these such as Schools of Law, Education, Nursing, Dentistry)

#### *Service Agencies*

(e.g., PTA/PTSA, United Way, clothing and food pantry, Visiting Nurses Association, Cancer Society, Catholic Charities, Red Cross, Salvation Army, volunteer agencies, legal aid society)

#### *Service Clubs and Philanthropic Organizations*

(e.g., Lions Club, Rotary Club, Optimists, Assistance League, men's and women's clubs, League of Women Voters, veteran's groups, foundations)

#### *Youth Agencies and Groups*

(e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, Y's, scouts, 4-H, Woodcraft Rangers)

#### *Sports/Health/Fitness/Outdoor Groups*

(e.g., sports teams, athletic leagues, local gyms, conservation associations, Audubon Society)

#### *Community Based Organizations*

(e.g., neighborhood and homeowners' associations, Neighborhood Watch, block clubs, housing project associations, economic development groups, civic associations)

#### *Faith Community Institutions*

(e.g., congregations and subgroups, clergy associations, Interfaith Hunger Coalition)

#### *Legal Assistance Groups*

(e.g., Public Counsel, schools of law)

#### *Ethnic Associations*

(e.g., Committee for Armenian Students in Public Schools, Korean Youth Center, United Cambodian Community, African-American, Latino, Asian-Pacific, Native American Organizations)

#### *Special Interest Associations and Clubs*

(e.g., Future Scientists and Engineers of America, pet owner and other animal-oriented groups)

#### *Artists and Cultural Institutions*

(e.g., museums, art galleries, zoo, theater groups, motion picture studios, TV and radio stations, writers' organizations, instrumental/choral, drawing/painting, technology-based arts, literary clubs, collector's groups)

#### *Businesses/Corporations/Unions*

(e.g., neighborhood business associations, chambers of commerce, local shops, restaurants, banks, AAA, Teamsters, school employee unions)

#### *Media*

(e.g., newspapers, TV & radio, local access cable)

#### *Family members, local residents, senior citizens groups*

To date, efforts to enhance school-community collaboration have benefitted a relatively small number of schools. And the widely publicized projects that are cited as successful demonstrations of school-community collaboration were built and operated with exceptional resources. A reality is that the expense of replication of such projects across a school district generally is prohibitive. (And since scalability is an essential facet of equity, it is well to keep in mind that there are over 13,000 school districts and almost 140,000 K-12 schools in the USA.)



### Points to Emphasize in Making the Case

Efforts to end the fragmentation of student/learning supports have been the focus of policy reports and special initiatives. The problem has generated proposals for coordination and integration of interventions, often with an emphasis on improving the linkages between school and community services (e.g., full-service schools, wrap around services).

Calls for integrating student/learning supports and increasing school-community-home collaboration are certainly warranted. Of particular concern:

- the work is not guided by an agreed upon vision for a unified approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching
- student/learning support personnel are organized in ways that generate fragmented and overly specialized programs and services and counterproductive competition for sparse resources
- student support staff tend to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with a great deal of the work oriented to discrete problems and with an overreliance on specialized services for individuals and small groups
- while resources are sparse, too little of the available resources are used for systemic improvements
- current policies and practices promoting school-community-home collaboration are limited in focus, benefit a relatively few schools, often exacerbate fragmentation of efforts and competition for sparse resources, and are not designed in ways that facilitate replication to scale

The bottom line is that continuing with the status quo is a recipe for ensuring necessary supports remain unavailable to students, families, and staff in too many schools.

The matters highlighted above clearly require attention, but moving forward effectively on a large-scale also requires an understanding that these concerns are symptoms of an underlying problem, namely that addressing barriers to learning and teaching are **marginalized** in school improvement policy and practice.

We turn to this matter now.

## **Section B: Ending the Marginalization of Student/Learning Supports in School Improvement Policy**

**T**he problems encountered by students and schools are complex and overlapping. The number of students not doing well at a school can be staggering. For too long, it has been clear that student/learning supports as they currently operate can't meet the need in too many schools.

School budgets always are tight; cost-effectiveness is a constant concern. In some schools, principals report that up to 25% of their budget is consumed in efforts to address barriers to learning. Analyses of current approaches indicate extremely limited results, redundancy in resource use, and counterproductive competition among support staff and with community-based professionals who link with schools.

Over many years, increasing concern about fragmented approaches has produced calls for "integrated services" and recently for "integrated support systems." However, by focusing primarily on fragmentation, policy makers and school improvement advocates fail to deal with a core underlying problem. What drives the fragmentation is the *marginalization* in school improvement policy of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching *in a direct, unified, comprehensive, and equitable way*.

### **A Policy Shift to End the Marginalization**

#### ***Ending the fragmentation is not just about integrating student supports!***

It requires ending the marginalization, and ending the marginalization requires expanding the prevailing school improvement policy framework.

Evidence of the marginalization of efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching is seen in the ad hoc and piecemeal way the programs, services, and special projects are established and implemented. Student/learning supports are viewed as supplementary (often referred to as auxiliary services) and generally are given short shrift in school plans. Further evidence is seen in the limited way school-community-home collaboration is pursued, and the lack of attention to mapping, analyzing, and rethinking how the resources used to address barriers are allocated. All this seriously hinders efforts to provide the help teachers, students, and families so desperately need.

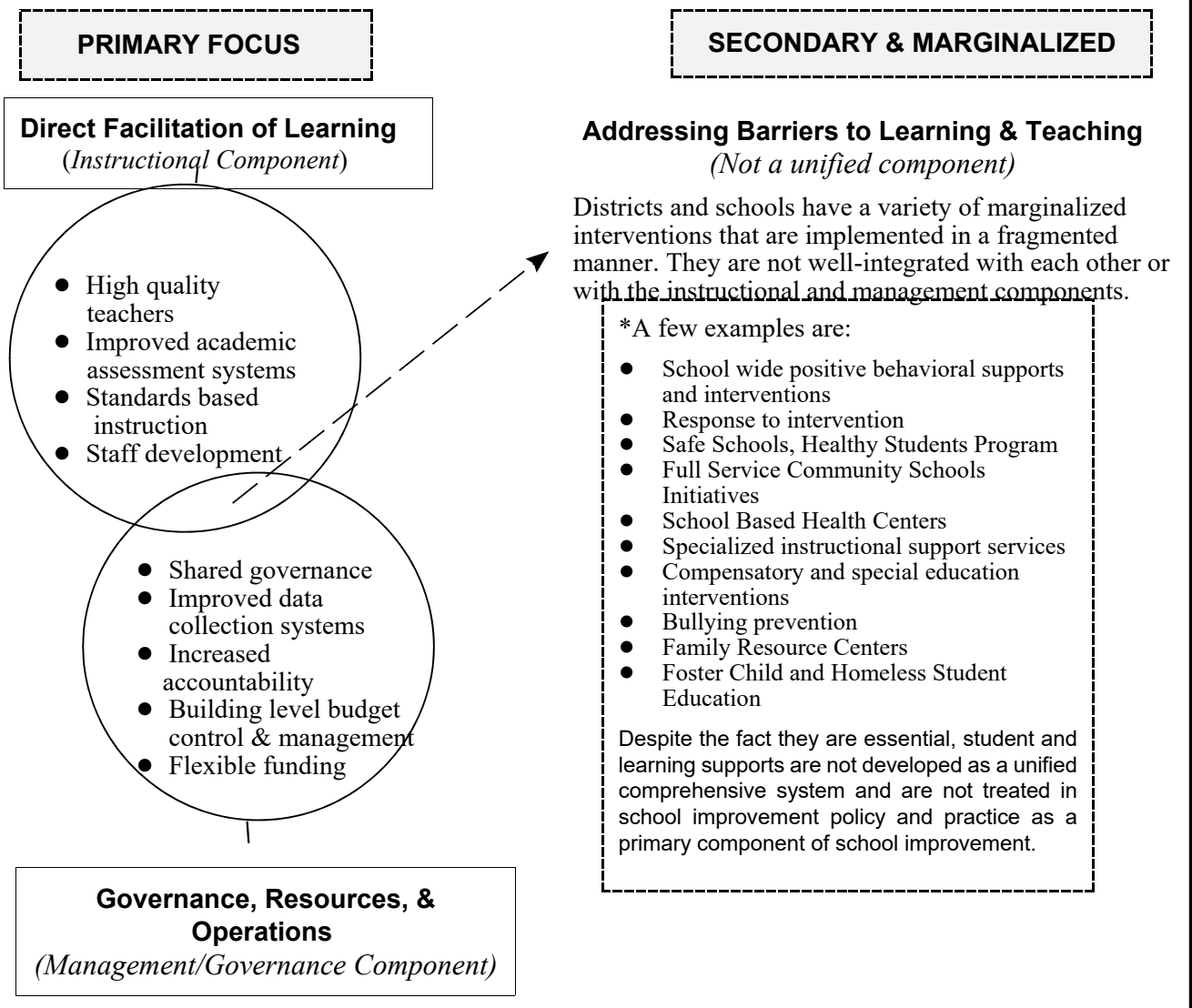
The marginalization stems from the reality that current policy and practice planning primarily is guided by a two-component framework, namely a framework emphasizing (a) instruction and (b) governance/management. Interventions for addressing learning barriers and reengaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. It cannot be emphasized enough that this marginalization is a fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports.

### **The Current Two Component Framework for School Improvement is Insufficient**

As stressed, districts have a variety of programs, services, and initiatives aimed at problems interfering with learning and teaching (e.g., school violence, drugs on campus, dropouts, delinquency). However, they are not unified into a cohesive component and are not well-integrated with the instructional and management components (see Exhibit 2). This remains the situation despite the current widespread emphasis on framing the work as a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).

