

# Addressing Barriers

## to Learning

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**Special Edition**

## Transforming Student/Learning Supports: What We've Learned so Far

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

And John Maynard Keynes cogently stressed:

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

At this stage in our work, not only have we found the above to be true, we frequently can be heard lamenting after a unsuccessful attempt:

*It's too hard; it's not fair; what's the use; let it be!*

But we soon recovered and moved on.

As the title indicates, our aim here is to share what we've learned so far and hopefully to provide a stimulus for you to share back with us. We start by providing a brief overview of our work so you will have a sense of context for what we cover.

### Laboratory Learnings

Our first major lessons about transforming schools were at a lab school on the UCLA campus that had been established by Grace Fernald. When we started there in the 1970s, it had about 100 full day students who were manifesting a range of learning, behavior, and emotional problems. One prominent factor they had in common was that the public school hadn't been able to help them (and often was glad to be rid of them).

We learned a lot in the years we worked with the students, families, and staff at that school.

First, and with regret, we had a terrible realization. We learned that many of the kids had become unlikable. They lied, they cheated, they manipulated others.

We wondered: *Why had they developed in this way?*

As we worked with them, it soon became evident that most had learned to cope with too many situations without having appropriate means for doing so. So they had used their smarts to discover other ways to survive. Unfortunately for them, many of the strategies were not socially approved.

Not surprisingly, it was also evident that their past experiences had made them distrustful of and reactive to authority figures and, initially, that



**Out of the Lab into a Surreal World**

*School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge*

Carnegie Task Force on Education

When the university decided it didn't want to fund the lab school any more, we took what we had been learning out into the "REAL" world. Critics of lab schools have long complained that the practices demonstrated in such schools were too exotic to be carried out in the real world of public schools. We soon found there was a bit of truth in this – and that was because the real world we entered felt so surreal.

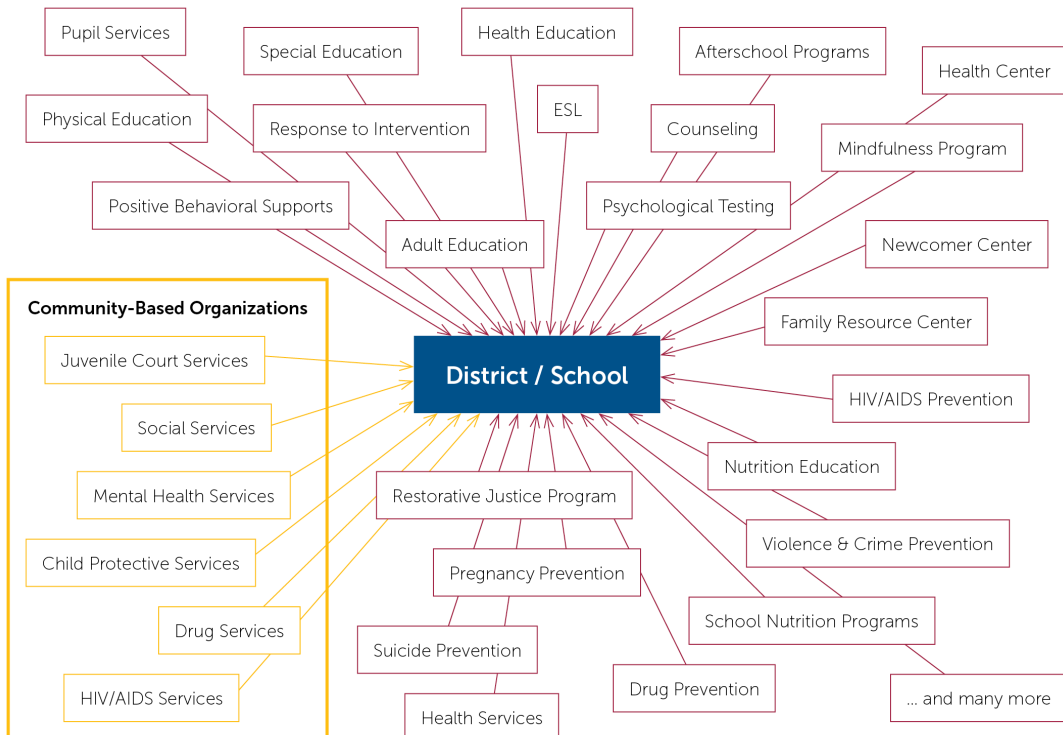
In 1986, we established the School Mental Health Project (SMHP) to pursue theory, research, practice and training related to addressing mental health and psychosocial concerns through school-based interventions. We started with schools in LAUSD. At that time, the district had about 750,000 students. With Linda Taylor in the lead of a federally funded dropout project, we took on 12 schools (see <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1037/h0079276> ).

