



Addressing Barriers to Learning

New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link



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School Improvement Requires Developing, Supporting, and Retaining Quality Teachers

Teachers can't do it alone!

All the emphasis on improving teacher evaluation tends to contribute to the trend to focus on one factor solutions for improving schools. Should teacher evaluation be improved? *Without a doubt!* Are some teachers not doing a good enough job? *Sure.* Can evaluation alone improve teacher performance? – *to a relatively small degree and only with significant negative side effects.* Will improved teacher accountability be sufficient to ensure equity of opportunity for students to succeed at school and beyond? *Certainly not!*

The reality is that the *overemphasis* on the topic of evaluating teachers has pulled attention away from major policy and system shortcomings that must be addressed to fundamentally improve and transform schools. And the rhetoric surrounding the topic has exacerbated an unfortunate atmosphere of blame to the point where *public school* teachers categorically and disproportionately are viewed as the primary cause of the deficiencies in the educational enterprise.

One apparent side effect of all this is the loss of a significant number of potentially good teachers. For years, the nation has been losing too many teachers and at considerable cost both economically and to efforts to improve public education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): "Of the teachers who began teaching in public schools in 2007 or 2008, about 10 percent were not teaching in 2008–09, and 12 percent were not teaching in 2009–10" (Kaiser, 2011). Previous reports from the NCES indicated that about 30 percent had left after three years, and more than 45 percent left after five, with schools in rural and low-income areas having higher teacher dropout rates. Those reports also indicate that the rate of teacher departure in schools serving low-income families is over 20% every year. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2007), this turnover rate costs school districts \$7 billion annually.

While reasons for leaving vary, most experts agree about basic elements for retaining teachers and improving their performance (National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2009). Such elements, however, have been relatively neglected as teacher accountability arguments rage on. It is time to face up to matters that can immediately and directly improve teaching and result in more positive teacher evaluation findings and higher rates of retention of teachers *and* students.

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In a recent report, our center focused on fundamental matters related to improving teacher retention and performance (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2012). The discussion highlighted seven factors: (1) salaries, (2) recruitment, (3) preservice professional preparation, (4) induction into the profession, (5) personalized on-the-job (inservice) learning, (6) student and learning supports, and (7) a career ladder.

Because teachers can't and shouldn't be expected to do it alone, we are following up that report with the ensuing three articles. The first two expand the report's sections on (a) addressing the need to provide teachers with a broad-range of student and learning supports dealing with factors interfering with good instruction and productive learning and (b) the importance of personalizing continuous staff development. The third article focuses on enhancing retention by increasing staff collaboration and well-being to minimize stress and burnout.

I. Needed: A New Approach for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

One of the reasons teachers leave the profession is that they do not have the type of supports they need to do their job effectively (Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2010). A wide range of external and internal barriers to learning and teaching pose pervasive and entrenched challenges to teachers, particularly those working in chronically low performing schools. Failure to directly address such barriers ensures that (a) too many students continue to struggle in school and (b) too many teachers suffer the effects of having to deal with problems that stress them and the system in which they work (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008).

Addressing Barriers/ Re-engaging Disconnected Students

In keeping with prevailing demands for higher standards and achievement, the focus of school improvement and personnel development is mainly on curriculum content and instruction and management concerns (e.g., governance, resource use). Analyses indicate that implicit in most of this is a mythology that lessons are being taught to students who are motivationally ready and able to absorb the content and carry out the processes. Moreover, while it is recognized that teachers have to deal with behavior and learning problems, these matters are seen as readily remedied by good classroom management and behavior control strategies and individualized instruction.

Given these assumptions, too little attention is paid to what to do when students are not motivationally ready and able to respond appropriately to a lesson. And even less attention is paid to the problem of re-engaging students who have become chronically disengaged from classroom instruction. The reality is that failure to engage students fully in classroom learning works against sustaining, over time, student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.

These lapses may be less critical in schools where few students are doing poorly. In settings where large proportions of students are not doing well, however, and especially where many students are "acting out," failure to provide a broad-range of student and learning supports is a recipe for student failure and teacher dropout.

In general, there is a major disconnect between what teachers need in the way of student and learning supports and what schools provide. And, as long as this is the case, focusing mainly on curriculum and instructional concerns and classroom management techniques remain an insufficient approach for meaningfully improving teacher performance and student outcomes.

From this perspective, fundamental to school improvement is enhancement of how the school addresses barriers to learning and teaching and re-engages disconnected students. This is a *total school* responsibility that goes beyond providing a few scattered programs and services focused on school safety and greater family and community involvement. Needed is a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports. Properly designed, such a system brings supports into the classroom and surrounds these with a full continuum of schoolwide interventions.

