Moving Forward

Schools Re-opening: Safety Plus
Enhancing Equity of Opportunity and Social Justice

*This is a time to reflect on systems that may not have worked for
every child, and we encourage you to please continue to eliminate
the barriers to student success that existed before the closure.*
California Dept of Education's Guidebook for the Safe Reopening of Public Schools

The last issue of this ejournal stressed some specifics for planning to support the transition-back of students, families, and staff (see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring20.pdf). We see in available plans essential steps to ensure safe physical health. Given growing concerns about increasing numbers of students manifesting learning, behavior and emotional problems, it is unfortunate that planning is falling back on old ideas that have not been effective.

> The COVID-19 pandemic and the protests about police violence underscore the need for schools to address these matters as they re-open as well as addressing barriers that have long interfered with learning and teaching. Everyone (students, families, staff) has experienced considerable stress, some have been ill, some have lost a relative or friend who died. Some did not do well with online instruction. It was predictable that transition-back stressors would likely exacerbate factors interfering with school adjustment and thus with learning and teaching. Some will be staying home and continuing with online teaching. And some remain disconnected from school instruction.

The problem stems from the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) endorsement of a multi-tiered support system (MTSS) in framing how student learning, behavior, and emotional problems should be approached at schools. Many states, districts, and schools have adopted some version of a MTSS framework. The focus on a multi-tiered continuum of intervention provides an opportunity to move forward with how student/learning supports are addressed in school improvement policy and practice. A major challenge in capitalizing on this opportunity involves going beyond the limitations of the MTSS framework and do so in ways that enhance equity of opportunity and social justice.

Expanding the MTSS Framework

Now that adaptation of some form of MTSS is so widespread, it is time to expand the framework in ways that improve the role of schools in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Doing so is fundamental to enhancing school attendance, safeguarding schools from violence, enabling academic, social, emotional, and physical development, and addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Schools can readily rework their approach to addressing factors interfering with learning and teaching. First, (1) reframe the MTSS continuum and (2) organize interventions into a cohesive set of student/learning support domains. This will expand the framework in ways that can better promote student and staff well-being, enhance school climate, and yield safe and caring schools.

Reframing the Continuum

MTSS outlines the continuum of interventions in terms of levels of focus and intensity. Another way to conceive the levels not only is in terms of what they aim to do but as *an interrelated and overlapping continuum of braided school and community subsystems*. The subsystems focus on promoting effective schooling and whole child development, preventing problems experienced by schools, teachers, and students, quickly addressing problems as they arise, and providing for students who have severe and chronic problems. Each subsystem is seen as weaving together a wide range of school and community resources.

As illustrated in Exhibit A, the interrelated and overlapping subsystems taper from top to bottom to indicate the view that, if the top is well-designed and implemented, the numbers needing early intervention are reduced and then, as more are helped through early-after-onset assistance, fewer students will need "deep-end" interventions. Without a well-designed and implemented system, current evidence is that too many students are referred inappropriately for specialized, deep-end services.