It didn't take long for us to learn how much more we needed to learn about system change. Also evident was that students, families, and teachers did not have the type of support system that could make a dent in the opportunity and achievement gaps that are pervasive in the real world of public schooling.

Our first step was to map what schools were doing to (a) address barriers to learning and teaching and (b) reengage disconnected students and families. Our next step involved clarifying what needed to be done to make the efforts more effective.

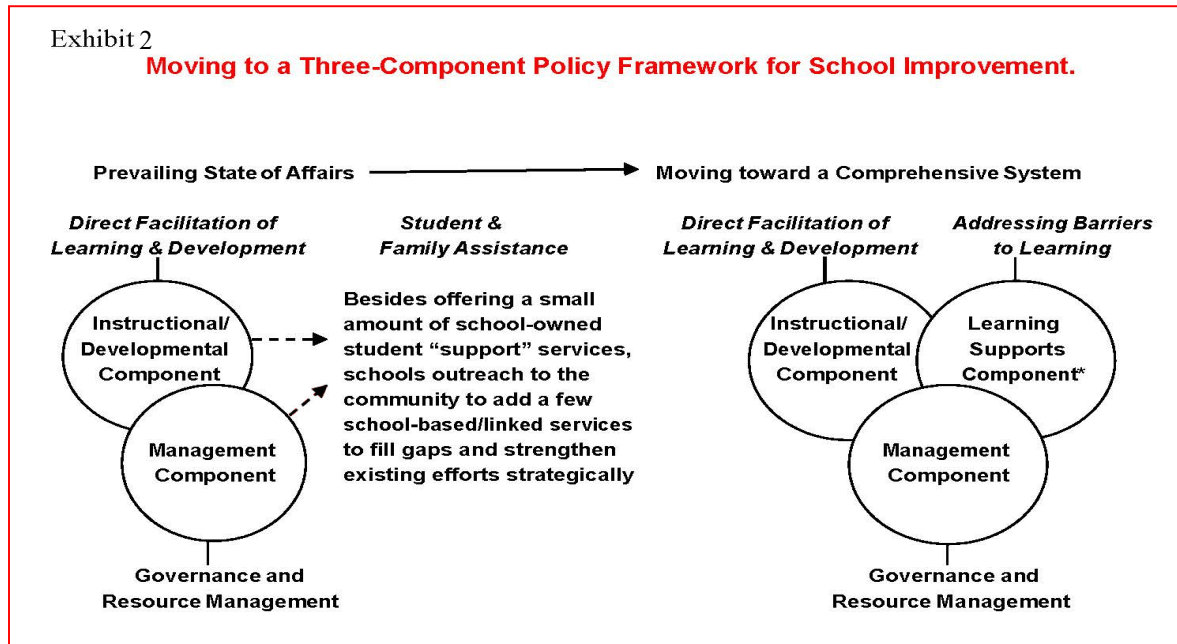
As we reported widely, we found that the district had an extensive list of student/learning supports. However, in general such supports were pursued at district and school levels in ad hoc, piecemeal, and fragmented ways (see Exhibit 1), and schools varied considerably in what they had on site.