An Enabling/ Learning Supports Component

One prototype for a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports has been designated an *enabling or learning supports component* (Adelman & Taylor, 2006). The framework encompasses both a continuum of interventions and a circumscribed set of organized content. The process involves first addressing interfering factors and then (re)engaging students in classroom instruction and includes a focus on prevention, early intervening, and use of strategies such as response to intervention.

In the classroom, the emphasis is on enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning (e.g., improving instruction for students with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems and those who have become disengaged from learning at school). The work involves

- (1) bringing more bodies into the classroom to work with the teacher (e.g., parents, adult and student volunteers, professionals-in-training; school staff collaborative teaming),
- (2) personalizing instruction and other interventions,
- (3) ensuring a continuum of interventions and using a sequential approach in assessing responses to interventions,
- (4) extending ways to accommodate differences and disabilities (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011).

These types of classroom strategies are fundamental and essential, but the work can't stop there if all students are to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. Thus, the prototype organizes the content into five other arenas encompassing interventions to:

- Support transitions (i.e., assisting students and families negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
- Increase home & school connections & engagement
- Respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises

- Increase community involvement and support (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- Facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.

What's the evidence for why districts and schools should develop a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports? We stress two sets of findings that underscore the need and available evidence for moving in this direction (see Exhibit on next page).

Implications for School Improvement Policy & Practice

It is time to go beyond thinking in terms of providing traditional services, linking with and collocating agency resources, and enhancing coordination. These all have a place, but they do not address how to unify and reconceive ways to better meet the needs of the many rather than just providing traditional services to a relatively few students.

It is time to fundamentally rethink student and learning supports. The need is to develop a cohesive and comprehensive system. Such a system encompasses a full continuum of interventions and covers a well-defined and circumscribed set of classroom and schoolwide supports – see

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf> .

Developing the system entails

- unifying all direct efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching at a school
- connecting families of schools (such as feeder patterns) with each other and with a wider range of community resources
- weaving together school, home, and community resources in ways that enhance effectiveness and achieve economies of scale.

For such a system to emerge, however, a high priority on its development must be fully integrating into school improvement policy and planning. And strategic planning should begin with an emphasis on reworking the operational infrastructure at all system levels and (re)deploying available resources in keeping with developmental priorities.

To aid in all this, see the Center's Rebuilding Tool Kit –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm> .

One of the tools outlines seven steps for principals and their staff to move forward with implementation – see

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf> .

Data on Why Schools Should Develop a Unified and Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports

(1) The following data point out the shortcomings of current school improvement efforts:

- excessive absences,
- high student dropout rates,
- high teacher dropout rates,
- the continuing achievement gap,
- the plateau effect related to efforts to improve achievement test performance
- the growing list of schools designated as low performing,
- the degree to which high stakes testing is taking a toll on students

Related to this is the evidence that current school improvement planning does not adequately focus on the need for schools to play a significant role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. See:

>"School Improvement Planning: What's Missing?"

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/whatsmissing.htm>

>"Addressing What's Missing in School Improvement Planning: Expanding Standards and Accountability to Encompass an Enabling or Learning Supports Component"

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enabling/standards.pdf>

(2) Moreover, the combined data from a variety of efforts that have been undertaken provide an extensive and growing body of research indicating the value of moving toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports. *The various studies show improvements in school attendance, reduced behavior problems, improved interpersonal skills, enhanced achievement, and increased bonding at school and at home.*

See, for example:

>*Rebuilding for Learning -- Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching, and*

Re-engaging Students online at -- <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/casestudy.pdf>

This report from the Education Development Center (EDC) highlights the processes and outlines the successes of Gainesville City Schools (GA) as they create a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.

>"Addressing Barriers to Student Learning & Promoting Healthy Development: A Usable Research- Base" online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/BarriersBrief.pdf>

>Lists of Empirically Supported/evidence Based Interventions for School-aged Children and Adolescents annotated at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/aboutmh/annotatedlist.pdf>

>CASEL – http://www.casel.org/downloads/SEL_and_Natl_Policy_Final.pdf

>Statewide example of data indicating a significant relationship across secondary schools between California's *Academic Performance Index* (API) scores and three-quarters of the survey indicators on the Healthy Kids Survey – <http://www.wested.org/chks/pdf/factsheet.pdf>

>Excerpts from the Executive Summary of an American Institutes for Research (AIR) evaluation that gathered data related to Iowa's first implementation steps – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/wheresithappening/airiowa.pdf>

The above all indicate the need for new directions in addressing barriers to learning and teaching (e.g., moving school improvement policy from a two- to a three-component framework).