## Exhibit 2

### Prevailing Two-Component Framework Shaping School Improvement Policy



Efforts to address student and schooling problems are funded and pursued as "categorical" initiatives, some supported by school district general funds and some underwritten by the federal, state, and private sector. Overlapping what schools offer are initiatives from the *community* to link resources to schools (e.g., school-linked services, full-service schools, community and school partnerships, community schools). Some of these efforts braid resources together; however, others contribute to further fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and marginalization of student support.

Local, state, and federal agencies also have generated initiatives that play out at schools. One major focus is on promoting interagency coordination and collaboration (e.g., fostering "integrated services"); another focus is on special funding streams (e.g., ESSA funds, billing Medicaid for school health services, pandemic relief funding). The various initiatives do help *some* students who are not succeeding at school.

However, they come nowhere near addressing the scope of need. Their limited potency further underscores the degree to which efforts to address barriers to learning are marginalized in policy and practice.

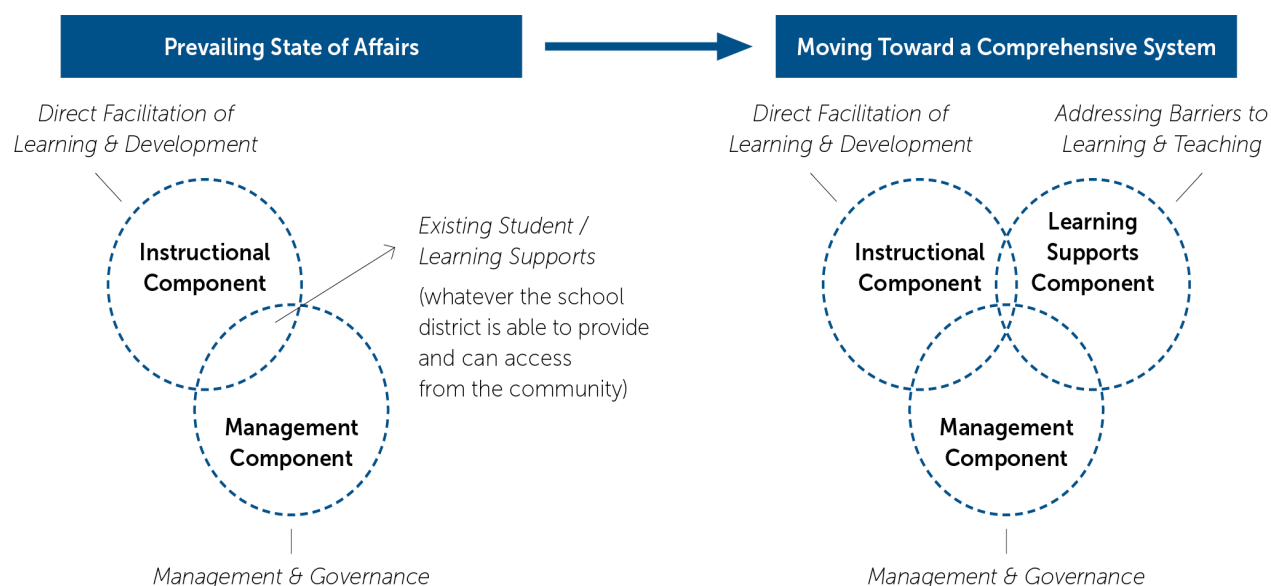
The need is for transformative system changes. These involve

- elevating the policy priority for addressing barriers to learning and teaching in a unified, comprehensive, and equitable way
- fully integrating the policy into school improvement strategic planning and daily practice
- institutionalizing mechanisms that facilitate effective development, implementation, scale-up, and sustainability of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach

### Moving to a Three Component Framework

As illustrated below, an enhanced policy framework is needed to ensure efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching are pursued as a primary and essential component of school improvement.

**Exhibit 3**



Ending the marginalization of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching requires policy action that establishes and institutionalizes a component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching as a primary and essential facet of school improvement (on a par with the components for instruction and governance/management). The Learning Supports Component aims at enabling learning by (1) addressing factors that interfere with learning, development, and teaching and (2) reengaging students in classroom instruction.

## Unifying Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Learning Supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that support physical, social, emotional and intellectual development and well-being to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school. They are deployed in classrooms and schoolwide to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

As Exhibit 4 and 5 underscore:

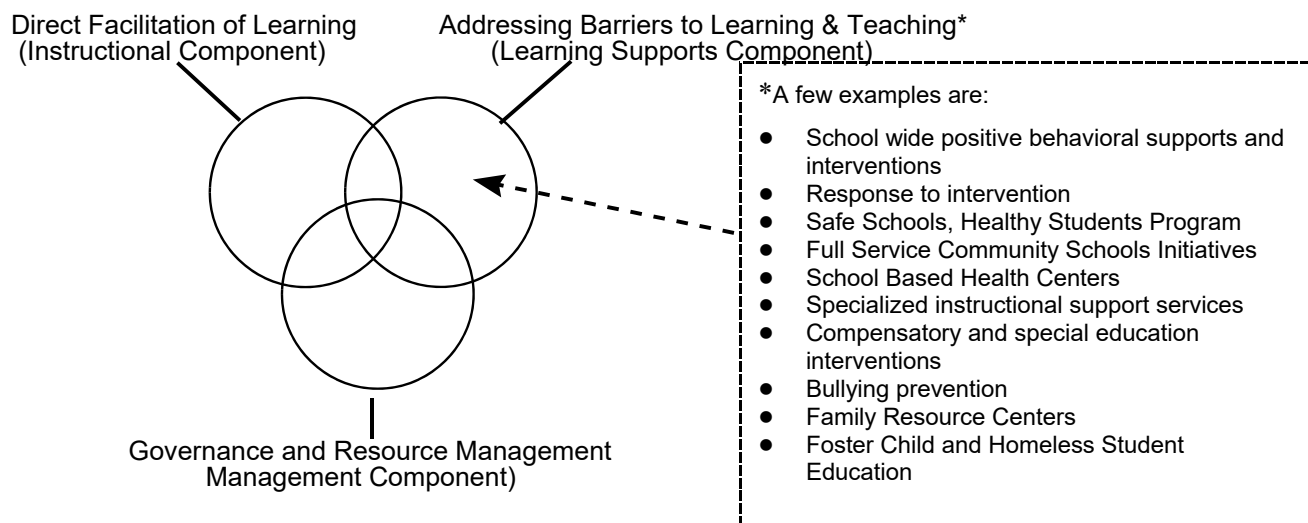
- a first objective of adopting the concept of a Learning Supports Component is to emphasize that integrating student/learning supports involves *unifying* them and ensuring they are fully integrated as a primary and essential facet of school improvement
- then the aim over several years is to develop the unified supports into a comprehensive and equitable system.

### Unifying Student and Learning Supports

Unifying learning supports involves more than integrating them. As the following Exhibit illustrates, the aim is to establish a third component that is fully integrated into school improvement.

**Exhibit 4**

#### Unifying Student/Learning Supports and Fully Integrating them into School Improvement



## Developing the Unified Supports into a Comprehensive and Equitable System

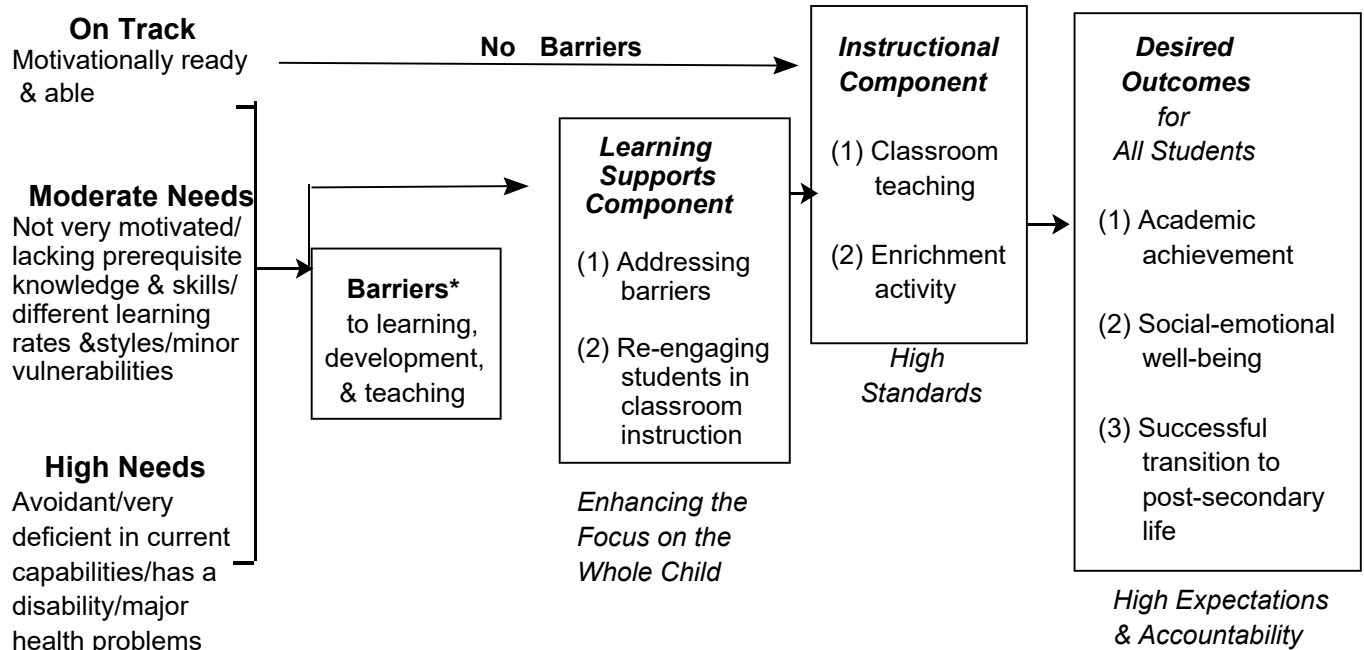
After unifying the programs, services, and initiative, the aim over several year is develop the unified component into a comprehensive and equitable system. The following Exhibit graphically emphasizes that the aim of such a system is to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. This necessitates a system that is dedicated directly to (1) addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (2) reengaging disconnected students. Note the emphasis on engagement. Systems that do not ensure students are engaged meaningfully in classroom learning usually are insufficient in sustaining, over time, student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.