Most schools and communities have some programs and services that fit along the entire continuum. However, analyses indicate that the various interventions commonly are adopted in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner, and their implementation is fragmented and usually marginalized in school improvement policy and practice.
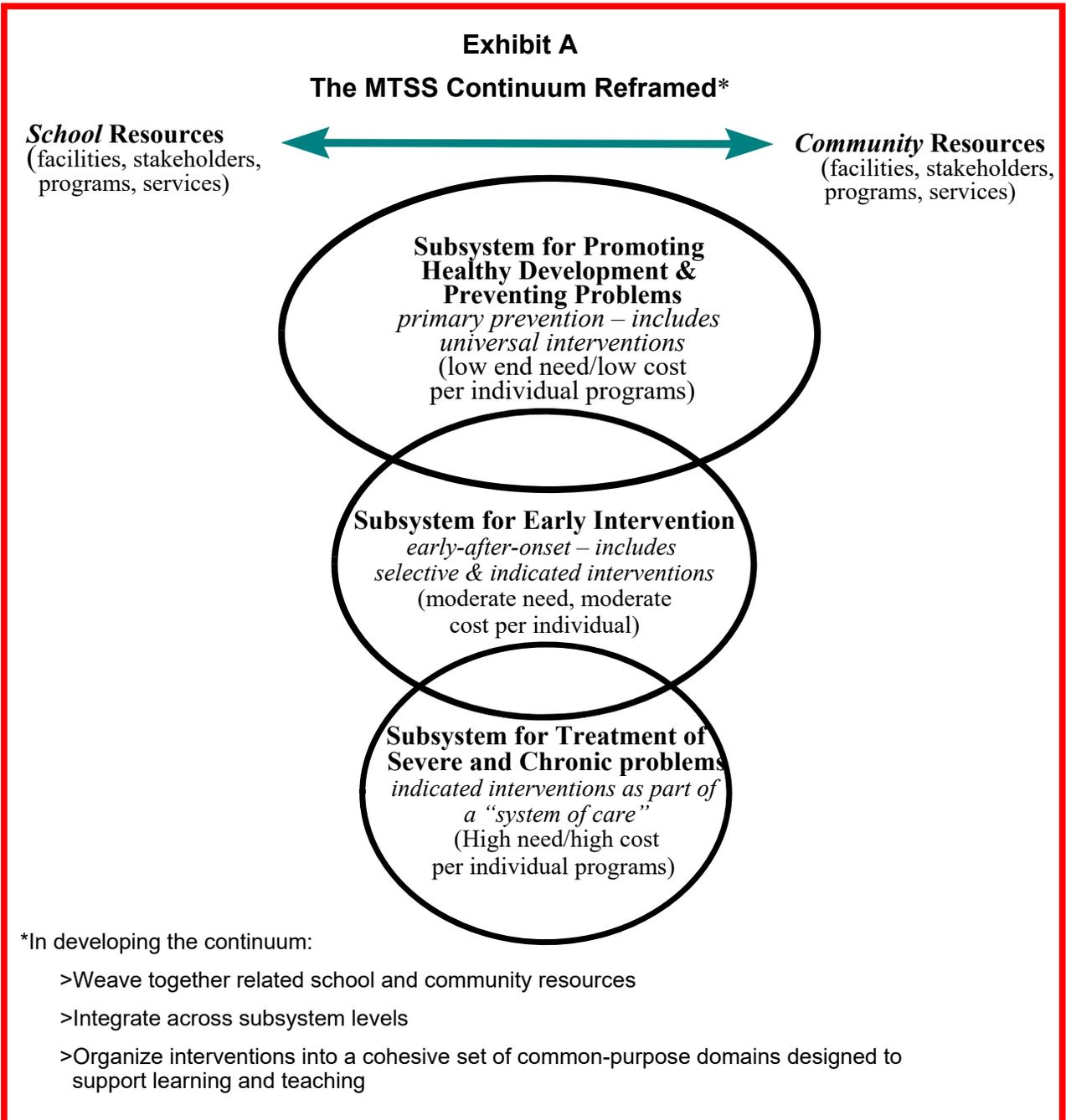
Organizing the Interventions into a Cohesive Set of Student/learning Support Domains

Mapping interventions using only a continuum tends to generate "laundry lists" of programs and services at each level. Thus, in addition to the continuum, it is necessary to organize interventions cohesively with respect to their intent to address basic concerns that schools actually are confronted with each day. In organizing the activity, it becomes clearer what supports are needed in and out of the classroom so that teachers can enable the learning of students who are not doing well as well as address barriers to learning and teaching such as lack of a safe learning environment.