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http://www.tqsource.org/publications/KeyIssue_TeacherRetention.pdf

Teachers deserve more credit.

Sure, but they wouldn't need it if we paid them better.



Reminder:

**About the District and State Collaborative Network for
Developing Comprehensive Systems for Learning Support**

For information about this growing network, see

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/network/network.html>

And, If you want to be part of the collaborative, please let us know.

Contact: Ltaylor@ucla.edu or adelman@psych.ucla.edu

II. Personalized Continuous Learning for Schools to Enhance Equity of Opportunity

Just enough material, in just the right format, at just the right time, with just the right amount of personalized follow through.

For the most part, the natural tendency is to think about school inservice mainly in terms of how to teach academics better. Concerns about addressing barriers to learning are discussed on occasion, usually in the context of behavior management or when school staff experience some problem as pressing. Whatever the content, little attention is given to personalizing continuous on-the-job learning.

While understandable, the current state of affairs is grossly inadequate for pursuing the vision of equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school. Clearly, a change in the way schools approach inservice is needed. And, staff who provide student and learning supports are essential to meeting this need so that adequate emphasis is given to addressing barriers to learning in classrooms and schoolwide.

The bottom line is that inservice policy and practices must be modified. Prevailing policy and practice do not reflect the reality of what school staff must learn so that more students connect with promising instructional practices. All school staff need continuous learning experiences to

- enhance understanding of factors that interfere with effective student learning and productive teaching
- spell out what can be done to address such barriers.

The goal is to increase the capability of teachers and all other school staff to play effective roles in (1) promoting healthy development, (2) preventing problems, (3) responding as early after problem onset as feasible, and (4) improving how severe and pervasive problems are handled.

Continuous Learning

Given that preservice education generally is designed with beginning levels of functioning in mind, systematically designed continuous learning experiences are essential to enhancing job-related knowledge, skills, *and attitudes*. This requires infrastructure mechanisms for planning and implementation of programs, both at worksites and in other appropriate venues that foster a community of learners and higher levels of effectiveness. Program design must account for differences in level of development, motivation to learn, and immediate needs identified by self and/or supervisors.

An Example of Commitment to Continuous Learning at Five High Schools Serving Low-income Families

“Overall, the schools allocate 7 to 15 days to shared learning time throughout the year. In addition, they organize substantial time during the week – usually several hours – for teachers to plan and problem solve together. With teachers meeting regularly in grade-level teams, the schools have venues for examining student progress, creating a more coherent curriculum, and enabling teachers to learn from one another. ... Mentoring and coaching systems for new and veteran teachers also augment professional learning. In staff meetings, teachers engage in focused inquiry about problems of practice.”

Darling-Hammond, L., & Friedlaender, D. (2008). Creating excellent and equitable schools. *Educational Leadership*, 14-21.

With a view to maximizing the value of job-related learning, targeted and personalized inservice education are ideals. In this respect, mentoring, coaching, collaboration, and teaming can provide an important foundation for daily on-the-job learning that goes beyond trial and error. By definition, professionals in a personalized inservice program should experience both the content and process as (a) maximizing their feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to significant others and (b) minimizing threats to such feelings.

Given the need to expand staff development to focus more on enhancing equity of opportunity, inservice planners must think in terms of

Inservice Delivery Systems

- a broad range of delivery systems
- designing a good instructional match
- ensuring staff learn to account for all students.

The Exhibit on the following page outlines seven inservice delivery systems. The first three are *information dissemination* mechanisms; the fourth is the traditional *presentation/workshop* approach; the last three encompass what we call *collegial* mechanisms. Clearly, these are not mutually exclusive, and hopefully other strategies will come to mind as efforts are made to improve inservice.

Designing a Good Instructional Match

In stressing personalized and targeted continuing professional development, we recognize that there are also a variety of general school and district concerns requiring inservice time. Staff meetings provide one vehicle for addressing such concerns, and, increasingly, technology provides several types of delivery mechanisms.

Successful inservice calls for good teaching. Good teaching always revolves around the concept of a good “match” or “fit” – that is, meeting the learner where they are in terms of both motivation and capability. Ultimately, the best match is achieved when a learner is highly motivated to learn and is enabled to do so actively.

The choice of delivery system shapes the types of activity that can be used to create a good match for learning. In addition, windows of opportunity periodically appear. When they do, it is helpful to have a “tool kit” of materials at hand that allow for an immediate response (see addendum to this article). However, good tools are not enough. The following three matters are fundamental to ensuring a good instructional match.

