

Student and Learning Supports: Moving Forward*

With passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the shift to more local control is on the way. The new law dramatically replaces a maze of federal programs with a single “Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant” with the intent of providing states and districts with more flexibility in assisting students and families. It also stresses greater subgroup accountability and calls for adding at least one “nonacademic” accountability indicator. Such changes provide opportunities for state and local policy makers to substantially move student and learning supports in new directions.

This brief report discusses research and development relevant to transforming student and learning supports to enhance equity of opportunity. Specifically, it outlines a necessary shift in school improvement policy and provides a prototype for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable student and learning supports component to replace the existing fragmented and disorganized set of student and learning supports.

Current State of the Art

Legislative bodies regularly recognize and wrestle with matters such as bullying, school shootings, substance abuse, disconnected youth, and the many barriers arising from being raised in poverty, being a newly arrived immigrant, and being homeless. The result has been passage of a fragmented set of student and learning supports that tend to address barriers to learning and teaching in superficial ways (see Exhibit 1).

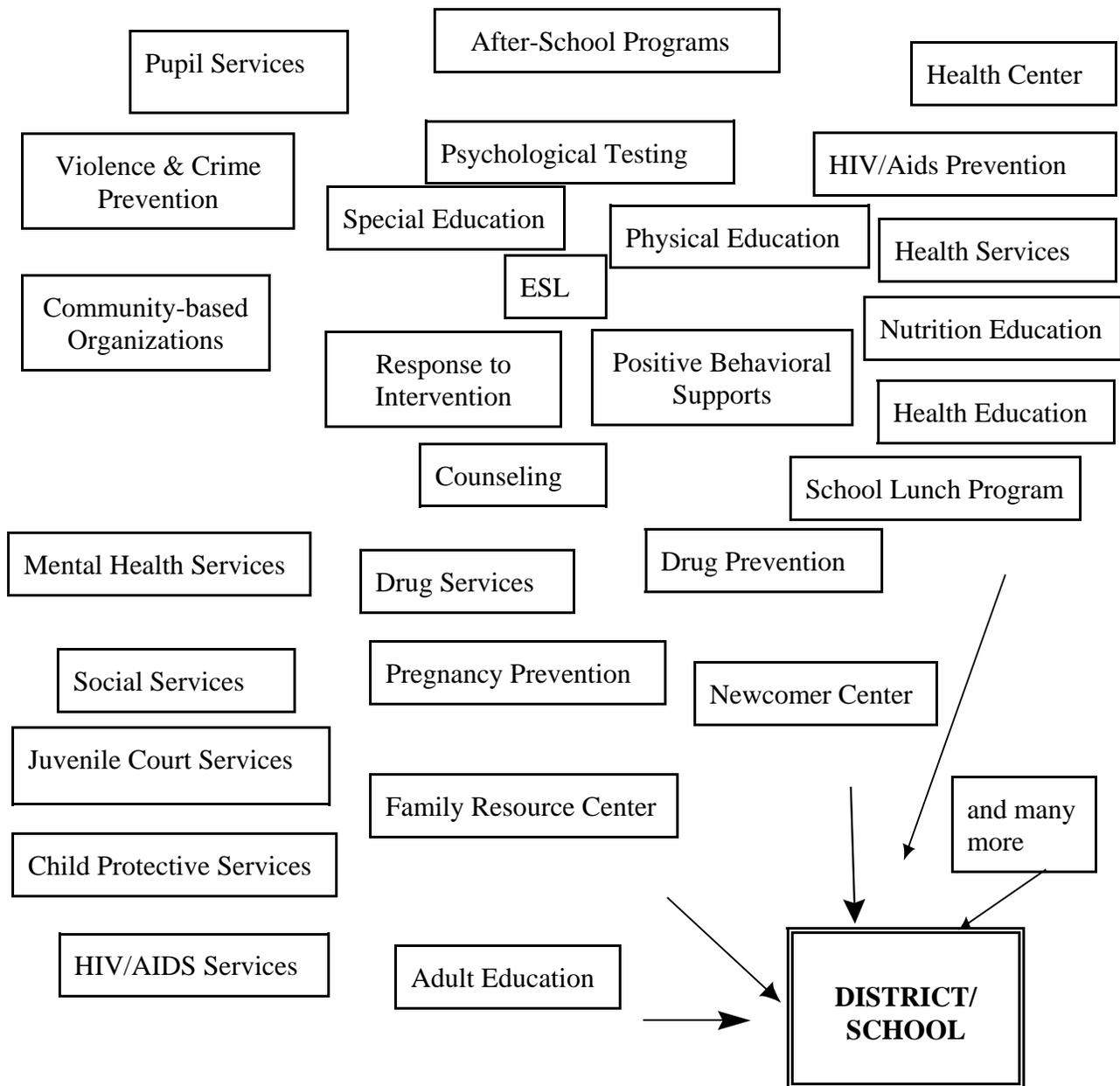
Schools differ, of course, in what learning and student supports they have; some have few; some have many. Some have connected with community services (e.g., health and social services, after-school programs). Given the sparsity of community services, however, agencies endeavoring to bring their services to schools usually must limit activity to enhancing supports at a couple of schools in a neighborhood.