To improve efforts along the continuum, pioneering efforts have begun to coalesce programs and services into six domains of student/learning supports. These trailblazers define and organize the domains to improve how schools promote academic, social, emotional, and physical development and address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

The six domains encompass daily efforts in classrooms and schoolwide to address student and schooling problems and promote general well-being (e.g., enhance school climate, yield safe and caring schools, improve student outcomes). The six domains encompass efforts to effectively:

- *Enhance regular classroom strategies to enable learning* (e.g., use of personalized instruction and special assistance for students with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems and those who have become disengaged from learning at school; emphasizes prevention, response to intervention and early intervening in the classroom, social emotional learning, and more),
- *Support transitions* (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and the many daily transitions),
- *Increase home and school connections and engagement,*
- *Respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises*,
- *Increase community involvement and support* (e.g., outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers),
- *Facilitate student and family access to specialized assistance and services as needed.*

Exhibit A

The MTSS Continuum Reframed*

School **Resources**
(facilities, stakeholders,
programs, services)

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Community **Resources**
(facilities, stakeholders,
programs, services)

**Subsystem for Promoting
Healthy Development &
Preventing Problems**
*primary prevention – includes
universal interventions*
(low end need/low cost
per individual programs)

Subsystem for Early Intervention
*early-after-onset – includes
selective & indicated interventions*
(moderate need, moderate
cost per individual)

**Subsystem for Treatment of
Severe and Chronic problems**
*indicated interventions as part of
a "system of care"*
(High need/high cost
per individual programs)

*In developing the continuum:

>Weave together related school and community resources

>Integrate across subsystem levels

>Organize interventions into a cohesive set of common-purpose domains designed to
support learning and teaching

The continuum of interventions and the six domains provide a comprehensive, multifaceted intervention framework to guide and unify school improvement planning with respect to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The resultant matrix is shown in Exhibit B and includes a specific example in each cell to illustrate an embedded intervention that can promote school safety and help address MH concerns.

Clearly, the intervention domains can be conceived in other ways. The points for emphasis here are that (1) the many activities that schools pursue along the intervention continuum can and need to be further organized and (2) interventions for specific initiatives such as enhancing school safety should be embedded into a unified system of student/learning supports.

Exhibit B
Expanding the MTSS Framework to Enhance Equity of Opportunity and Social Justice*

Integrated Intervention *Continuum* (levels)

Categories of Classroom and School-wide Student/ Learning Support Domains	*Subsystem for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems*	*Subsystem for Early Intervention*	*Subsystem for Treatment ("System of Care")*
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 & providing social/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 family in 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 & 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

*The specific examples inserted in the matrix are just illustrative of those schools already may have in place. For a fuller array of examples of student/learning supports that can be applied in classrooms and schoolwide, see the set of surveys available at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/surveys/set1.pdf

> *LEAs will need to have the emotional recovery of students, staff, and families at the forefront of their planning and decision making .When educators and students practice physical distancing at school or through distance learning, it does not mean they must lose social and school connections .*
>
> California Dept of Education's Guidebook for the Safe Reopening of Public Schools

Re-opening Schools: Three Crosscutting Concerns for Schools – Equity, Social Justice, and Safety

At this time, it is a given that schools need to ensure that students and staff are safe when schools re-open. The emphasis on safety includes concern for COVID-19 and continuing concerns for safety from violence, threats, bullying, and so forth.

However, safety is just the platform upon which a good school moves forward in enhancing equity of opportunity for all students to succeed and ensuring social justice. These *basics* require that the school facilitate learning related to all areas of development and play a major role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Equity, social justice, and safety are matters that crosscut the intervention framework outlined in Exhibit B. They are qualities that emerge when a school effectively addresses barriers to learning and teaching and promotes whole child development.

To ensure that the aims of equity and social justice and the related matters of diversity and inclusion, are pursued diligently, the school leadership can establish an ad hoc workgroup. The workgroup can help promote and recommend practices for

- appropriate recruitment, induction, development, and retention of diverse faculty and staff

- relevant curriculum design, development, and resources to facilitate thinking critically about equity, social justice, diversity, inclusion (e.g., related to race, gender, ethnicity, nation and nationhood, class, and religion and their intersections)

- student leadership is developed with respect to concerns about equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice

- student, family, and staff support related to these matters

- outreach for school community collaboration

Where needed, the members can be resources to collaborate with individual teachers and departments to develop relevant courses and curricula. They also can develop strong relationships with as liaisons to the various diversity and inclusion-related groups in the school and respond to equity and social justice when they arise.