It’s About Motivation. The first set of concerns in creating a good match involve motivation. It is clear there are competing demands on the amount of time staff can devote to learning more about addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Excessive time demands can counter positive motivation. So, it is important to ensure that the time set aside for inservice (including released time from the classroom) is distributed appropriately and that staff are credited equitably (salary point credit, certificates of accomplishment). Then, the focus

Inservice Delivery Systems*

Information Dissemination Mechanisms

(1) ***Mail Boxes, Bulletin Boards, and Electronic Communications.*** Easily digested materials can be distributed through staff mail boxes, displayed on bulletin boards, incorporated into websites, sent as emails, and so forth. When the information also is appropriate for students and families, it can be distributed in classrooms, at other sites throughout the school and community, and sent home.

(2) ***Newsletters.*** Addressing barriers to learning (including MH and psychosocial concerns) need to be at least a periodic if not regular feature in all newspapers associated with the school. A special newsletter related to such matters also is a possibility.

(3) ***Special Displays.*** Identify, create, and use every available place that provides an opportunity to display information, ideas, resources, etc. This includes existing bulletin boards and other display areas, as well as working to create new bulletin boards and display areas. Places for displays include classrooms, halls, staff rooms, student libraries, cafeterias, auditoriums, multipurpose rooms, front offices and waiting areas, administrative and support staff offices, parent centers, gymnasiums, recreation areas, and any other place staff (students and parents) will see the material.

Presentation and Workshop Mechanisms

(4) ***Staff Meetings and Workshops.*** These are the traditional forms of inservice. The challenges here are to expand what is focused upon and to get a fair share of time on the schedule for enhancing how barriers to learning are addressed in the classroom and schoolwide.

Collegial Mechanisms

(5) ***Teaming to Capture Teachable Moments for Mentoring and Cross Training.*** Whenever problems arise, there are opportunities to teach and learn. Examples of such times arise whenever there is discussion about dealing with common school problems (e.g., daily problems related to attendance, discipline, bullying, drugs, pregnancy), crisis events, or a specific child's behavior, emotional, and learning problems. Such discussions provide teaching and learning opportunities for all involved (e.g., regular and special ed teachers and aids, administrators, support staff, staff who supervise recess, lunch, and before and after school activities, front office personnel, family members, and so forth). While the focus often is on a specific event or individual, the opportunity is not only to enhance understanding of how to deal with the specific case but how to clarify some general principles and rethink practices to prevent and correct subsequent problems. This form of inservice may take different forms, including consultation, mentoring and tutoring, and modeling while teaming together to address problems. For teachers, a powerful way to learn could be for support staff to work with them in the classroom for a period of time while new approaches are learned and instituted.

(6) ***Integrating Material into Regular Coursework.*** Almost every subject taught provides an opportunity to enhance understanding of psychosocial and mental health concerns. Here, too, teachers and support staff can team to plan and teach.

(7) ***Lunch "Brown Bags" and Open Hours.*** Informal and optional opportunities for sharing, teaching, and learning include offering periodic presentations and interchanges during lunch (e.g., perhaps bringing in community expertise to stimulate interest and show the breadth of support available or focusing on a specific reading/topic) and setting aside a regular "open hour" each week for staff who want to get together as a learning community.

*See the Center document entitled: *Enhancing School Staff Understanding of MH and Psychosocial Concerns* for examples related to the various delivery systems.

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enhancingschoolstaff.pdf>

turns to ensuring that topics and content reflect staff interests and especially the problems they confront each day in the classroom. And, a strong thread in all inservice activity should be an emphasis on capturing teachable moments.

It's About Building on Current Needs and Strengths. Everyone knows something about barriers to learning and mental health and psychosocial concerns. School staff tend to respond most positively when new material builds on what they have learned already and what they can use immediately. (The oft heard reaction during inservice sessions is: *Yes, but ... how will that help me on Monday?*) Thus, in planning staff development priorities, it is important to address fundamental needs as perceived through the eyes of school staff; and learning activities should be designed to build on current capabilities. At the same time, the context remains that of enhancing ways to address barriers to learning and re-engage disconnected students.

It's About Personalizing Material and Facilitating Active Learning. Personalization requires options and choices related to content and processes. This includes varied opportunities for motivated application so that staff can practice what is learned and follow-up in timely ways to consolidate learning. Clearly, no one delivery system can do the job. Indeed, it often requires use of all seven delivery mechanisms.