Moreover, there often is not a good connection between community services and the work of the many school and district-based student support staff whose roles include preventing, intervening early, and treating students with learning, behavior, emotional, and physical problems. Such school-employed personnel include psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, dropout/graduation support staff, special educators, and others. When school and community efforts are poorly connected, community and school personnel may be working with the same students and families with little shared planning or ongoing communication. And there is almost no attention paid to systemic improvement.

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Exhibit 1.

Student and Learning Supports: Much Activity, Much Fragmentation!*



*Learning and student supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that aim at enabling all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school and beyond by directly addressing external and internal barriers to learning and teaching.

And while connecting school and community resources is desirable, community resources that directly address barriers to learning and teaching are sparse, especially in poor neighborhoods. Thus, it is ironic that some policy makers have developed the false impression that community resources are ready and able to meet the multifaceted needs of students and their families. In the struggle to balance tight school budgets, this impression has contributed to serious cuts related to student supports (e.g., districts laying off student support personnel). Such cuts further reduce the amount of resources available for schools to deal with problems interfering with student and school success.¹

Also ironic, given all the work on improving schools, is how little attention has been paid to rethinking student and learning supports. Our analyses suggest that this is the result of a long-standing marginalization in school improvement policy and practice of efforts to directly address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. This is seen in the minimal way student/learning supports are accounted for in school improvement planning.²

Because of the marginalization, the continuing trend is to establish student/learning supports through piecemeal policies and implement them in a fragmented and sometimes redundant manner. Then, when budgets tighten, many of these supports are among the first cut. All this contributes to a counterproductive job competition among student support staff and between these school personnel and community professionals who bring services to schools.

Given the marginalization, fragmentation, redundancy, and counterproductive competition related to student and learning supports, schools are not effectively playing their role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Systemic changes are imperative.

What Needs to be Done?

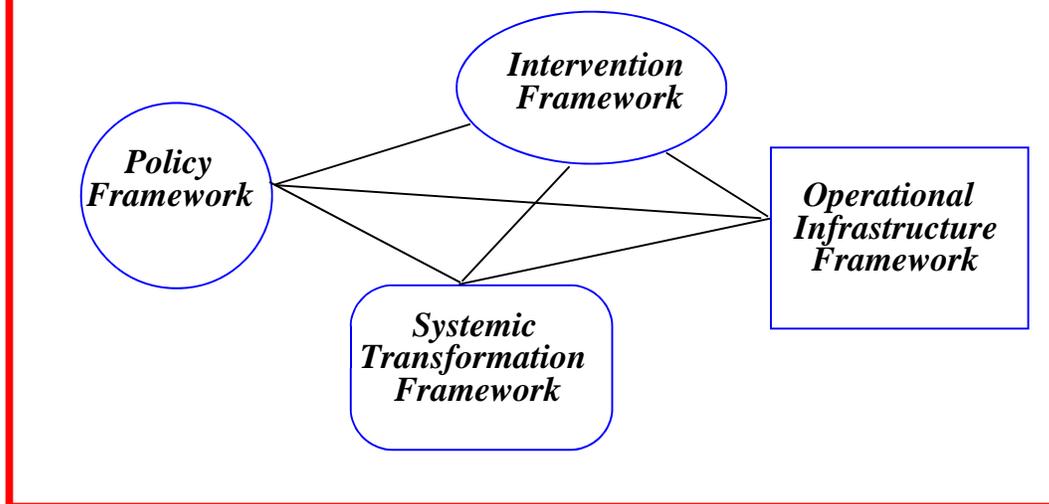
Tinkering with changes in how schools respond to learning, behavior, emotional, and physical problems has not proven effective on a large-scale. School improvement must encompass policy and planning that enables every school to replace the outdated patchwork of programs and services that have emerged for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

Effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability involves systemic transformation of student and learning supports. As illustrated in Exhibit 2, such transformation requires making major changes with respect to the following set of interconnected concerns:

- the *policy* framework for school improvement (expanding from a two- to a three-component framework to ensure that a student and learning supports component is fully woven in as primary and essential)
- the framework for student and learning support *interventions* (creating a unified and comprehensive system of supports in classrooms and school-wide)
- the *operational infrastructure* (ensuring effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching)
- the strategic approach to *systemic change* (ensuring effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability).

Research and development has produced prototype frameworks for each of these concerns, and the frameworks are being used by trailblazers across the country.³ This report focuses on the work related to expanding the policy framework and reframing student and learning supports.