> *School leaders will need to ... spend time creating safe spaces to listen to students and to navigate discussions that are grounded in respectful communication. And they will have to formally integrate these issues into the curriculum so that the students have informed perspectives on these issues.*
> See the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance Program
> https://www.tolerance.org/
>
> Sent to the Center by a colleague

Some Implications

The aim in expanding the MTSS framework is to coalesce all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students into a primary and high priority component of school improvement.

Prevailing school improvement policy marginalizes efforts to address factors that interfere with youngsters' well-being. An enhanced policy framework is needed to stress that a comprehensive component addressing such factors is a primary and essential facet of school improvement. As illustrated in Exhibit C, such a component complements and overlaps efforts to directly facilitate learning and development by preventing and minimizing as many interfering factors as possible and maximizing engagement and re-engagement in productive learning. Ensuring that such a third component is adopted and not marginalized are keys to enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond.
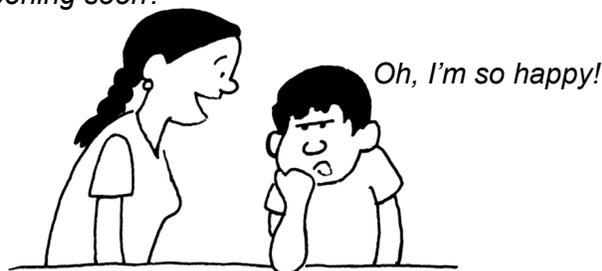
Our research operationalizes this third component of school improvement as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports. Such a system is developed first by adopting an intervention framework such as that illustrated in Exhibit B and then developing the framework, over several years, into a comprehensive and equitable system. Appropriately developed, we suggest that such a system can play a major role in producing a safe, healthful, nurturing environment (school climate) characterized by respect for differences, trust, caring support, and high expectations.
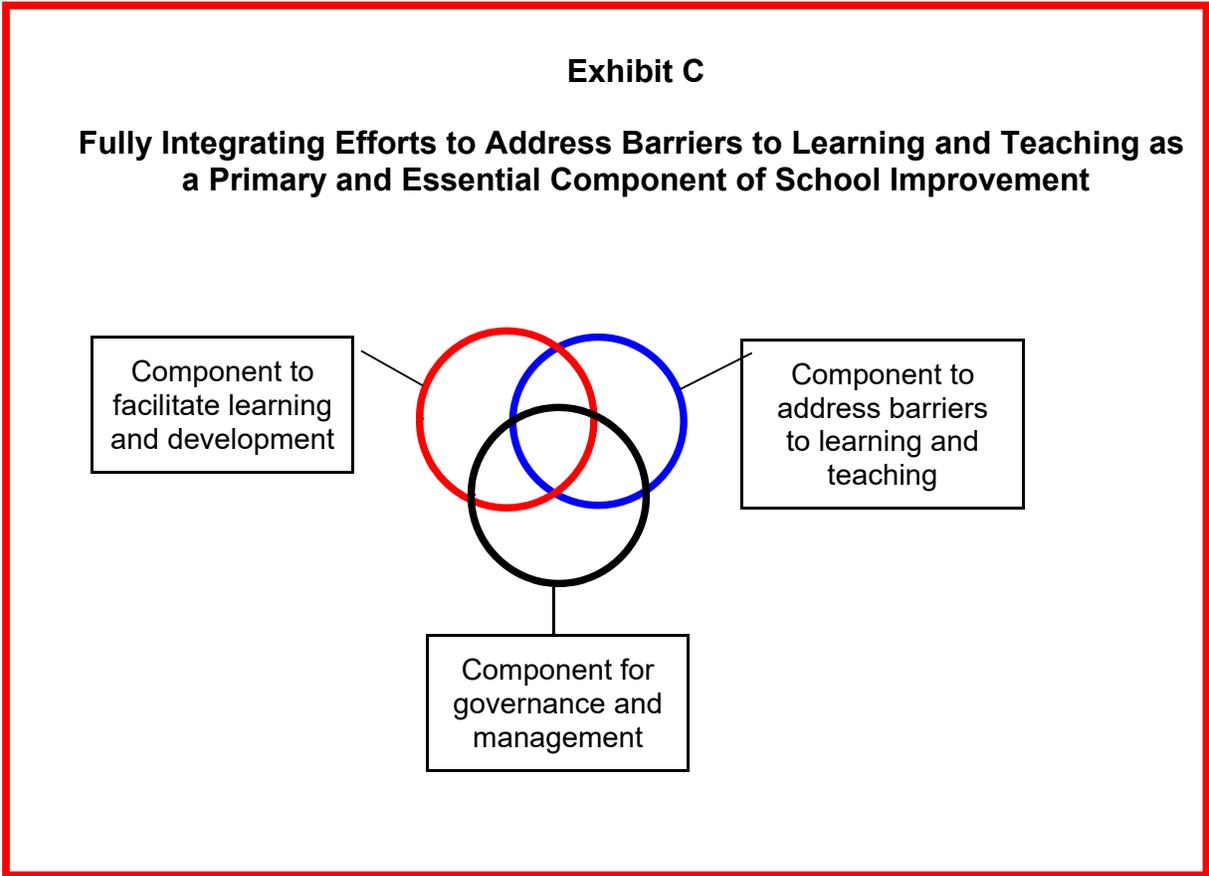
All this has implications for enhancing in-classroom supports by retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., student and learning support personnel – psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, Title I staff, special educators, dropout/graduation support staff, etc.). The jobs of these personnel need to include working collaboratively with regular teachers *in classrooms* for part of each day. Improving student/learning supports in classrooms requires such collaboration, and such collaboration is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