**Ensuring Staff
Learn to
Account for
All Students**

In designing inservice, the following guidelines are meant to ensure what is taught accounts for all students, not just good learners or those with the most severe problems. The emphasis is on helping staff acquire a broad perspective for understanding the problems they are experiencing and what needs to be done in both the short- and long-run to enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

Guidelines for Inservice on the Causes of Problems. When discussing the *causes of problems*, it is essential to counter tendencies to view them too simplistically and in categorical terms. Thus, presentations that discuss causes should be designed with a view to ensuring that staff continue to learn more about

- the full range of causes for emotional, behavior, and learning problems – contrasting problems caused by external factors from those caused by internal factors from those resulting from both external and internal causes
- how to differentiate commonplace behavior, emotional, and learning problems from true disorders and disabilities
- how often problems are caused by multiple factors
- how often youngsters have multiple problems
- how the same problem behaviors (“symptoms”) may arise from different underlying causes and motives
- how different problem behaviors may arise from the same underlying causes and motives.

Guidelines for Inservice on Interventions to Address Problems. When discussing *how to address problems*, it is essential to counter tendencies toward simplistic and categorical solutions to complex problems. Thus, each inservice activity should ensure that discussions are presented (a) from a system’s perspective and (b) with a commitment to personalizing interventions. In all this, there should be an emphasis on ensuring that a caring classroom and school-wide climate and culture emerge from the various intervention efforts.

The system’s perspective should encompass:

- a “big picture” intervention framework – Such a framework should delineate the type of comprehensive, multifaceted continuum of interventions required to effectively address the full range of factors that interfere with school learning and teaching. That is, the emphasis should be on a continuum that encompasses promotion of healthy development, problem prevention, intervening as early after the onset of problems as is feasible, treatment and follow up support for severe and chronic problems
- how to integrate learning supports as a necessary, high level priority in all school improvement planning
- how to enhance teaming and collaboration as a necessary element of a comprehensive approach – in classrooms, school-wide, and with families and others in the community
- how to apply the principle of “least intervention needed” in a sequential manner – focusing ***first*** on *changes in the classroom and school-wide environment* to address environmental causes; ***then, if necessary, focusing on addressing other needs*** with increased attention to specialized assistance for those few students and families whose problems remain chronic.

The commitment to personalizing interventions should encompass learning

- how to ensure that motivational differences as well as differences in capability are appropriately accounted for – with a particular focus on intrinsic motivation and the need to address motivation as a readiness, process, and outcome consideration.

The overriding inservice guideline is: All efforts to enhance staff understanding of student/learning supports should have as a major outcome enhanced *motivation* on the part of school staff to learn more and to use that learning in ways that lead to *more success, more often, with more students and their families*.

About Mentors for Teachers

“Formal mentoring, which pairs new teachers with their veteran colleagues, is currently the main strategy introduced by state and local policymakers to address new teachers’ isolation, frustration, and failure.... Although certain programs that offer training for mentors report measurable success..., it would be a mistake to assume that all mentoring programs are thoughtfully organized and that all mentors know what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to do it. ... What might mentoring of new teachers look like in the ideal?.... Mentors help novice teachers decide what to teach and how to teach, advising them about how to choose, adapt, or create appropriate materials and instructional practices. Mentors help new teachers learn to manage their classrooms and develop strategies for succeeding with particular students. Mentors observe them in their classroom, model good teaching, and share materials and ideas. ... Mentors help new teachers learn the modes of professional practice in the school and adjust to their school and the families it serves. Mentors help new teachers understand and adjust to new reform and school change efforts, both from inside and outside the school.”

[Kardos, S. & Johnson, S. (2010). New teachers’ experiences of mentoring: The good, the bad, and the inequity. *Journal of Educational Change*, 11, 23-44.]

Mentors, Cross Training, and Teachable Moments. In addition to formal mentors, all colleagues especially student and learning support staff, can make an invaluable contribution to continuous learning. Whenever problems arise (e.g., daily problems related to attendance, discipline, bullying, drugs, pregnancy; crisis events; a specific child’s behavior, emotional, and learning problems), there are opportunities for mutual teaching and learning across all staff. At such times, staff can focus on how to clarify general principles and rethink practices to prevent and correct subsequent problems. These occasions also help identify priorities for developing a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

A Note About Student Support Staff. Clearly, staff development applies to more than teachers. Support staff must continue to learn. Moreover, they can play an important role in the continuing education of all school staff. Unfortunately, all this is undercut when they are marginalized at a school.

Do you like going to continuing education workshops?



Going is fine; having to stay is the problem!



Addendum

Finding Relevant Content Resources for Teacher Personnel Development

Just as using a range of delivery systems is essential, so is use of various formats for sharing information, ideas, and resources. For instance, when there is an immediate “need to know,” Fact Sheets, Practice Notes, and specific “tools” are useful. When there is sustained interest, indepth materials are needed. When addressing barriers to learning is a major priority for the school, a range of resources compiled into a campaign and/or course are called for to cover the topic and maintain interest and momentum.