Exhibit 5

### A Learning Supports Component to Address Barriers and Reengage Students

#### Range of Learners

(based on their response to academic instruction at any given point in time)



#### \*Examples of Barriers to Learning and Development

##### ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

##### PERSON FACTORS

#### Barriers to Development and Learning (Risk producing conditions)

##### Neighborhood

- >extreme economic deprivation
- >community disorganization, including high levels of mobility
- >violence, drugs, etc.
- >minority and/or immigrant status

##### Family

- >chronic poverty
- >conflict/disruptions/violence
- >substance abuse
- >models problem behavior
- >abusive caretaking
- >inadequate provision for quality child care

##### School & Peers

- >poor quality school
- >negative encounters with teachers
- >negative encounters with peers &/or inappropriate peer models

##### Individual

- >medical problems
- >low birth weight/neurodevelopmental delay
- >psychophysiological problems
- >difficult temperament & adjustment problems
- >inadequate nutrition

### Points to Emphasize in Making the Case

Current school improvement policy and practice is guided primarily by a two-component framework which stresses (a) instruction and (b) governance/management. Interventions for addressing learning barriers and reengaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. This marginalization is a fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports.

***Ending the marginalization rather than focusing just on integrating student supports is essential to effectively improve how schools respond to learning, behavior, and emotional problems.***

Ending the marginalization requires expanding the prevailing school improvement policy framework from a two- to a three-component framework for school improvement. Dubbed a Learning Support Component, the new component focuses directly and systemically on addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The intent is to pursue it as a primary and essential facet of school improvement and develop it into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that (a) plays out in classrooms and schoolwide and (b) takes advantage of the natural opportunities at schools for addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and promoting personal and social growth.

Given sparse budgets, the third component requires rethinking and redeployment of existing resources. This includes strategic collaboration to weave school-owned resources and community-owned resources together.

Because of the current emphasis in schools on framing interventions as a multi-tiered continuum (a Multi-Tiered System of Support – MTSS), the call for integrating student/learning supports increasingly is associated with that framework. A caution about this is that our Center's analyses indicate that the emphasis on integrated supports only can have a limited impact on improving equity of opportunity for students because it fails to deal with ending the policy marginalization of such supports (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/integpolicy.pdf>). However, as emphasized in Part II of this guide, work related to integrated supports and MTSS can readily be built upon (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/threetier.pdf>).

## Part II: Rethinking Student/Learning Supports

Ending the marginalization and fragmentation of student and learning supports includes reformulating how such supports are framed and used in confronting barriers to learning and teaching. The aim is to unify the supports and develop them into a comprehensive, and equitable approach.

Because the multi-tiered support system (MTSS) framework has been widely adopted, Part II of this brief guide begins with a discussion of the limitations of MTSS. Where MTSS has been adopted, efforts to move forward can indicate that the framework is a move in the right direction but represents only a first step in developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach.

Part II illustrates a prototype framework for student/learning supports that can guide expansion of MTSS. The framework combines classroom and schoolwide supports into (1) an interconnected *continuum of subsystems* that weaves school and community resources together with (2) organized *domains* of student and learning supports.

The last section of Part II emphasizes that the mechanisms constituting operational infrastructures at district and school levels are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. A prototype to guide strengthening the current operational infrastructure is illustrated.

**Why do you think we'll do better  
at school this year?**



**Because I heard that Congress passed  
a law that says every student will succeed!**



## Section A: Building on MTSS to Enhance the Continuum of Interventions for Addressing Learning, Behavior, and Emotional Problems

As a framework for preventing and addressing behavior and learning problems, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers a school-wide tiered model (also referred to as a multi-tier system of supports). Emphasis on the tiered model is a carryover from previous federal policy guidelines related to “Response to Intervention” and “Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.” Federal guidelines note that the tiered model is to be coordinated with similar activities and services carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The result has been that states, districts, and schools increasingly are framing student and learning supports in terms of tiers or levels.

In ESSA, the tiered model is defined as "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making." The framework is being referred to widely as MTSS and has proven to have considerable appeal for a variety of reasons, including its conceptual simplicity.

Unfortunately, while a full continuum of interventions is essential, it is just one facet of a truly *comprehensive intervention system*. So, system building requires moving beyond the limitations of the way MTSS generally is conceived.

### Limitations of MTSS in Framing Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning

Analyses indicate that the term MTSS is being adopted widely as a planning convenience often without detailing how it will be translated into practice at schools. As the term becomes yet one more set of initials, the risk is that it simply will become another school improvement buzzword. If so, it will do little to enhance a school's effectiveness in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. Enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond requires going beyond how MTSS generally is conceived and implemented.

From this perspective, we note that most discussions of MTSS do not account for the framework's serious limitations. Analyses indicate that MTSS is an inadequate depiction of a continuum of student/learning supports. By mainly delineating levels of intensity of school interventions, the framework does not include a focus on:

- systematically connecting the *school with community* interventions that fall into and across each level
- developing each level as a school/community *subsystem* of student and learning supports
- organizing the many fragmented approaches to addressing barriers to learning and teaching into a cohesive and circumscribed set of *domains of student and learning supports*.

As a result of these limitations, adopting MTSS does little to end the fragmentation, never mind the marginalization, of student and learning supports in school improvement efforts.

## Moving Forward Requires Reframing MTSS

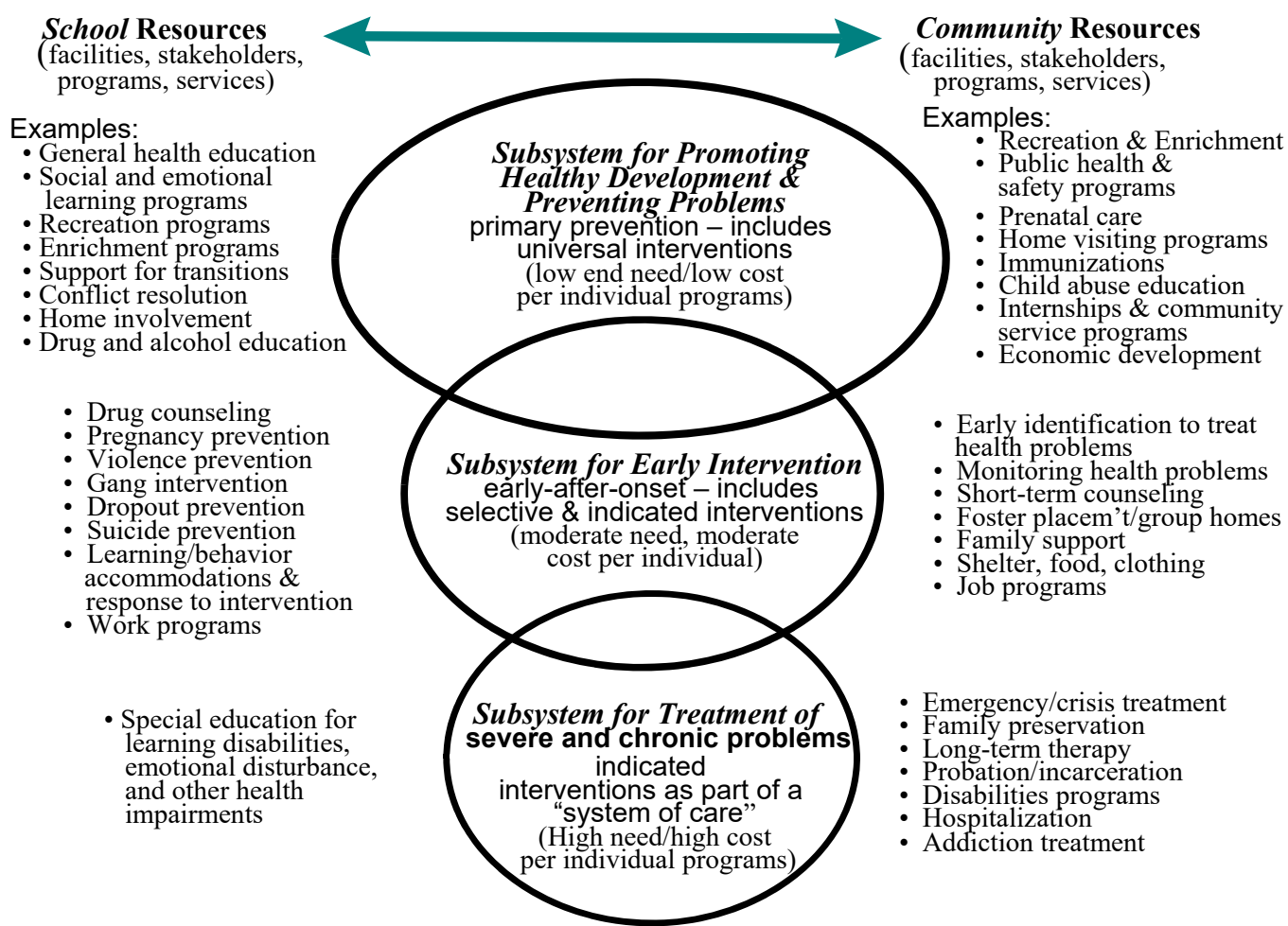
A well-designed system of student and learning supports requires more than a continuum of interventions. Simply tweaking prevailing views of a multi-tier framework falls far short of planning and developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of in-classroom and schoolwide student/learning supports.

