April 4, 2016

Concern from the Field:

>**Do we really mean to involve families at school?**
- **Perspectives from the Field**
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Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives

Follow Up:

>**Using "assistants" to strengthen learning supports**

Featured Set of Center Resources:

>**Think broadly about mental health in schools in responding to the media**

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Please forward this to a few colleagues you think might be interested.
The more who join, the more we are likely to receive to share.

For those who have been forwarded this and want to be part of
the weekly exchange, send an email to **Ltaylor@ucla.edu**

For previous recent postings of this community of practice, see
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm
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Note: In keeping with the *National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning Supports*,* this community of practice network has expanded in number of participants and topics discussed. The thematic emphasis is on (1) daily concerns confronting those working in and with schools, (2) the transformation of student and learning supports, and (3) promoting whole child development and positive school climate.

Concern from the Field:

>Do we really mean to involve families at school?

While strategies and resources for involving families in schools are plentiful, one colleague wonders not about what we should do, but *what do we really want to do* related to families:

"My experience in working in a feeder pattern of schools in our district is that parents and students are foreign territory for most of our schools, and I believe there is good reason. The schools are perpetually going in circles from staff turnover and vacancies or student related crisis. (I even think that crisis becomes an excuse to avoid parents and students and the hard work of implementing improved systems that might lead to improved academics and prosocial activities).

Furthermore, schools have few resources so the day to day is difficult for our school teachers and staff. Broaching the topic of involving parents has been challenging, but there are steps being taken. Many schools have events and activities to engage families (sports, art, farms). At each complex, one schools hosts a neighborhood monthly meeting held by the community and parents. Those have been quite challenging when we begin to face the difficult topics that our communities struggle with. At this time, staff are not seeing their families and students as partners in solving problems. In the meantime, I am working to build our community resources, which schools want. But I may be fighting an uphill battle. My heart is to keep teachers and school staff inspired for the reasons they came into the profession, while gently suggesting that students and families are potentially the biggest catalyst for change."

Perspectives from the Field: *What do others have to say? Here is a sample of what has been shared with us so far:*

(1) "We have been doing listening circles (fishbowls) with students to help inform our practice and we did our first one with parents last week. Parents were in the center circle and teachers were in the outside circle listening, without speaking, to what parents had to say. Honestly, I wasn't sure how it would work but it went very well. The teachers were initially hesitant and one expressed concern that parents were just going to talk bad about teachers. When they truly listened and heard that was not the case the teachers relaxed and saw their commonalities and the support parents were willing to give. I think it served to change attitudes about parents."

(2) "The goal is to view parents and families as resources. That requires a shift in daily practice that accesses them as resources. And, that requires that expectations be set and the time set aside to build relationships among families (including students) and staff (including custodians, secretaries, bus drivers, etc.). I always believe in starting small, so the question becomes, how can individual staff members reach out to build relationships and start conversations about the "difficult topics" they want to address. An event probably won't do it. It will take lots of small things over time. And perhaps they don't begin with the most difficult topics but with ideas generated to simply make the school a better place for students, staff and families.

As a guidance counselor, I learned that when you have a student with multiple, complex problems, you don't try tackling the hardest one first. You just put small supports in place to improve the little things and soon the bigger problems are not so monumental. I think the same principle applies here.

I believe staff have the answers and they may all be different. Could staff be grouped into smaller teams (so there's no need to set time aside for a large meeting) and they decide for themselves how to access and use students and families as resources to improve conditions? There will need to be parameters for what can be done, but perhaps these little teams can be charged with "making the school a better place for students, staff and families" and figure out

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what they can do together. Bottom line is that staff members, students and families need to see one another as people who care about the same things.

Afford staff with the opportunity to make the school a better place for students and families and let them figure out how they can get the ball rolling together. Share successes across teams so they can learn from one another. I'm guessing that the students and families care about the same issues that the staff does. Perhaps they just need to learn that for themselves. Then the ideas can begin to flow and people can work together. I realize how 'loosely' organized such an effort might be……but perhaps it will begin to generate positives that can become part of how the school operates on a daily basis. Hope this helps."

Center Perspective: Often lost in the discussion of the school's motivation for involving families is that school policy and operational infrastructure for effective outreach to and maintenance of connections with the home (and community) are not well designed. That is why we stress that home and community connections with the school need to be two parts of six arenas of a transformed system of student and learning supports.* See

>*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf

>*ESSA, Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essaanal.pdf

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Invitation to listserv participants: *What's your take on all this?* Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Follow-up on using "assistants" to strengthen learning supports

In a recent *Practitioner* discussion, the focus was on the range of support personnel and programs that can come together to create a safety net of learning supports. It was noted that an often overlooked resource are teaching/education assistants, paraprofessionals, and volunteers working in classrooms. We shared a range of resources to build the capacity of such resources.

The following is an example of stretching the idea to include students.