There also are major implications for rethinking infrastructures (e.g., reworking the operational and organizational infrastructure for a school, a family of schools, the district, and for school-family-community collaboration). And, given the scale of public education, there are many complications to address related to pursuing and sustaining system changes.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the protests about police violence mark a turning point for how schools, families, and communities address the problems of confronting so many students and schools. We suggest that the focus on safe schools can be a catalyst for major system changes as public schools strive to ensure every student succeeds.

Exhibit C

Fully Integrating Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching as a Primary and Essential Component of School Improvement

Component to facilitate learning and development

Component to address barriers to learning and teaching

Component for governance and management

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

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Note: The following article elaborates on some of the matters discussed above and provides references to resources.

The Role of Schools in Promoting Whole Child Development and Learning

Given all the discussion about whole child development and learning, we want to share our perspective about the need to attend to (1) context, (2) facilitate learning and teaching to promote positive knowledge, skills, and *attitudes*, and (3) proactively work against interfering factors and reengage disconnected students. We also stress that the focus in schools is on *all* students. With these matters in mind, we suggest that a guiding question for school improvement is:

> ***What should and shouldn't happen in classrooms, school-wide, and out-of-school to promote success and well-being at school and beyond FOR ALL CHILDREN?***

And finally in this discussion we emphasize that major school improvements require a change process that produces transformative innovations that are replicable to scale and sustainable.

Context

As Exhibit 1 highlights, development and learning are embedded in a complex set of socio-political-economic arenas. Ideally, pursuit of whole child development and learning in each arena would be guided by a shared vision and a cohesive set of policies and practices (e.g., a focus on societal and personal needs for the 21 century, liberal arts). The reality is that fundamental differences in vision prevail and major conflicts are commonplace. And those directly intervening with students have relatively little impact on many of the major policy decisions that shape daily practice at schools.