As discussed below and in the next sections, moving toward such a system involves reframing MTSS into a cohesive, multifaceted, and systemic approach. Such a approach involves both (1) an interconnected *continuum of subsystems* that weaves school and community resources together and (2) student and learning support that are organized cohesively into a circumscribed set of domains (rather than the current trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level).

*This section illustrates a reframing of the MTSS continuum (see Exhibit 6); the following section lays out a way to organize learning support domains.*

**Exhibit 6**

### Reframing MTSS's Levels into a School-Community Intervention Continuum of Interconnected Subsystems



As illustrated, the continuum levels are conceived as three subsystems. Each subsystem is weaves together a wide range of school with community (including home) resources. The subsystems focus on (1) promoting whole-child development and prevention, (2) identifying and addressing problems as soon as they arise, and (3) providing for students with severe and chronic problems.

The interrelated and overlapping subsystems are illustrated as intertwined and tapering. This is meant to convey that if the top subsystem is designed and implemented effectively, the number of students needing early intervention are reduced and fewer need specialized “deep-end” interventions. (This is critical given that current evidence is that too many students are referred inappropriately for costly deep-end services.)

### Points to Emphasize in Making the Case

MTSS is an insufficient organizing framework for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Given this, as states, districts, and schools adopt some version of (MTSS), they tend to box themselves in with old thinking about student/learning supports and miss the opportunity to significantly build a better system.

Those using MTSS as a intervention framework need to build on and expand their intervention framework into a *unified, comprehensive, and equitable system*. Doing so will move beyond the limitations of the MTSS framework and can lead to ending the marginalization and fragmentation of student and learning supports in schools.

The prototype presented as Exhibit 6 conceives the intervention continuum as an overlapping and intertwined set of *subsystems that weave school-community-home resources* together with the aim of

- promoting healthy development and preventing problems
- intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible
- assisting with chronic and severe problems.

The following section stresses that, rather than the current trend just to generate laundry lists of programs and services at each level of the continuum, system building benefits from cohesively organizing student and learning supports into a circumscribed set of six domains.

## Section B: Categorizing Domains of Classroom and Schoolwide Student/Learning Supports

A system of student and learning supports requires more than conceiving a continuum of intervention. It also is necessary to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that reflect a school's efforts to provide student and learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide.

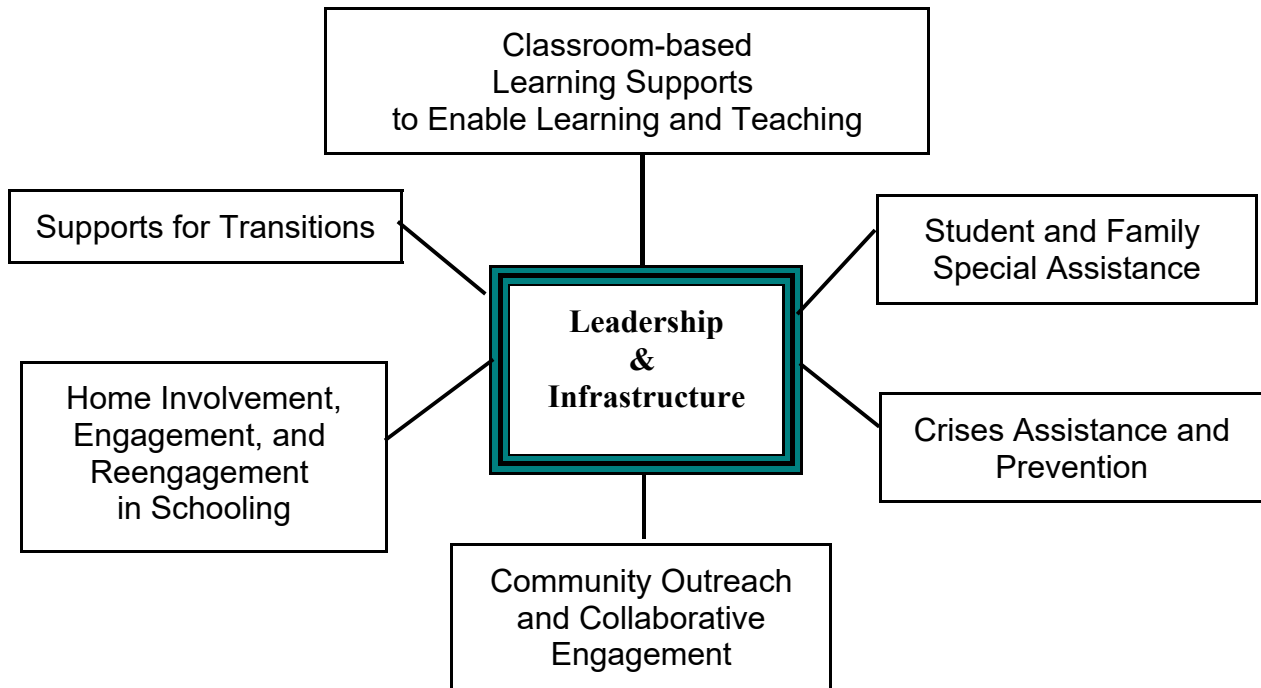
Analysis of typical “laundry lists” of district programs and services used to address barriers to learning and teaching indicates they can be grouped into six domains reflecting basic concerns that schools confront regularly. In organizing the activity, it becomes clearer what supports are needed in and out of the classroom to enable the learning of all students (see Exhibit 7), and it promotes efforts to reduce fragmentation and redundancy. The six domains are:

- *In-classroom supports.* Embedding student and learning supports into regular classroom strategies to enable learning and teaching (e.g., teachers working collaboratively with each other and with student support staff to ensure instruction is personalized with an emphasis on enhancing intrinsic motivation and social-emotional development for all students, especially those experiencing mild to moderate learning and behavior problems; reengaging those who have become disengaged from instruction; providing learning accommodations and supports as necessary; using response to intervention in applying special assistance; addressing external barriers with a focus on prevention and early intervention)
- *Supports for transitions.* Supporting transitions that occur daily and over the year (e.g., supporting daily transitions before, during, and after school; assisting students and families as they negotiate the many hurdles related to reentry or initial entry into school; school and grade changes; program transitions; accessing special assistance)
- *Supports to increase home connections and engagement with the school.* Supporting the involvement of those with student caretaking responsibilities including those providing foster care and those outreaching to the homeless (e.g., addressing barriers to home involvement; helping those in the home enhance supports for their children; strengthening home and school communication; increasing home support for the school)
- *Crises responding and prevention* (e.g., preparing for emergencies; implementing plans when an event occurs; countering the impact of traumatic events; providing follow-up assistance; implementing prevention strategies; creating a caring and safe learning environment)
- *Supports to increase community involvement and collaborative engagement with schools* (e.g., outreach to develop greater community connection and support from a wide range of resources – including enhanced use of volunteers and developing a school-community collaborative infrastructure)
- *Facilitating student and family access to special assistance* (e.g., in the regular program first and then, as needed, through referral for specialized services on and off campus).

Each of these domains is discussed in detail in *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>. As aids for system planning, priority setting, and development, a set of self-study surveys is available for each domain, as well as for a general overview of student and learning supports activity, processes, and mechanisms – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/surveys/set1.pdf>.

**Exhibit 7**

**Prototype for Six Domains of Support – In Classrooms and Schoolwide**



*Note: All categorical programs can be integrated into these six domains.* Examples include initiatives, programs, and services that focus on positive behavioral supports, responses to intervention, programs for safe and drug free schools, programs for social and emotional development and learning, full service community schools, family resource centers, and school based health centers, CDC's approach to school health, bilingual, cultural, and other diversity programs, compensatory education programs, special education programs, mandates stemming from education legislation, and many more.

Clearly, the intervention domains can be conceived in other ways. The points for emphasis here are that the many activities that schools pursue along the intervention continuum can and need to be further organized.

Over the last decade, versions of the six basic domains have been incorporated in a variety of venues across the country (for examples and lessons learned, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm>).

The six domains capture the substance of the multifaceted ways schools are trying to address barriers to learning. As indicated in the next section, combining the domains across each level of the continuum illustrated in the previous section provides the framework for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.

## Section C: Framing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System

As illustrated in Exhibit 8, combining the continuum and the six domains of supports provides an intervention framework that can guide development of a learning supports component as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that weaves together school and community funding (regular and extramural) budgeted for addressing shared agenda.

The matrix framework is used as a tool for mapping existing interventions, identifying strengths and critical intervention gaps, and analyzing resource use with a view to redeploying resources to strengthen the system of student and learning supports. Based on school priorities, the analyses can be used in strategic planning for system improvement, including targeted outreach to bring in community resources that can fill critical gaps.

The specific examples inserted in the matrix are just illustrative of those that schools already may be using. As the examples illustrate, the framework embeds a wide range of student/learning supports. It encompasses the work of specialized instructional support personnel, compensatory and special education efforts, programs for English learners and homeless students, and interventions for psychosocial, mental health, and learning problems.

Exhibit 8

### 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)

## **A Intervention Framework for Moving in New Directions**

With all the criticism of public schools, policy makers have difficult choices to make about improving schools. Ultimately, the choices made will affect not only students and school staff but the entire society. Choosing to continue with old ways of thinking about student/learning supports is a recipe for maintaining the achievement and opportunity gaps. Unifying available resources and starting a process to develop a comprehensive and equitable system of learning supports over the coming years is an alternative.

Establishing a comprehensive and equitable intervention system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students requires coalescing ad hoc and piecemeal policies and practices. Doing so will help end the fragmentation of student and learning supports and related system disorganization and will provide a foundation for weaving together whatever a school has with whatever a community is doing to confront barriers to learning and teaching.