**Exhibit 1. A Fragmented Approach to Supporting Student Well-Being**



*We learned a policy shift is needed*

As we analyzed the situation, we soon realized that the fragmentation reflected the marginalized way student/learning supports were treated in school improvement policy. In general, the primary emphasis was on two components: (1) instruction and (2) management/governance. We concluded that ending the marginalization and fragmentation requires expanding the framework for school improvement policy and practice. So we began advocating for adding a third primary component that directly addresses barriers to learning and teaching. (See chapter 11 in our 1994 book at (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/understandingintervention.pdf>).



When we first proposed the expanded framework, we emphasized the third component enabled learning by address factors that interfered with effective teaching. So we called it an enabling component, and we delineated six intervention arenas for schools. As it has been adopted, there has been a preference to call it a learning supports component. (See *What are Learning Supports?* on the following page.)

In pursuing application of the third component, we stressed the need for a set of leadership mechanisms to (1) unify the various student/learning supports covered by the component and (2) develop them into a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports.\*

We also called for expanding the accountability framework to support the emphasis on all three components (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/account.pdf>). And we suggested a set of standards and indicators to promote quality development (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/qualityindicators.pdf>).

\*The mechanisms that constitute operational infrastructures at schools, LEAs, and SEAs are critical drivers for effective implementation and system change. The reality is that the current operational infrastructure at all levels require major reworking. And to increase efficiency and effectiveness and garner economies of scale, mechanisms are needed that enable groups or "families" of schools to work together and in collaboration with community stakeholders and resources. See *Improving Student/Learning Supports Requires Reworking the Operational Infrastructure* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/reworkinfra.pdf>.

## What are Learning Supports?

Learning supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports intended to enable all pupils to have an equal opportunity for success at school by addressing barriers to and promoting engagement in learning and teaching. The resources include a wide range of student and learning support personnel (e.g., counselors, school psychologists, social workers, nurses; compensatory and special education staff, paraprofessionals, volunteers, and more). These personnel provide a variety of supports, specialized services, and staff special initiatives (e.g., programs for wellness, dropout prevention, attendance, drug abuse prevention, violence prevention, pregnancy prevention, afterschool). Funding comes from the general budget and allocations for compensatory and special education, as well as for special projects (including those supported by extra-mural sources). Added personnel and resources come from community efforts linked to schools. Special venues include parent/family/health centers. And of course we have undoubtedly failed to mention something else that is relevant here.

Currently, many places are adopting a multi-tiered continuum framework for student supports (commonly referred to as MTSS). However, we stress that a system of student and learning supports requires more than conceiving a continuum of intervention (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mtss2019.pdf>). MTSS and its pyramid depiction does provide a good starting point for broadly framing student and learning supports. As widely conceived, however, the multi-tier model needs to be expanded into intertwined sets of subsystems at each level that braid together a wide range of school and community (including home) resources. The subsystems focus on promoting whole-child development and prevention, identifying and addressing problems as soon as they arise, and providing for students with severe and chronic problems (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/continuum.pdf>).

It also is necessary to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that reflect a school's daily efforts to provide student/learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide. Our analysis of typical "laundry lists" of district programs and services used to address barriers to learning and teaching led us to group student/learning supports into six domains. In organizing the activity in this way, it becomes clearer what supports are needed in and out of the classroom to enable student learning. The six domains are:

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

See Exhibit 3

**Exhibit 3. Intervention Framework for a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Supports**

		Integrated Intervention Continuum (levels)		
		Subsystem for promoting healthy development & preventing problems	Subsystem for early intervention	Subsystem for treatment ("system of care")
<b>Categories of Classroom &amp; Schoolwide Student and Learning Support Domains</b>	<b>Classroom-based learning supports</b>	e.g., personalized instruction	e.g., special assistance in the classroom provided as soon as a problem arises	e.g., referral for specialist assistance
	<b>Supports for transitions</b>	e.g., welcoming newcomers and providing social and/or academic supports	e.g., when problems arise, using them as teachable moments to enhance social-emotional development and learning	e.g., personalized supports for students returning to school from incarceration
	<b>Home involvement &amp; engagement</b>	e.g., outreach to attract and facilitate participation of hard-to-reach families	e.g., engaging families in problem-solving	e.g., support services to assist families with addressing basic survival needs
	<b>Community involvement &amp; collaborative engagement</b>	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
	<b>Crisis response &amp; prevention</b>	e.g., promoting positive relationships	e.g., immediate response with physical and psychological first aid	e.g., referral for follow-up counseling
	<b>Student &amp; family special assistance</b>	e.g., enhancing coping and problem-solving capability	e.g., providing consultation, triage, and referrals	e.g., ongoing management of care related to specialized services
		<b>Accommodations for differences &amp; disabilities</b>		<b>Specialized assistance &amp; other intensified interventions (e.g., special education, school-based interventions)</b>

*We began to work with pilots & demonstrations with a focus on transforming student & learning supports*

In the early 1990's, we were invited help develop the Urban Learning Centers model which was one of several approaches sponsored by New American Schools, a national initiative to develop replicable schoolwide comprehensive reforms. The Urban Learning Center model encompassed grades from pre-kindergarten through 12. It was generated by a collaboration of the Los Angeles Unified School District, United Teachers of Los Angeles, and the Los Angeles Educational Partnership.

The aim was to develop a "break-the-mold" comprehensive school reform design. The design adopted our three component approach to school improvement. By fully integrating an emphasis on addressing barriers, the Learning Supports Component provided a unifying framework for responding to a wide range of psychosocial and educational factors interfering with learning and performance to enable students to learn and teachers to teach. Besides focusing on barriers and deficits, the approach included a strong emphasis on facilitating healthy development, positive behavior, and asset-building as the best way to prevent problems and as an essential adjunct to corrective interventions. The work involved a fundamental rethinking of student and learning supports as typically pursued at schools. It also called for developing a family and community center at schools as the locus for special activities that enhanced student and family outreach and school engagement. The model was first implemented at the Elizabeth Street Learning Center in 1993 and subsequently was introduced in 16 other urban schools in California. (See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/urbanctr.pdf> and <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED460429.pdf>)











*Some lessons  
learned while  
facilitating  
system change*

As we worked for system change, we often heard: *It's all about relationship building.* That's true as long as one distinguishes the difference between just building a few good personal relationships and the importance of developing an extensive network of productive *working relationships* that go beyond specific individuals (some of whom aren't interested in a personal relationship).

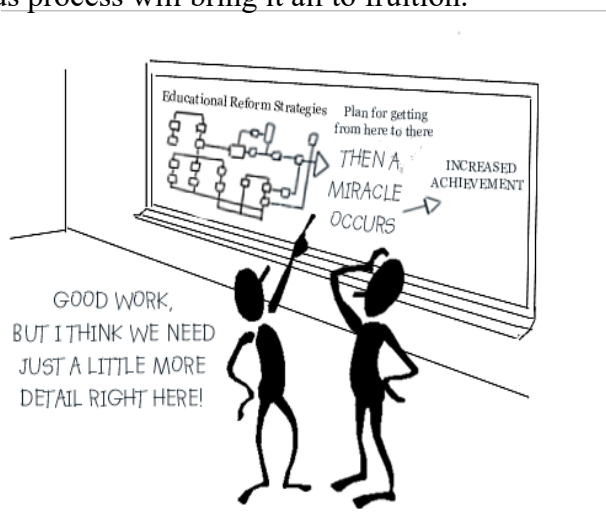
Fundamental and sustained system changes require developing effective *working* relationships among a critical mass of stakeholders. Such relationships emerge from establishing a set of steering, planning, and implementation mechanisms and weaving them into an effective (albeit temporary) operational infrastructure for systemic change.

Tasks involve

- articulating the design for innovative new directions
- a multi-year strategic plan for phasing in the changes
- an immediate action plan
- coaching and mentoring that facilitates implementation of the design and action plan
- a reworking of the ongoing daily operational infrastructures at school and district levels to enable successful implementation.