Example: Monthly Focus on a Matter that Matches the Rhythm of the School

Schools have a yearly rhythm – changing with the cycle and demands of the school calendar. There is the Season of Hope as the school year starts; then comes homework discontent, conferences of concern, grading and testing crises, newspaper attacks, worries about burnout, and the search for renewal. In keeping with all of this, each month support staff can provide some ideas and activities the school can use to enhance support for students, their families, and the staff. These can be incorporated into any of the above delivery mechanisms. Examples of topics for a monthly focus are: September – Getting off to a Good Start; October - Enhancing Student Engagement; November - Enhancing Learning Supports; December – Re-engaging Disconnected Students, etc.

(See *School Improvement Themes of the Month* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/schoolsupport.htm>)

The support staff at a school are a logical resource to help amass, over time, a “tool kit” of content aids on the wide range of relevant topics. This can be done with relative ease through the internet. Some sites provide ready access to a wealth of resources on almost any topic relevant to the inservice agenda. Ours is one. Moreover, not only does our website provide online access at no cost to Center developed documents, it offers direct links to a world of resources obtainable from others.

Some easy ways to proceed are:

- (1) Log on to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> and on the top of the homepage click on “First Visit.”
- (2) Go to the section entitled: *Finding Information and Getting Technical Assistance*. There you will find descriptions of such Center features as:
 - *Quick Finds* (These offer a fast way to access Center technical information and resources using a large menu of topics. When you click on a topic, you are provided with access to Center developed materials and links to materials available from other sources.)
 - *Search Engines* to find resources.

You will also find a link to the *Practitioners’ Toolbox, Resources, and Networks* and information on how to freely access the many Center resources including

- Continuing Education Modules, Training Tutorials, and Quick Training Aids
- Guidebooks, handbooks, & guidelines
- Journal and newsletter articles, book chapters, books
- Special Resource Packets & Aids
- Webinars and power point presentations.

A Few More Examples of Center Resources for Teacher Personnel Development

- > *RTI and classroom and schoolwide learning supports: A guide for teachers and learning supports staff* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rtiguide.pdf>
- > *Learning supports: Enabling learning in the classroom* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rtipract.pdf>
- > *Challenges and Opportunities in the Classroom* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Newsletter/winter08.pdf>
- > *Welcoming and Involving New Students and Families* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/welcome/welcome.pdf>
- > *Addressing School Adjustment Problems* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/adjustmentproblems.pdf>
- > *Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School* -- <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagingandre-engagingstudents.pdf>
- > *Natural Opportunities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/naturalopportunities.pdf>
- > *Turning Big Classes into Smaller Units* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/small classes.pdf>
- > *Volunteers as an Invaluable Resource* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/voluntresource.pdf>
- > *Working with Disengaged Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/disengagedstudents.pdf>
- > *School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schooleng.pdf>
- > *What Might a Fully Functioning Enabling or Learning Supports Component Look Like at a School?*– <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/whatmightafully.pdf>
- > *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Classroom-Focused Enabling* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/cfe.pdf>

III. Beyond Inservice: Reducing Teacher Dropout and Enhancing Staff Mental Health

Let's say it as it is every day in every school:

Teachers have a significant impact on students' mental health and well-being!

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And while the impact could be positive, too often the opposite results prevail.

These are not minor concerns, but they continue to be marginalized in school improvement policy and practice and in discussions of the ESEA reauthorization.

A Culture of Stress & Crisis

Stress is a commonplace phenomenon for almost everyone who works in school settings. Some stress comes from working with troubled and troubling youngsters. Some stems from difficult working conditions and staggering workloads. Some is the result of the frustration that arises when everyone works so hard and the results are not good enough. While everyone at a school site shares common stressors, those who work in underperforming schools often are overwhelmed by what they experience during a school year. Almost everyone dealing with student behavior, learning, and emotional problems over an extended period becomes fatigued.

Each day elementary school teachers enter a classroom to work with about 30 students. Secondary teachers multiply that often by a factor of five. Their students bring with them a wide variety of needs. In some classrooms, many students are disengaged from the learning process. Upon entering the classroom, the teacher closes the door, and all present try to cope with each other and with the designated work. The day seldom goes smoothly, and many days are filled with conflict and failure.

For student support staff, the list of students referred for special assistance is so long that the reality is that appropriate assistance is available for only a few. Many support personnel find it virtually impossible to live up to their professional standards.