Effectively designed and developed at a school, a learning supports component increases supports for all students. The emphasis is on

1. unifying student and learning supports by grouping the many fragmented approaches experienced at school in ways that reduce the number of separate and sometimes redundant intervention responses to overlapping problems
2. addressing barriers to learning and teaching by improving personalized instruction and increasing accommodations and special assistance when necessary
3. enhancing the focus on motivational considerations with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation as it relates to individual readiness and ongoing involvement and with the intent of fostering intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome
4. reengaging disconnected students
5. adding specialized remediation, treatment, and rehabilitation as necessary, but only as necessary

In doing all this, a learning supports component enhances equity of opportunity, plays a major role in improving student and school performance and promoting whole child development, fosters positive school-community relationships, minimizes the school's reliance on social control practices, and contributes to the emergence of a positive school climate. And it fully embeds interventions to address mental health concerns.

Implementation of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports as a primary school improvement component is essential to the focus on whole child, whole school, and whole community (including fostering safe schools and the emergence of a positive school climate). Properly implemented, the component increases the likelihood that schooling will be experienced as a welcoming, supportive experience that accommodates diversity, prevents problems, enhances youngsters' strengths, and is committed to assuring equity of opportunity for all students to succeed.



## Section D: Strengthening Operational Infrastructures

The mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. And the reality is that the current operational infrastructure at all levels require major reworking. What follows are excerpts from a recent report, *Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure* (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/reworkinfra.pdf>).

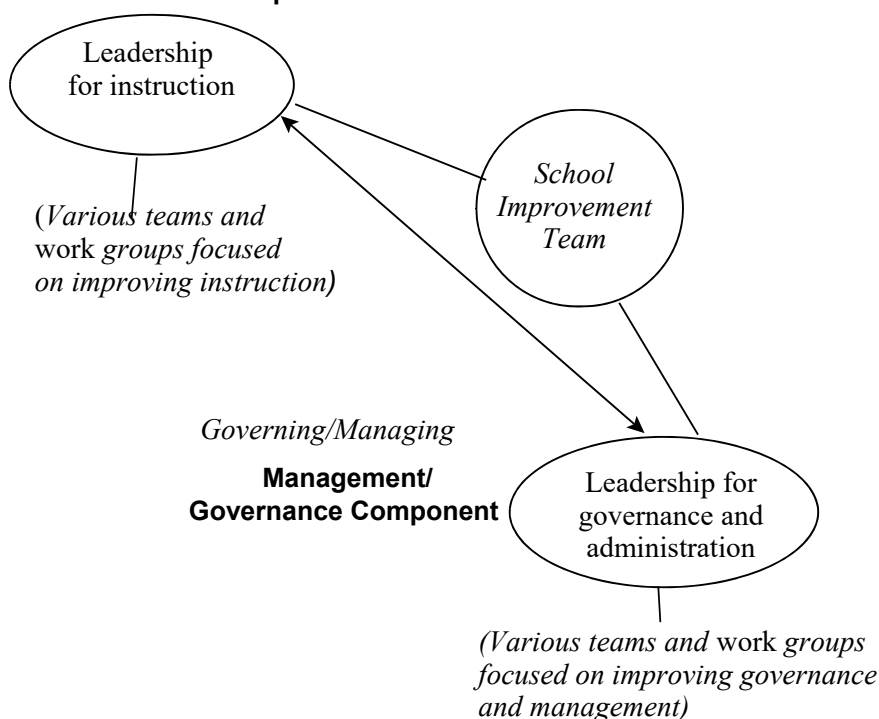
The report stresses that the operational infrastructure at too many schools looks as is illustrated below.

Exhibit 9

### Does the Operational Infrastructure at the School Level Look Like This?

*Facilitating Learning/Develop.*

#### Instructional Component



### What's missing?

Note that there is no designated leadership for student and learning supports. Also note that the two work groups focused on individual students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems mainly meet to review and make decisions for designated students about special assistance needs and referrals. In doing so, the teams usually develop a perspective on the type of systemic improvements that could prevent problems and stem the tide of referrals. However, addressing these concerns is not one of their formal functions. And, in general, these work groups have little or no connection to discussions and decisions about school improvement needs.

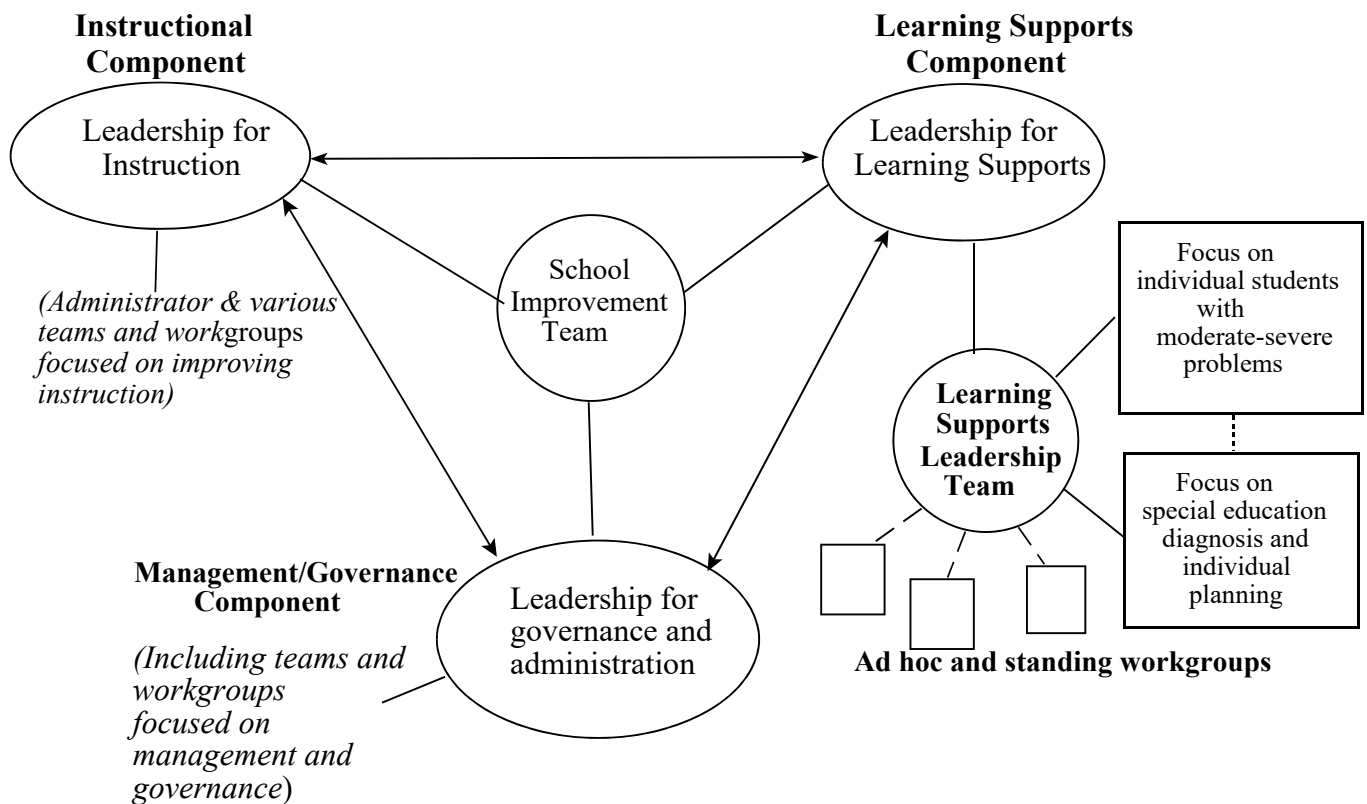


The move to a three component school improvement framework (as presented in Part I) calls for added mechanisms and restructuring. For example, Exhibit 10 illustrates an operational infrastructure at the school level that fully emphasizes and integrates student/learning supports. This prototype was designed to ensure the type of interconnected leadership and workgroups necessary for daily operation and ongoing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.

Exhibit 10

### Prototype for an Integrated Operational Infrastructure at the School Level

(This operational infrastructure should be paralleled at the district level, see [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/resource\\_oriented\\_teams.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf).)



Note: Each of the three primary and essential components for school improvement requires

- administrative leadership and other advocates/champions with responsibility and accountability for ensuring the vision for the component is not lost,
- a leadership team to work with the administrative lead on system development,
- standing workgroups with designated ongoing functions and occasional ad hoc workgroups to accomplish specific short-term tasks.

To ensure coordination and cohesion, the leaders for the instructional and learning supports components are full members of the management/governance component, and if a special team is assigned to work on school improvement, the leaders for all three components are on that team.

When we mention a Learning Supports Leadership Team, some school staff quickly respond: *We already have one!*

When we explore this with them, we usually find what they have is a *student case-oriented team* – that is, a team focused on individual students who are having problems. (Such a team may be called a student study team, student success team, student assistance team, teacher assistance team, and so forth.) A related team, of course, is the IEP team. The functions of student case-oriented teams include triage, referral, and care monitoring/ management, progress review and reassessment.

Clearly, an emphasis on specific students is warranted. However, as the primary focus associated with student and learning supports, this approach tends to sidetrack development and implementation of improvements at schools that can prevent many individual problems and help many more students.

So, we designate the student case-oriented teams as one type of standing work group and contrast them with standing and ad hoc workgroups that focus on the functions related to system improvement. This involves pursuing tasks related to developing and implementing schoolwide and classroom student/learning supports and ensuring they are implemented in a unified, comprehensive, and equitable manner.

### **Connecting a Complex or “Family” of Schools**

Beyond the school, mechanisms are conceived that enable groups or “families” of schools to work together to increase efficiency and effectiveness and gain economies of scale.