Exhibit 1: **Some of the Complex and Transactional Context Affecting Whole Child Learning and Development**
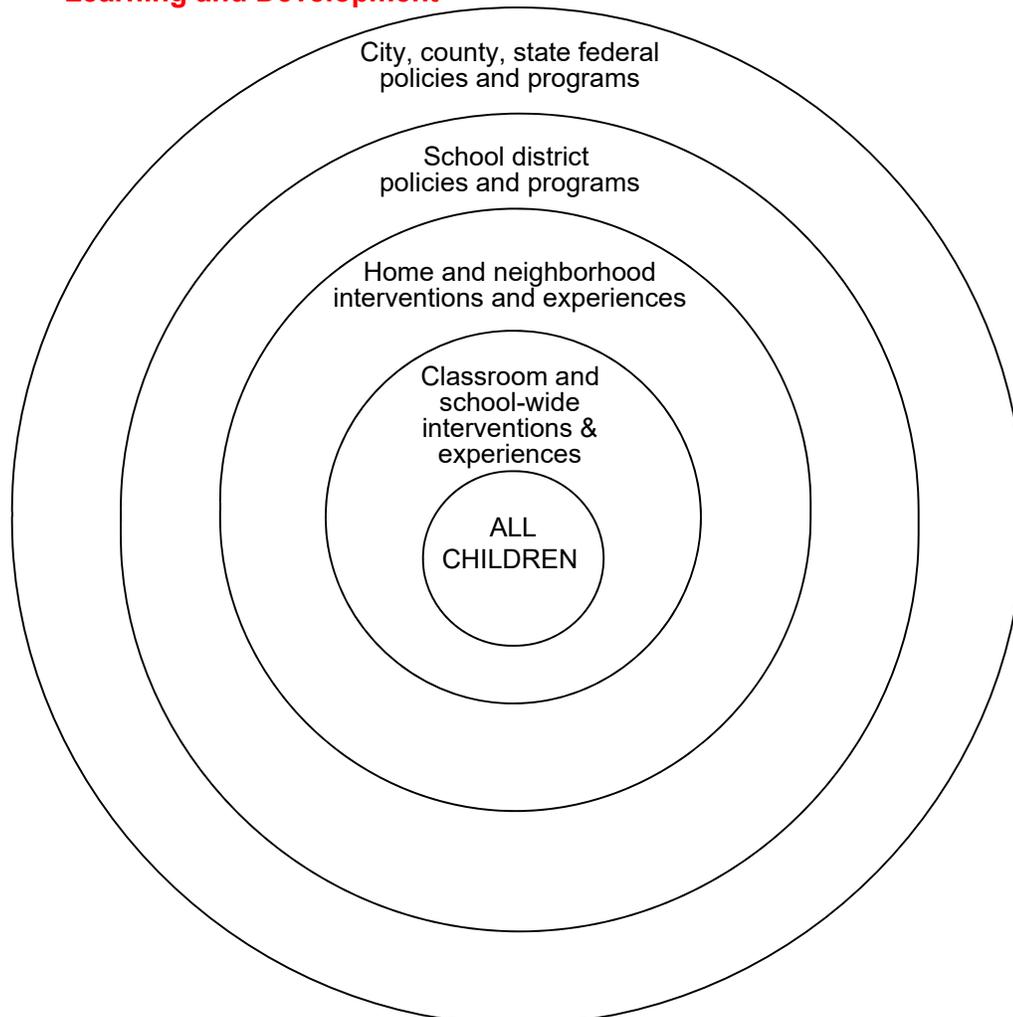
About Facilitating Learning and Teaching at School

Learning at school is a function of how the learning environment fits with the learner's accumulated capacities and attitudes, current states of being, and the ongoing transactions between the learner and the learning environment (e.g., formal teaching, extended day, enrichment opportunities, and various other experiences during the school day and year). All school staff, students, and volunteers play a role. To enhance positive working relationships, structural changes have been recommended (e.g., cooperative learning, team teaching, block scheduling, looping, small schools).

Differentiated instruction is basic to good teaching in a classroom. And, while "meeting students where they are" in terms of current knowledge and skills is necessary, it is evident that differentiated instruction also requires factoring in motivation (e.g., attitudes) with special attention given to *intrinsic* motivation. We view the emphasis on motivation as key to *personalization.* Moreover, from a psychological perspective, we stress that a learner's perception is critical in evaluating whether a good match exists between a learner and the learning environment.