Stressors make the culture of schools more reactive than proactive.

Others who work at a school, such as front office staff, are overworked, underpaid, often unappreciated, and seldom provided with inservice training. Their dissatisfaction frequently adds another layer of negativity to the school climate.

Accountability demands and daily problems produce a sense of urgency and crisis that makes the culture of schools more reactive than proactive and more remedial than preventive. The result is a structure oriented more to enhancing external control and safety than providing caring support and guidance. This translates into authoritarian demands and social control (rules, regulations, and punishment), rather than promotion of self-direction, personal responsibility, intrinsic motivation, and well-being.

The many stressors, large and small, affect staff and student morale and mental health. In the short run, this contributes to the high rate of teacher dropout during the first 3-5 years on the job. Over time, stress can lead to widespread staff and student demoralization, exhaustion, and dropout.

Ignoring the psychological needs of staff and students is commonplace and a mistake. While the mission of schools is education and not mental health per se, school policy makers and personnel are aware of the impact mental health concerns have on schools and schooling. When school personnel don't feel good about themselves, they are less likely to make students feel good about themselves.

It is worth noting that, over the years, one of the resource packets most often downloaded from our Center website is: *Understanding and Minimizing Staff Burnout*. Another indicator of the need to pay greater attention to these concerns comes from our Center's analyses showing how marginalized these matters are in school improvement policy and practice and in staff development.

An Intrinsic Motivational Perspective

Anyone who works in schools knows about stress and burnout. As with so many problems, if ignored, stress takes a severe toll. The problem is talked about more often than dealt with systematically. Personnel who bring a mental health and motivational perspective to schools can help change the situation by enhancing understanding of causes and promoting action.

One way to understand the problem is in terms of three psychological needs that theorists posit as major intrinsic motivational determinants of behavior. These are the *need to feel competent*, the *need to feel self-determining*, and the *need to feel interpersonally connected*. From this perspective, stress and burnout are negative outcomes that arise when these needs are threatened and thwarted. And, such needs are regularly threatened and thwarted by the prevailing culture in most schools.

Staff and students chronically find themselves in situations where they feel over-controlled and less than competent. They also come to believe they have little control over long-range outcomes, and this affects hope for the future. A sense of alienation from other staff, students, families, and the surrounding neighborhood is all too common. Thus, not only don't they experience feelings of competence, self-determination, and positive connection with others, such feelings are undermined.

**Teachers
Working and
Learning
Together in
Caring Ways**

In many ways, the success of school improvement efforts depends on the school's ability to organize itself into a community that supports each other and personalizes continuous learning.

Increasingly, it is becoming evident that teachers need to work closely with other teachers and school personnel, as well as with parents, professionals-in-training, volunteers, and so forth. Collaboration and teaming are key facets of addressing barriers to learning. They allow teachers to broaden the resources and strategies available in and out of the classroom for enhancing learning and performance.

As Hargreaves cogently notes, the way to relieve the uncertainty and open-endedness that characterizes classroom teaching is through developing a culture of shared learning, positive risk-taking, and continuous improvement.* The key is to create a community of colleagues who learn how to work collaboratively and establish professional standards and limits. Such communities bring together professional and personal lives in ways that support growth, creativity, innovation, and problem solving without fear of disapproval or punishment.

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Collaboration and collegiality are fundamental to morale and work satisfaction and to transforming classrooms into caring contexts for learning. Collegiality, however, cannot be demanded. As Hargreaves stresses, when collegiality is mandated, it can produce what is called contrived collegiality which tends to breed inflexibility and inefficiency. Contrived collegiality is compulsory, implementation-oriented, regulated administratively, fixed in time and space, and predictable. In contrast, collaborative cultures foster working relationships which are voluntary, development-oriented, spontaneous, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable.

At the same time, we all must accept that problems related to working relationships are a given – even in a caring environment. A common example that arises in such situations is rescue dynamics. These dynamics occur when caring and helping go astray, when those helping become frustrated and angry because those being helped don't respond in desired ways or seem not to be trying. To minimize such dynamics, it is important for all concerned to understand interpersonal dynamics and barriers to working relationships and for sites to establish effective problem solving mechanisms to eliminate or at least minimize such problems.

*Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times: Teacher's work and culture in the postmodern age*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Minimizing Job Stress

Support to minimize job stress and burnout resolves down to

- reducing environmental stressors
- increasing personal capabilities
- enhancing job supports

Minimizing stress at a school site begins with an appreciation that causes are multifaceted and complex. Some stress stems from environmental conditions, and some stems from characteristics and capabilities individuals bring to the situation. Moreover, the way the environment and individual mesh is a further complication.