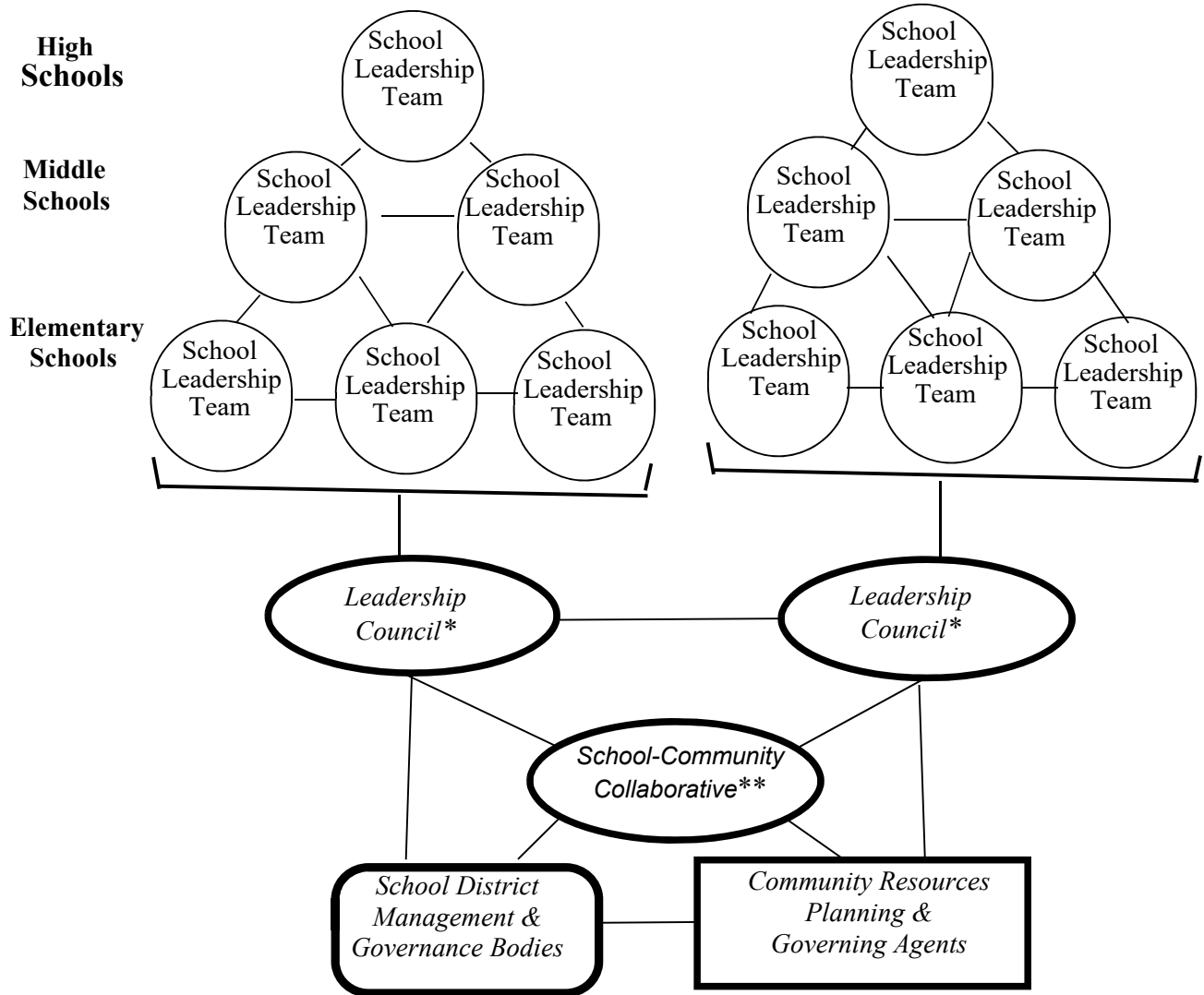
Schools in the same geographic (catchment) area have shared concerns, and feeder schools often are interacting with students from the same family. All three components of school improvement can benefit when a “family” of schools works together.

For example, some programs and personnel are (or can be) shared by several neighboring schools, thus minimizing redundancy and reducing costs. Think about overall capacity building and personnel development. Think about supports for transitions, shared crises, and working with families who have youngsters attending more than one level of schooling in the same cluster. (When a family has several children in need of special attention, it is neither cost-effective nor sound practice for each school to work with the family separately.)

School leaders from a “family” of schools can establish a multi-site leadership council to help ensure cohesive and equitable deployment of resources and also can enhance the pooling of resources to reduce costs. Such a multi-site mechanism can enhance leadership, facilitate communication and connection, ensure quality improvement across sites, and facilitate ongoing development of the component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The mechanism can be particularly useful for integrating the efforts of high schools and their feeder middle and elementary schools (see Exhibit 11). With respect to linking with community resources, a family of connected schools is especially attractive to community agencies who often don't have the time or personnel to link with individual schools.

Exhibit 11

## Connecting Resources Across Feeder Schools, a District, and Community-Wide



\*A *Leadership Council* consists of representatives from each of schools in a complex. It provides a mechanism for analyzing needs and resources at a family of schools and can enhance how resources are used and developed, achieve economies of scale, and improve outcomes. Councils also enable connections with and between district and community decision makers – again with an agenda of enhancing resources, garnering economies of scale, and whole school improvement.

\*\*See following discussion.

As illustrated in Exhibit 11, a multisite team or Leadership Council brings together representatives from each participating school's Leadership Team to meet (e.g., once a month). The objectives are to

- identify and meet common needs with respect to mandates and other functions and personnel development
- create processes for communication, linkages, coordination, and collaboration among schools and with community resources (note: multi-school councils are especially attractive to community agencies lacking the time or personnel to link with each individual school)
- ensure cohesive and equitable deployment of resources
- weave together human and financial resources from public and private sectors and encourage the pooling of resources to minimize redundancy, reduce costs, and achieve economies of scale.

While all three components of school improvement can benefit from a multi-site council, if the schools are not ready to connect with a whole school focus, we recommend starting with the leadership for the learning supports component.

### **Operational Infrastructure for a School-Community Collaborative**

Connecting school and community resources has mutual benefits, including school improvement, positive socialization of the young, higher staff morale, improved use of resources, an enhanced sense of community, community development, and more. In the long run, the aims are to strengthen young people, schools, families, and neighborhoods.

Temporary school-community connections often are established in the wake of a crisis or to address a particular problem. It is relatively simple to make informal linkages. However, major long-term formal working relationships are driven by a comprehensive vision about the shared role schools, communities, and families can play in strengthening youngsters, families, schools, and neighborhoods. This encompasses a focus on safe schools and neighborhoods positive development and learning; personal, family, and economic well-being; and more.

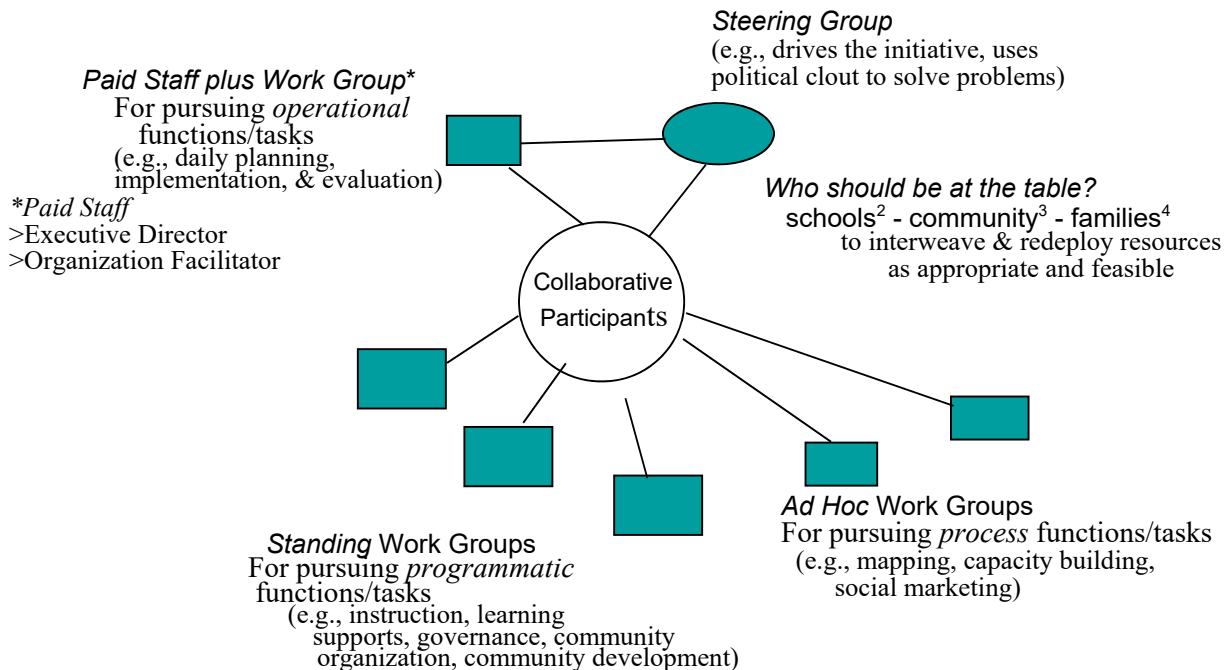
School/district efforts to enhance community connections begin with outreach to a broad range of community entities. Initially, the objective often is to develop immediate links and connections with community resources that can help fill critical intervention gaps at schools. If the aim is to form ongoing partnerships, steps must be taken to establish a school-community collaborative.

Outreach can involve a social marketing campaign to inform and invite participation with respect to district and school planning for working with the home and community to improve schools.

Effective pursuit of joint aims and functions requires establishing an effective school-community *collaborative* at the district level. To these ends, it is essential to develop a well-conceived operational infrastructure for collaboration. See Exhibit 12 for a prototype of the type of mechanisms needed to provide oversight, leadership, capacity building, and ongoing support as a collaborative plans and implements strategic actions.