To underwrite the work, the emphasis is first on weaving together what education agencies already allocate (e.g., pupil services, special and compensatory education and other categorical programs). Over time, increasing efforts are made to link school resources with those in homes and communities (e.g., formally connecting school programs with assets at home, in the business and faith communities, and neighborhood enrichment, recreation, and health and social service resources).

It often seems that after developing a design for new directions, the hope is that a miraculous process will bring it all to fruition.



Any plan for major improvements to address barriers to learning and teaching requires significant system changes that are sustainable and replicable across a schools district. This calls for two sets of strategic and action planning; one for the implementing intervention improvements and the other for facilitating essential systemic changes.

(See <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/implemreport.pdf>.)



**So, Where  
Are We with  
All this Now?**

We persevere . . . and we are optimistic about the opportunities just ahead.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it inevitable that public schools will change in fundamental ways over the next few years. This is particularly the reality for how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and for efforts to reengage disconnected students and families.

Certainly the pandemic has increased the numbers experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems and increased the need for student and learning supports. However, it is widely acknowledged that student/learning supports have long been marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. As a result, such supports are developed in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner. Implementation is fragmented and at times redundant. Those involved often are counterproductively competitive, especially when funding is sparse (and when isn't it?).

For many years, we have received a steady stream of frustrated comments about the situation at schools related to all this. And the situation has been exacerbated as a result of COVID-19. (Considerable concern has been expressed about the capability of schools to deal with the increasing number of students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems.)

We know that folks have to address immediate problems as best they can (and will continue to be frustrated, upset, and overwhelmed).

Given the constant demand to respond to pressing problems, the primary tendency has been to argue for hiring more staff. And clearly some of the temporary relief funds are being used to add some student/learning support personnel. However, it is also evident that when the relief funds end most schools will not have sufficient funds to maintain the added personnel.

*The bottom line*

Schools cannot continue to spend all the time of student and learning support staff responding to the culture of crisis that dominates efforts to address barriers to teaching and learning and reengage disconnected students and their families. To do so means maintaining the marginalization, fragmentation, counterproductive competition, redundancy, and limited outcomes that characterize most schools' approach to providing student and learning supports efforts.

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.

Fundamental systemic changes are needed. To these ends, the aims of the National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports are to mobilize direct actions for

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

The number of inquiries to our Center related to the National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports underscore the reality that the time has come to make transformative changes in how schools address students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Increasingly we are being asked about how to move forward and for assistance in doing so.

A major challenge at this time is to escape old ways of thinking. New directions are essential.

## MOVING FORWARD IN 2022

Moving forward at this time involves

- rethinking student and learning supports and the roles and functions of staff providing such supports
- approaching learning, behavior, and emotional problems as interrelated concerns
- using an umbrella concept, such as addressing barriers to learning, to unify the laundry list of programs and initiatives currently being implemented for that purpose (e.g., MTSS, Community Schools, integrated services, social emotional learning as a response to problems, response to intervention, trauma informed practices, suicide and substance use prevention, crisis response, special efforts to close the opportunity and achievement gaps, etc., etc., etc....).

Here are some first steps that can be taken to improve student/learning supports at school, district, regional, state, and even federal levels.

- (1) Establish a Learning Supports Leadership Team (See *What is a learning supports leadership team?*) The prototype described can be adapted to fit current settings and situations.
- (2) Have the team
  - (a) map existing student/learning support resources -- see *Mapping & Analyzing Learning Supports and An Aid for Initial Listing of Current Resources Used at a School for Addressing Barriers Learning and Teaching*
  - (b) analyze what's working, what needs strengthening, and critical gaps
  - (c) develop a set of prioritized recommendations for moving toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports
  - (d) present the recommendations for approval.
- (3) As soon as a set of proposed improvements are approved, establish a workgroup to develop a strategic action plan that details the who, what, and when of the steps forward.
- (4) Assign the Learning Supports Leadership Team to guide implementation of the strategic plan.