> For in-depth discussions of personalized learning and instruction with a focus on the whole child and all students, see Chapter 7 of *Improving School Improvement* https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5288v1c1
>
> and Chapter 3 of *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* https://escholarship.org/uc/item/55w7b8x8

Working Against Interfering Factors and Reengaging Disconnected Students

Most policy makers and administrators know that good instruction delivered by highly qualified teachers cannot ensure successful whole child learning or equity of opportunity for success at school. There are always barriers to learning and teaching that result in some students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Even the best teacher can't address these interfering factors alone. Minimally, teachers need student and learning supports in the classroom and school-wide in order to personalize instruction and provide special assistance when necessary.

Unfortunately, student and learning supports have long been marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. As a result, such supports usually are developed in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner. Implementation is fragmented and at times redundant. The professionals involved often are counterproductively competitive, especially when funding is sparse (and when isn't it?).

All this needs to change. Yet, most of the widely circulated reports about improving schools pay scant attention to these concerns.

And while the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers opportunities for change, it also continues the piecemeal approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families. Its emphasis on a multi-tiered system of supports falls far short of delineating a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports.

> For an in-depth discussion of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, see *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* https://escholarship.org/uc/item/55w7b8x8

Exhibit 2 highlights practices to facilitate teaching and learning and proactively work against interfering factors.

Exhibit 3 suggests some resources for enhancing home and community engagement with schools.

Exhibit 4 highlights resources that illustrate the need and ways to expand school improvement policy from a two- to a three component framework as a basis for enhancing how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

Exhibit 2

**Practices to Facilitate Teaching and Learning and
Proactively Work Against Interfering Factors**

What to do:

(1) develop supportive, caring, safe school and classroom environments; make structural changes (e.g., cooperative learning, team teaching, looping, small classes and schools)

(2) contribute to enhancing home and neighborhood supports for child development

(3) develop and support teacher ability to personalize instruction

(4) ensure the curriculum, classroom, and school-wide experiences promote whole child development (physical health, cognition/perception, language, social and emotional)

(5) develop and support systems for providing special assistance as needed for students (in classrooms as well as out) to address mild-to-moderate learning, behavior, and emotional problems

(6) provide for a range of specialized assistance as needed (including referrals to outside resources)

What to work against:

(1) school and classroom environments that threaten students' feelings of self-determination, competence, and relationships with peers and school personnel.

(2) practices that interfere with home and neighborhood engagement with the school

(3) an overemphasis on broad band teaching and negative strategies to control behavior

(4) tendencies to pay too little attention to classroom and school-wide experiences that work against positive learning and development

(5) making special assistance for common problems primarily an out-of-classroom process; applying special assistance in ways that stigmatize and isolate students

(6) tendencies to take only minor steps to address the negative "side effects" of specialized assistance

Exhibit 3

Some Resources for Enhancing Home and Community Engagement with Schools

>Schools, Families, and Community Working Together: Building an Effective Collaborative
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/buildingeffectivecollab.pdf

Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling – Chapter 6 in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System.* Published by Cognella –
https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html

Enhancing School and Community Collaboration – Chapter 14 in *Improving School Improvement* – https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5288v1c1

Enhancing Home Involvement to Address Barriers to Learning: A Collaborative Process
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/homeinv.pdf

Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling –a self-study survey.
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/toolsforpractice/homeinvolvementsurvey.pdf

Exhibit 4

**Resources that Illustrate the Need and Ways to
Expand School Improvement Policy
from a Two- to a Three Component Framework**

ESSA and Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching: Is there Movement toward Transforming Student/Learning Supports? http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/2018%20report.pdf

State Education Agencies & Learning Supports: Enhancing School Improvement
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/seals.pdf

How Well Do State Legislatures Focus on Improving School Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching & Re-engage Disconnected Students?
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Legisanal.pdf

What are States Doing to Help Schools Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching?
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/statelegis.pdf

Rethinking District Budgets to Unify and Sustain a Critical Mass of Student and Learning Supports at Schools http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/financebudget.pdf

District Superintendents and the School Improvement Problem of Addressing Barriers to Learning http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/supt.pdf

Concluding Comments: Tinkering or Transforming?