Establishing such an infrastructure requires translating policy into authentic agreements about shared mission, vision, decision making, priorities, goals, roles, functions, resource allocation, redeployment, and enhancement, strategic implementation, evaluation, and accountability.

## Prototype of a School-Community Collaborative Operational Infrastructure<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Connecting the resources of schools, families, and a wide range of community entities through a formal collaborative facilitates all facets of school improvement. Effectiveness, efficiencies, and economies of scale can be achieved by connecting a “family” (or complex) of schools (e.g., a high school and its feeder schools, schools in the same neighborhood). In a small community, the feeder pattern often is the school district.

<sup>2</sup> **Schools.** This encompasses all institutionalized entities that are responsible for formal education (e.g., pre-K, elementary, secondary, higher education). The aim is to draw on the resources of these institutions.

<sup>3</sup> **Community entities.** These encompass the many resources (public and private money, facilities, human and social capital) that can be brought to the table (e.g., health and social service agencies, businesses and unions, recreation, cultural, and youth development groups, libraries, juvenile justice and law enforcement, faith-based community institutions, service clubs, media). As the collaborative develops, additional steps must be taken to outreach to disenfranchised groups.

<sup>4</sup> **Families.** All families in the community should be represented, not just representatives of organized family advocacy groups. The aim is to mobilize all the human and social capital represented by family members and other home caretakers of the young.

Steps in establishing a school-community collaborative include:

- identifying community stakeholders who are interested in establishing a school-community collaborative
- formulating aims, short-term goals, and immediate objectives
- organizing participants into an effective operational infrastructure and establishing formal working agreements (e.g., MOUs) about roles and responsibilities
- forming and training workgroups to accomplish immediate objectives
- mapping school and community resources used to improve teaching and learning and address barriers to student success
- analyzing resource use to determine redundancies and inefficiencies
- identifying ways resources can be redeployed and interwoven to meet current priorities
- monitoring and facilitating progress

As illustrated in Exhibit 11, the family of schools leadership councils envisioned can readily be incorporated into a school-neighborhood collaborative. And the district's existing connections with community stakeholders and resources can be expanded and formalized as a district-wide school-community collaborative.

### Summary

Ultimately, significantly improving student and learning supports requires not only a vision for how to better address barriers to learning and teaching, but a way to get there from here. The mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. And the reality is that the current operational infrastructure at all levels require major reworking.

Since planned improvements mean little if they don't play out at the school level, this section highlighted a prototype for a reworked operational infrastructure at that level. Then, to facilitate and enhance school level efforts, mechanisms are conceived that enable groups or "families" of schools to work together to increase efficiency and effectiveness and garner economies of scale. From this perspective, district level mechanisms must be reconceived with a view to supporting each school and family of schools as they change and develop. Also at the district level, establishment of a school-community collaborative is key to weaving together available resources.

### Part III: Making It Happen

To this point, the emphasis has been on the importance of helping stakeholders understand

and *Why are major changes necessary?*  
*What changes are needed?*

Part III focuses on the matter:

*How do we get from here to there?*

With this question in mind, we think about Seymour Sarason's caution that

*Good ideas and missionary zeal are sometimes enough to change the thinking of individuals; they are rarely, if ever, effective in changing complicated organizations (like the school) with traditions, dynamics, and goals of their own.*

And we add the caution:

*a simple truth about school improvement policies is that, if they don't play out at school and classroom levels, they don't mean much.*

Guiding stakeholders from here to there requires strategies that address these matters in ways that lead to substantive, scalable, and sustainable system school improvements.

The emphasis in what follows is on first steps to take and the importance of keeping everyone focused on developing the essential elements of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.



## Section A: Taking First Steps in Making Systemic Changes

Whether the focus is on establishing a prototype at one site or replicating a new approach at many schools, the systemic changes can be conceived in terms of the four overlapping phases as outlined in the following Exhibit.

Exhibit 13

### Four Phases of Transforming How Schools Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Transforming student and learning supports involves major systemic changes that are phased in strategically over several years. The major phases are as follows:

First Phase – *Introduction and Creating Readiness, Commitment, & Engagement*  
(i.e., increasing a climate/culture for change through enhancing the motivation and capability of a critical mass of stakeholders)

Second Phase – *Start-up and Phase-in: Building Infrastructure, Capacity, and Pursuing Initial Implementation*  
(i.e., reworking operational infrastructure to ensure effective leadership, guidance, and support)

Third Phase – *Institutionalization, Replicating to scale, Sustaining, and Evolving to Enhance Outcomes*  
(i.e., enhancing capacity to ensure quality improvements, adaptive scalability, and sustainability)

Fourth Phase – *Ongoing Evolution and Generating Creative Renewal*  
(i.e., enabling system stakeholders to become a community of learners and expanding accountability to support creative renewal)

Each phase has a host of strategic tasks (e.g., see Chapters 16 and 17 in *Improving School Improvement* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improve.pdf>).

## Getting Started

In our experience, there always are stakeholders who want to make major improvements in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. Below are some first steps that can be adapted at any level. A list of aides for accomplishing these steps is provided at the end.

### Step 1. *Establish the interested stakeholders as a workgroup and proceed to*

- (a) *map existing resources being used to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students*
- (b) *with respect to available data on needs, analyze what's working, what requires strengthening, and what critical gaps exist*
- (c) *identify immediate priorities for moving forward with improvement and system development*



- (d) *develop a set of prioritized recommendations for moving toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports* (emphasizing redeployment of resources to meet priorities in a cost-effective manner)
- (e) *develop and implement a plan to build readiness and commitment among key stakeholders for moving forward*

**Step 2:** *Have prioritized recommendations approved by appropriate authorities.*

**Step 3:** *Appoint a high level steering group to champion and monitor the work.*

Establish an official Steering Group of *high level* power leaders to steer, champion, problem solve, clear barriers to moving forward, and provide essential guidance to keep the work flowing.

**Step 4.** *Appoint an administrative leader for system development.* Assign an administrative-level *Student/Learning Supports Lead* to begin development of the component. Be sure the leader's job description is revised to reflect the new responsibilities and accountabilities and provide appropriate professional development. Be sure this leader is at administrative planning and decision making tables and the system's development is a regular part of the agenda.

**Step 5:** *Establish a development team to work with the administrative lead.* Assign key staff to a system development team (i.e., a *Learning Supports Leadership Team*) to work with the leader to prepare a *design "document"* and a *strategic plan* for unifying interventions and then developing the system. In the process, the team helps clarify, analyze, identify priorities, recommend resource redeployment, and establish and guide workgroups for developing each facet of the system over a period of several years. Be sure the strategic plan for the system is fully integrated into the overall strategic plan.

**Step 6.** *Establish an operational infrastructure designed to ensure effective planning, initial implementation, capacity building, formative evaluation, and ongoing development.* As noted in Part II, the mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. And the reality is that the current operational infrastructure at all levels requires major reworking in order to facilitate the desired system changes.

**Step 7.** *Expand formative evaluation and accountability indicators.* Initial data gathering should be designed to provide guidance and support to foster progress. This means monitoring all factors that facilitate and hinder progress and then ensuring actions are taken to deal with interfering factors and to enhance facilitation. As significant progress is made in developing the system, outcome monitoring and accountability measures should evaluate the impact on student outcomes with respect to *direct* indicators of the effectiveness of student/learning supports (e.g., increased attendance, reduced misbehavior, improved learning).

Here are two first step resource aids for use in situations where administrators are ready to lead the way:

>*First Steps for Superintendents Who Want to Get Started*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/superstart.pdf>

>*Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf>

## Links to Resources to Aid in the Work

### For Workgroup and Other Stakeholder Big Picture Preparation & Capacity Building

- > *Examples of State and District Design Documents*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb1a.htm>
- > *Q & A Talking Points* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkita2.htm>
- > Recent books to browse
  - > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
  - > *Improving School Improvement*
  - > *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*all three can be accessed at  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

### For Mapping Existing Resources

- > *Mapping & Analyzing Learning Supports*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf>

### For Reworking Operational Infrastructure

- > Review Part two, Section D of this guide
- > *What is a learning supports leadership team?*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/resource%20coord%20team.pdf>

### About Expanded Accountability

- > *Rethinking School Evaluation and Accountability*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rethaccount.pdf>

### Building Readiness

- > *Creating Readiness and Commitment for Developing a Unified and Comprehensive Learning Supports System* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/readiness.pdf>

### Other Aids and Guides related to getting started

- > *social marketing and public relations*
  - > *personnel development*
  - > *job descriptions*
  - > *reframing roles and functions of support staff*
  - > *blending funding streams*
  - > *benchmarks and monitoring*
- Links to these at
- <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/toolkitb4.htm>

### Preparing Design and Strategic Plan Documents

- > *Preparing a Design Document* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>
- > *General Guide for Strategic Planning* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/genguide.pdf>

### For more aids, see the **System Change Toolkit**

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

Finally, note that the UCLA Center offers free online mentoring, coaching, & technical assistance <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>

## Section B: Essential Elements

Developing a *Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports* is a complex, multi-year process. This brief guide has delineated the nature and scope of the system and of the processes for getting from a fragmented and marginalized set of student and learning supports to a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

Of course, such a system needs to be *adapted* to localities.

While reasonable adaptation is wise, care must be taken not to eliminate elements that are essential to an effective and sustainable transformation of how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

A constant problem we encounter is the tendency for some places to adopt the terminology and not the substance of system transformation. To counter this tendency, our research has identified *five* elements as essential in implementing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.

### **(1) A three component policy for schools**

To enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school, schools need to be able to directly address barriers to learning and teaching. As indicated in Part I, Section B, this requires elevating such efforts so that they are a third primary and essential component for school improvement. The third component might be called a learning supports component or a component to address barriers to learning and teaching or something comparable.