From: *Teacher connects peer mentors and special education students (3/5/16)*
http://www.richmond.com/news/ap/article_4c106261-def1-51fa-aaef-77cb1fdcdd8c.html

MOSCOW, Idaho (AP) — A few high school students have found another reason to go to school every day, thanks to a peer mentoring class developed by special education teacher Cory Singleton. Singleton, who has worked for the Moscow School District in Idaho for nearly seven years, had a specific reason for working toward the class since her first years at Moscow High School. "I was a peer mentor in high school," Singleton said. "I remember my first experience. I was in a choir class with a particular young girl, and she didn't really talk to anybody. She talked to me twice, and it was the most exciting thing in the world to me. It was an experience I remembered and really held dear to me."

When Singleton began working in special education at Moscow High, the school didn't have a peer mentor program — something she was determined to correct.

Although her first attempts didn't go any further than the discussion phase, Singleton said eventually she was able to get students involved with their peers in special education in the form of teaching assistants. "But I didn't use the TAs like the rest of the teachers did," she said.

While many TAs helped teachers by making photocopies and performing other busy work, Singleton said the assistants she was granted were assigned to work with individual special needs students, whether it be helping with assignments or attending classes with them.

"So many of the kids don't need an adult with them at PE class, but they still need somebody to keep an eye on them a little bit, to make sure they get on the bus, make sure they're staying involved. Instead of an adult making sure they're involved, it's one of their peers,"

Once she was given the OK to move forward with a peer mentoring class, Singleton said she created a syllabus and assignments for mentors to complete in addition to spending time with the students. These included learning about confidentiality, how to deal with challenging situations and, most importantly, seeing students with special needs as people first...."

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Featured set of Center Resources

>Think broadly about mental health in schools in responding to the media

Do you get media requests about mental health in schools?

Engaging with the media is an important facet of advancing policy for student and learning supports, but off the cuff responses when the media calls about "mental health" in schools often backfire. Media requests usually are hoping for something dramatic related to student psychopathology.

We try to use every call we receive as an opportunity to broaden the discussion. Here's a recent request and how we responded. Hopefully it will be a stimulus for thinking about ways for a school to convey all it does to provide students with essential supports.

The Request: "I am looking into doing a few stories on mental health in schools, particularly elementary schools and middle schools. And I wanted to see if you might be willing to chat informally about the topic? I have a few specific questions about which schools are doing a really good job at addressing specific issues — including issues around domestic violence. But I would also just love to hear about what you think is most important in the field."

Center Response: Always glad to talk about our work. Be warned, however, that our approach to providing students with essential supports is much broader than you may be thinking about. Here are a couple of things to look at so that you can decide if you really want to chat about our views on the topic of mental health in schools.

>*Embedding Mental Health into a Learning Supports Component: An Essential Step for the Field to Take Now* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/embeddingmh.pdf

Abstract: The time has come for ending the counterproductive competition that arises from efforts that push separate, narrow agenda for student and learning supports. No single program or service can address the range of factors interfering with equity of opportunity to succeed at school for the large number of students affected. And the competition for resources resulting from separate advocacy for such programs and services, such as those associated with mental health in schools, is contributing to the continuing marginalization and resultant fragmentation of such endeavors and the fact that they reach only a small proportion of the many students who should be beneficiaries.

The bottom line in terms of policy is that it is time to adopt a comprehensive concept such as learning supports as the umbrella under which those who push for expanding the focus on mental (and physical) health must learn to embed

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themselves. A health agenda (and especially a clinical health agenda) by itself is too narrow to fit into the broad mission of schools in our society and is inadequate for enabling equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school. We can continue to build a few islands of excellence (demonstrations, pilots) and ?Cadillac models,? but with over 90,000 schools in the U.S.A., the scale of need demands moving quickly in fundamentally new directions.

>*Mental Health in Schools: Opportunities and Challenges* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/mentalhealthinschoolsopportunitiesandchallenges.pdf

Abstract: Mental health concerns must be addressed if schools are to function satisfactorily and students are to succeed at school. It has long been acknowledged that a variety of psychosocial and health problems affect student learning and performance in profound ways. School policy makers have a lengthy history of trying to assist teachers in dealing with a variety of problems that interfere with schooling. Prominent examples of efforts to assist are seen in the range of counseling, psychological, and social service programs schools provide. In addition to interventions by school support staff, there has been renewed emphasis in recent years on increasing linkages between schools and community service agencies. This "school-linked services" agenda has added impetus to advocacy for mental health in schools.

>*Mental Health in Schools: Moving in New Directions* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contschpsych.pdf

Abstract: It has long been acknowledged that a variety of psychosocial and health problems affect learning and performance in profound ways. And school policy makers have a lengthy history of trying to assist teachers in dealing with problems that interfere with schooling. Prominent examples are seen in the range of psychological, counseling, and social service programs schools provide. Adding to the work done by student support personnel is whatever the community can offer to collocate and/or link to schools.

In general, we stress that the current imperative is to build on what schools are doing and move to transform student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system with a broad set of concerns for mental health fully embedded.*

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*For information about the
        National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports, see
                http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html

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INTERESTING THIS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE BECOMES!**
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on our website at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm
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