A superintendent recently told us his district was doing well without making major changes. We note that his district is rather small and serves a predominately white and economically advantaged student body. So, of course, he probably is right. (We do wonder, however, how well his current system is working for whatever number of students are experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems.)

At any rate, it is clear that things are not working well at many urban and rural schools serving students from economically disadvantaged communities. In addition to changes in instruction and management practices, student/learning supports remedies have tended to be minimal and relatively ineffective (e.g., hiring one or two more support staff, tinkering with current student support practices, adding another program, enhancing coordination, and delineating yet another set of things for teacher to learn in hopes they will be able to cope better with problems).

We recognize that proposed changes stem from real needs and usually are well-intentioned. They often follow any event that increases public concern about matters such as achievement gaps, violence at schools, bullying, dropouts, toxic stress, student trauma, depression, anxiety and other mental health concerns, and so forth.

The problem is that tinkering with school improvement tends to undermine efforts to make fundamental systemic changes. The reality is that schools are constantly confronted with requests and mandates that can't all be assimilated in the short-run without interfering with what already is in progress and what needs to be developed if significant, long-lasting progress is to be made.

So it is not surprising that a common reaction of many administrators and school staff to proposed school improvements is: *Enough - we can't take on another thing!*

A considerable part of what's wrong with school improvement proposals lies with the reality that prevailing education policy favors two components. One component emphasizes enhancing instruction; the other stresses improving the management/governance of schools. Some attention, of course, also is

given to student and schooling problems. However, in most school districts, these matters are at best a secondary concern in school improvement planning and practice.

As we stressed in the first article, what most schools need to do is adopt a three component framework and give equal emphasis to each component in planning and implementing improvements.

Don't Expect a Miracle!
Plan and Implement a System Change Process

Of course, any effort to make fundamental system change requires a change process that produces transformative improvements that are replicable to scale and sustainable.

For more on systemic change, see Chapter 16. *Toward Substantive and Sustainable Systemic Change* and Chapter 17. *Making it Happen* – online in *Improving School Improvement* – https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5288v1c1

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Or contact us – E-mail: Ltaylor@ucla.edu or Ph: (310) 825-3634

Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter *(ENEWS)?*
Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange?*
Send requests to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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What the best and wisest parent wants for his (her) own child that must the community want for all of its children. Any other idea . . . is narrow and unlovely. John Dewey

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights.

Transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to enabling
  >equity of opportunity,
  >promoting whole child development,
  >advancing social justice, and
  >enhancing school climate.

About the National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports – 2020

The aims of this ongoing initiative are to mobilize direct actions for

- Elevating school improvement policy discussion about ending the marginalization of student/learning supports
- Moving toward transformation of such supports.

A Call to Action – You Can Play a Role

Growing awareness and blueprints for new directions, makes this year an advantageous time for action by everyone concerned about ending the marginalization of student/learning supports.

Here's some ways:

(1) Be a potent voice advocating for

- Policy changes that can end the marginalization of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching
- Development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports

(2) Consider participating at decision making and planning tables focused on school improvement so you can clarify the need to

- Expand from a two to a three-component policy framework
- Unify student/learning supports
- Develop the unified component into a comprehensive and equitable system
- Contact local media about covering
  >The inadequacy of how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students
  >Potential new directions that transform student/learning supports

(3) Advocate for transformative system changes with school improvement policy makers (e.g., legislators,principals, superintendents, mayors, governors, associations, organizations, unions, guilds, business and philanthropic leaders).

Focus their attention on

- Ending the marginalization of student/learning supports by expanding school improvement policy from a two to a three component framework for planning and implementation
- Ceasing to generate student/learning support activity that further fragments, marginalizes, and results in counterproductive competition for sparse resources
- The need to help schools unify and develop a comprehensive and equitable system ofstudent/learning supports

See the Initiative's pages on the Center website for links to resources that you can choose from in order to provide basic information and examples to others.
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html