### Some General Resources from the Center to Aid in Moving Forward

> *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

> *Improving School Improvement*

> *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

all three can be accessed at

[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

> *Restructuring California Schools to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching in the COVID 19 Context and Beyond*

[https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/pb\\_adelman\\_nov2020.pdf](https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/pb_adelman_nov2020.pdf)

(At the end of 2020, we were invited to prepare this brief by the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). The content, of course, is applicable to other states.)

> *Evolving Community Schools and Transforming Student/Learning Supports*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/evolvecomm.pdf> (prepared in July 2021)

A host of other free resources to aid in the transformation process are available on the Center's website <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> – for example, see the *System Change Toolkit*

Note: The many reports, journal articles, chapters, and books related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and transforming student and learning supports that we have generated in recent years are catalogued at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/materials/resources.htm> .

Unfortunately, when interest in the work expanded, Scholastic decided to monetize the effort and charge for its coaching. (Another lesson learned: public-private collaborations may start altruistically, but private companies think about profits.) When this happened, we felt we had to end the collaboration. In its place, our Center offers free technical assistance and coaching if you need it -- see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf>

## Concluding Comments

We regularly hear from teachers and student/learning support staff that they feel overwhelmed by the increase in the number of students experiencing emotional, learning, and behavior problems. And more and more reports are emphasizing the heightened concern for students' mental health, especially in light of the pandemic and the heightened concerns about social injustices.

### **That's all to the good . . . BUT . . .**

The first impulse seems to be to think mainly about adding more mental health resources (e.g., staff). Also there's a big push to expand MH education and promote social emotional learning.

### **That's good . . . BUT . . .**

The nature and scope of need underscores how essential it is to move from a narrow focus on enhancing "school mental health" to embedding mental health concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Such a system involves transforming how schools play a better role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students and families.

The current widespread adoption of some form of a multitiered continuum of interventions (commonly designated as MTSS) is a partial step in the right direction. That framework recognizes that a full range of interventions encompasses a focus on promoting whole student healthy development, preventing problems, providing immediate assistance when problems appear, and ensuring assistance for serious and chronic special education concerns.

Moving forward, our research has clarified the need to reframe each level of intervention in ways that systematically weaves together school and community resources. Districts and schools also need to rethink how they organize the practices they use for learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Our research indicates that the various programs, services, initiatives, and strategies can be grouped into six domains of classroom and schoolwide student and learning support. Organizing the activity in this way clarifies what supports are needed in and out of the classroom to enable effective teaching and engaged student learning by addressing interfering factors.

Taken as a whole, our work offers

- a detailed blueprint for how student/learning supports can be transformed
- resources to make it happen, and
- invaluable examples and lessons learned to aid moving forward.

At the same time, we all know that major systemic changes are difficult to accomplish.

*But we also know that not meeting the challenge will maintain an unsatisfactory status quo.*

The current trend in improving student/learning supports and pursuing the expansion of school mental health involves tinkering in ways that result in changes that don't make a dent in reducing the opportunity and achievement gaps. Schools need a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that *embeds* a focus on a full range of mental health, psychosocial, and educational concerns. To enable such a major system change, school improvement policy must expand from a two- to a three-component framework and ensure that all three are fully integrated and pursued as primary components at schools.

For the title of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to be more than aspirational, equity of opportunity for student and school success must be enhanced. From this perspective we stress that equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights and that transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to promoting whole child development, advancing social justice, and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.

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

Center Staff:

*Howard Adelman, Co-Director  
Linda Taylor, Co-Director  
Perry Nelson, Coordinator  
. . . and a host of students*

### **INVITATION TO COMMENT AND SHARE**

Everyone has a stake in the future of public education, and this is a critical time for action.

Please send this resource along to others who may be interested.

Let us know what you think about what we have shared

AND send us information you have about any related work and lessons learned.

For anyone thinking about developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help.

Send all communications to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)