The policy must be translated into a *design document* and *strategic plan*. Such documents are critical guides for unifying student and learning supports as well as for developing them into a comprehensive and equitable system that provides supportive interventions in classrooms and schoolwide. The design and strategic plans for the third component must be fully integrated with the strategic plans for improving instruction and management at schools.

Obviously, it is desirable that the three component policy be adopted at all levels (SEA, LEA, and schools), however, most schools can move forward once the district has enacted such a policy.

### **(2) A transformative intervention framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching**

A unified and comprehensive intervention framework combines (a) a continuum of school and community interventions (that goes well beyond what is typically presented by a simple MTSS framework) and (b) an organized set of domains of student/learning supports. (See prototype presented in Part II, Section C.)

### **(3) An operational infrastructure dedicated to the third component**

To ensure effective daily functioning and continuous development and improvement in keeping with the design and strategic plan, a reworked operational infrastructure includes administrative and team leadership in addition to workgroups that are responsible and accountable for the successful development and daily operation of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. (See prototype presented in Part II, Section 4.)

Examples of assigned functions include: aggregating data across students and from teachers to analyze school needs; mapping school and community resources; analyzing resources;

identifying the most pressing program development needs at the school; coordinating and integrating school resources and connecting with community resources; establishing priorities for strengthening programs and developing new ones; planning and facilitating ways to fill intervention gaps; recommending how resources should be deployed and redeployed; developing strategies for enhancing resources; and social marketing.

The leader's job description must be revised to reflect the new responsibilities and accountabilities and to ensure this leader is at administrative planning and decision making tables so that component development is a regular part of the agenda.

Along with the administrative leader, a leadership team clarifies, analyzes, identifies priorities, recommends resource redeployment, and establishes and guides workgroups for developing each facet of the component over a period of several years.

(For job and team descriptions, see Section B of the Center's toolkit – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm> .)

#### **(4) Continuous capacity building (especially professional development)**

Capacity building plans and their implementation must include a specific focus on development of the unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. Professional development must provide on-the-job opportunities and special times focused specifically on enhancing the capability of those directly involved in the learning supports component. Professional development of teachers, administrators, other staff and volunteers, and community stakeholders must also include and emphasis on learning about how best to address barriers to learning and teaching.

(For resources related to capacity building, see Sections B and C of the Center's toolkit – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm> .)

#### **(5) Monitoring for improvement and accountability**

Essential facets of the ongoing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports involve (a) continuously monitoring all factors that facilitate and hinder progress and then (b) ensuring actions are taken to deal with interfering factors and to enhance facilitation.

As significant progress is made in developing the system, the monitoring expands to evaluate the impact on student outcomes that are *direct* indicators of the effectiveness of learning supports (e.g., increased attendance, reduced misbehavior, improved learning).

(See *Standards for a Learning Supports Component* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/commcore.pdf> .

This resource includes indicators for monitoring, evaluation, and accountability).

## Concluding Comments

The COVID-19 pandemic and growing concerns about social justice mark a turning point for how schools, families, and communities address student and learning supports. Those adopting the prevailing MTSS framework have made a start, as have the initiatives for community schools, integrated student supports, and school-based health centers. Given the growing challenges, however, schools need to develop and implement a more transformative and comprehensive approach. Hopefully, this brief guide will be helpful.

We know from experience how hard it is to achieve the outlined policy and practice changes in a district. And, given the scale of public education, the degree of transformative system change proposed here gives rise to many complications. For example, the approach calls for a major reworking of the operational and organizational infrastructure for the school, the family of schools, and the district, as well as for school-family-community collaboration. It also calls for enhancing in-classroom supports by retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., student and learning support personnel – psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, Title I staff, special educators, dropout/graduation support staff, etc.). In particular, the jobs of these personnel need to be modified to include working collaboratively with regular teachers in classrooms (in person and online) for part of each day. Improving student and learning supports in classrooms requires such collaboration, which is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

Certainly, the challenges are daunting, especially when folks are caught up in the day-by-day pressures of their current roles and functions. Everyone is so busy "doing" that there seems no time to introduce better ways.

One is reminded of Winnie-the-Pooh who was always going down the stairs, bump, bump, bump, on his head behind Christopher Robin. He has come to think it is the only way to go down stairs. Still, he wonders whether there might be a better way if he could only stop bumping long enough to figure it out.

Since maintaining the status quo is untenable, and just doing more tinkering will not meet the need, we hope this brief guide helps folks who are ready to stop "bumping their heads." The key is to set some time aside for taking first steps to move in new directions. And remember that our Center continues to provide free online mentoring, coaching, & technical assistance (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>).

## Coda

### A Caution About How the Feds Think About Student/Learning Supports and Mental Health

In May 2022, six agencies across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a Joint Letter to states, tribes, and jurisdictions encouraging them to prioritize and maximize their efforts to strengthen children's mental health and well-being.<sup>1</sup> As this brief guide stresses, efforts to bring together fragmented resources certainly are needed, especially in the wake of the pandemic and the horrific killings at schools and in communities.

The U.S. Department of Education's increased focus on mental health in schools also has been evident. See their document *Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health*.<sup>2</sup> The document offers much to consider about how schools pursue mental health and student/learning supports. We note that document does concur with many of the concerns our Center continues to raise.

Examples of shared concerns are reflected in statements such as:

"The current system is not working for many children, students, families, and staff, with notable problems that existed before the pandemic made much worse during the pandemic."

"Current systems focus on individual level needs, leaving out community supports."

"There is increasing recognition of the need to (a) move away from co located programs involving ad hoc involvement of mental health system staff in schools or programs and (b) move toward approaches that clearly integrate education and mental health systems."

The document cites our Center's work when it notes that "...within schools, those providing direct services to children and students, including teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and social workers, are often siloed and work in relative isolation from one another affecting all children and students ..."

It stresses the importance of starting to improve the focus on mental health by establishing "positive, nurturing environments where all children, students, and staff thrive; and layer on additional supports to address the unique needs of some." And it stresses that "Children and students learn more, report feeling safer, and develop more authentic trusting relationship with peers and adults if the learning and social environments of the school are positive. Educators foster safe and supportive environments by maximizing child and student connections, arranging engaging and successful learning, and being positively constructive in responding to the needs of children and students."

In recommending development of an integrated framework, it recognizes the problem of fragmented approaches and discusses blending funding, developing policy, changing job descriptions, etc.

(Detailed discussion about all these matters and more can be found in resources developed by our Center that are online for free access. We have listed some of the resources in our recent brief commentary on *Mental Health in Schools: Taking Stock, Moving Ahead* <sup>3</sup>.)

While we do share the above concerns, unfortunately the document from the U.S. Department of Education also contributes to some core problems facing the efforts to improve student/learning supports for students. In particular, it contributes to marginalizing efforts to move toward the type of unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that schools need to effectively address students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems and promote healthy development.

For example, in its recommendation for establishing "an Integrated Framework of Educational, Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Health Support," it treats schools as if they were primarily in the mental health business rather than having a much larger role to play in our society. For instance, the document fails to *embed* the focus on Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health into the school's mission to educate or to discuss implications for designing a *comprehensive system of student/learning supports*. Instead, it only recommends establishing "a comprehensive system of *mental health support*" and integrating systems such as education, health, and mental health within a MTSS framework. There is no effort to clarify the limitations of the MTSS framework or the narrowness of the concept of a "comprehensive system of mental health" or how to enhance mental health in schools by embedding the efforts into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.<sup>4</sup> In discussing policy, the document doesn't address the need to expand the frameworks for school improvement policy and school accountability in order to end the marginalization of how schools pursue student/learning supports.

So, while the document emphasizes seven key challenges to and offers recommendations for "providing school or program based mental health support across early childhood, K-12 schools, and higher education settings," we are concerned that the narrow focus skews and contributes to the prevailing limited thinking about student/learning supports at schools. The feds, states, and localities need to expand school improvement policy in ways that embed mental health concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Such a system is essential for schools to effectively address factors interfering with learning and teaching, reengage disconnected students and families, and promote the well-being of students, families, and school personnel.

Finally, a note about the flurry of new federal and state funding. These funds can contribute much needed resources to make schools better places for students, families, staff, and the surrounding community. But, as always, making the resources pay the greatest dividends for students and schools remains a significant challenge.

Past trends suggest that, in the rush to pursue new dollars, staff and programs will be added in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner. This will further fragment efforts to improve how schools address learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Moreover, as concerned critics are pointing out, some of what is proposed for schools will perpetuate questionable policies and practices and can interfere with critical efforts related to accomplishing the substantive school improvements necessary if schools are to achieve their mission. Since the unintended negative consequences are predictable, every effort should be made to prevent them.

Given that much of the enhanced funding is temporary relief money, we suggest that a portion be used for unifying and developing a comprehensive and systemic student and learning supports component at schools. Systemically conceived and implemented, such an approach can

- enable teachers, support staff, administrators, and all other personnel at a school to work together to reduce learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- develop classroom, school-wide, and community interventions that enhance efforts to personalize learning and address student problems, promote a safe and nurturing school climate, and promote academic success and general well-being

- facilitate school, home, and community collaboration to weave together resources (including human and social capital) in order to enhance system development, coordination, and cohesion, garner economies of scale, and enhance outcomes
- reverse the unrealistic and often inappropriate trend toward more and more one-on-one direct services by schools.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joint letter from federal agencies

<https://www.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/hrsa/about/news/2022-joint-letter-childrens-mental-health.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health*

<https://www2.ed.gov/documents/students/supporting-child-student-social-emotional-behavioral-mental-health.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> *Mental Health in Schools: Taking Stock, Moving Ahead* (includes links to resources detailing matters involved in improving student/learning supports in classrooms and schoolwide and replicating district-wide) <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/5-19-22.pdf>

**Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;  
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to  
promoting whole child development, advancing social justice,  
and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.**