As with student problems, personal conditions often are the presumed cause of staff stress and burnout. This can lead to inadequate understanding of what must be done over the long-run to address the matter. For example, personal “wellness” and health promotion programs and stress-reduction activities often are advocated. However, these individual-oriented approaches usually are an insufficient remedy. Reducing environmental stressors and enhancing job supports are more to the point, but again, by themselves these strategies are insufficient.

The solution requires reculturing schools to minimize undermining and maximize enhancement of intrinsic motivation. This necessitates policies and practices that ensure a regular, often a daily, emphasis on school supports that (1) promote staff and student well-being and (2) enhance how schools address barriers to teaching and learning.

Reculturing Schools to Promote Well-being

Needed: a caring environment, effective mentoring, teaming, and other collegial supports. New staff, in particular, require a considerable amount of support and on-the-job training. All staff need to learn more about mobilizing and enabling learning *in the classroom*. From an intrinsic motivational perspective, a strong collegial and social support structure and meaningful ways to participate in decision making are critical for promoting feelings of well-being at a school.

Key elements include well-designed and implemented programs for

- inducting newcomers into the school culture in a welcoming and socially supportive way
- transforming working conditions by opening classroom doors and creating appropriate teams of staff and students who support, nurture, and learn from each other every day
- transforming inservice training into personalized staff development and support from first induction into a school through ongoing capacity building
- restructuring school governance to enable shared decision-making.

**A positive
school climate
emerges from a
school culture
that promotes
well-being.**

Welcoming and Social Support

From a psychological perspective, learning and teaching at school are experienced most positively when the learner wants to learn and the teacher enjoys facilitating student learning. Each day works best when all participants care about each other. To these ends, staff must establish a school-wide and classroom atmosphere that is welcoming, encourages mutual support and caring, and contributes to a sense of community. A caring school develops and institutionalizes welcoming and ongoing social support programs for new staff, students, and families. Such efforts can play a key role in reducing staff burnout and benefit students in significant ways.

Regular mentoring is essential. However, learning from colleagues is not just a talking game. Good mentors model and then actively demonstrate and discuss new approaches, guide initial practice and implementation, and follow-up to improve and refine. Depending on practicalities, such modeling could take place in a teacher's own classroom or be carried out in colleagues' classrooms. Some of it may take the form of team teaching.

Opening the Classroom Door

Opening the classroom door is a key step in enhancing the learning of teachers, other staff, and students. The crux of the matter is to ensure use of effective mentoring, teaming, and other collegial and volunteer supports. Specialists should be prepared to go into classrooms to model and guide teachers in the use of practices for engaging and re-engaging students in learning. This includes school psychologists, counselors, special education resource teachers, and others who have learned to mentor and demonstrate rather than just play traditional consultant roles.

In addition, teachers and schools can do the job better by integrating community resources. Anyone in the community who wants to help might make a contribution. In general, the array of people who can end the isolation of teachers in classrooms includes: (a) aides and volunteers, (b) other regular/specialist teachers, (c) family members, (d) students, (e) student support personnel, (f) school administrators, (g) classified staff, (h) teachers- and other professionals-in-training, (i) school and community librarians, and more.

Personalized Staff Development and Support

As with any learners, staff capacity building must strive to be a good fit in terms of both personal motivation and capabilities. This includes designing inservice programs to account for interests, strengths, weaknesses, and limitations and enhance and expand intrinsic motivation for learning and problem solving. And it requires the type of in-classroom and schoolwide learning supports described in the first article. Moreover, schools must be able to provide intensified inservice and learning supports when new staff have adjustment problems and at any time experienced staff show signs of succumbing to stress. Personalized contacts increase opportunities for enhancing competence, ensuring involvement in meaningful decision-making, and attaining positive social status. This all helps counter alienation and burnout.

Shared Governance

Who is empowered to make decisions in an organization can be a contentious issue. Putting aside politics for the moment, we stress the motivational impact of not feeling empowered. A potent and negative impact on motivation occurs when staff (and students and all other stakeholders) are not involved in making major decisions that affect the quality of their lives.

This argues for ensuring that personnel are provided with a variety of meaningful opportunities to shape such decisions. Participation on planning committees and teams that end up having little or no impact can contribute to stress. Alternatively, feelings of self-determination that help counter stress are more likely when governance structures share power across stakeholders and make room for their representatives around the decision-making table.

Given the importance of the matters discussed in these three articles, please let us hear from you about how they relate to your efforts to enhance equity of opportunity for all students to succeed in school and beyond.



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Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.
William Butler Yeats

The Center for Mental Health in Schools operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

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