Exhibit 3.
Fundamental and Interrelated Transformation Concerns



Reframing Policy to Directly Address Barriers to Teaching and Learning

Efforts to *transform* rather than just tinker with student and learning supports require an expansion of current school improvement policy. In most places, school improvement policy and practice is guided primarily by a two component framework (i.e., an instructional component and a management component). The result: all interventions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best. As already noted, this marginalization is an underlying and fundamental cause of the widely observed fragmentation and disorganization of student and learning supports.

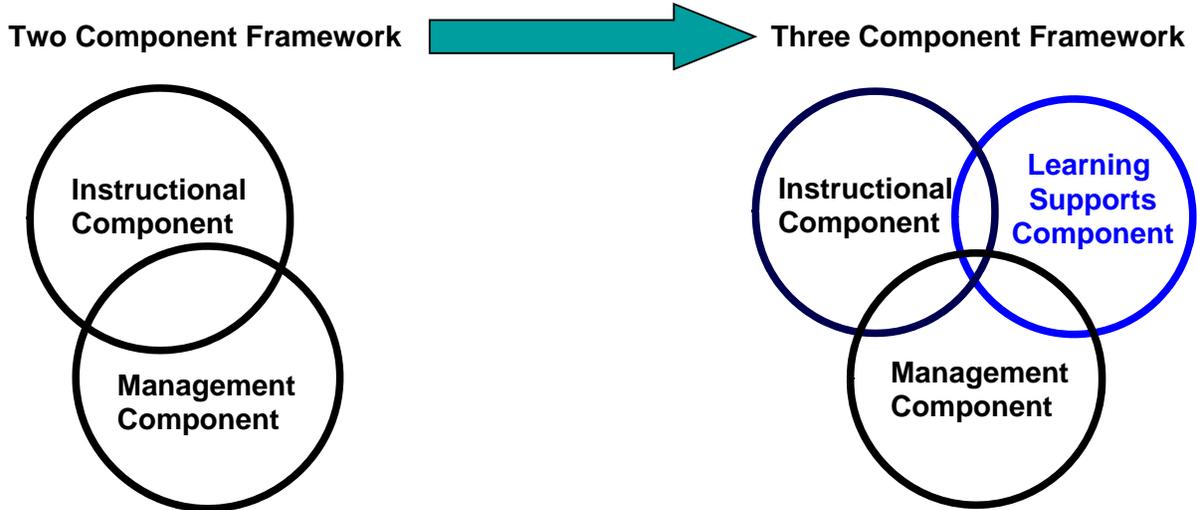
Expanding School Improvement Policy

Ending the disorganization and effectively weaving together whatever a school has with whatever a community is doing to confront barriers to equity of opportunity calls for establishing a three component school improvement framework. As illustrated in Exhibit 4, an expanded policy framework is intended to make efforts to *enable* learning by directly addressing barriers a *primary* commitment of school policy.

The type of policy expansion illustrated is underway.³ A large-scale example is the initiative in Alabama where the state education agency has adopted the three component policy framework with plans for statewide implementation. Fifty districts and approximately 300 principals are currently involved. The work in Alabama is facilitated by *Scholastic, Inc.* as part of that company's expansion beyond its focus mainly on enhancing literacy. Currently, Scholastic is integrating and fully embracing the need to help schools develop a comprehensive system of learning supports. (The company has just hired a senior vice president to move its new learning supports division forward.)

Exhibit 4. Expanded Policy Prototype:

Expanding school improvement policy and practice from a two to a three component model.



Those currently leading the way in transforming student and learning supports are doing so because they understand the wide range of factors that interfere with students connecting with good instruction. They recognize that too many teachers are confronted with a large proportion of students who are not motivated and ready to learn what is on the teaching agenda for the day.

About the term Learning Supports. States and districts are trending toward using the term “Learning Supports” to cover the range of school activity involved in addressing factors interfering with school success. Learning supports are defined as the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school by directly addressing barriers to learning and teaching. In the classroom and school-wide, such supports encompass efforts to reduce the overemphasis on using extrinsic reinforcers and enhance an emphasis on *intrinsic motivation* to promote engagement and re-engagement.

Learning supports are designed to (1) directly address interfering factors *and* (2) do so in a way that (re-)engages students in classroom instruction. Attention to both these matters is essential because, in general, interventions that do not ensure a student’s meaningful engagement in classroom learning are insufficient in sustaining student involvement, good behavior, and effective learning at school.

Rethinking Accountability and Adopting Learning Supports Standards

Because school improvement policy across the country is "standards-based" and accountability driven, expanding the prevailing accountability framework and establishing standards for learning supports are key facets in driving effective implementation of a three component policy.

About School Accountability. Accountability is a policy tool with extraordinary power to reshape schools – for good and for bad. As everyone involved in school improvement knows, for some time the only accountability indicators that really counted was achievement test scores. What such tests measure has been the be-all and end-all of what was attended to by many decision makers. This produced a growing disconnect between the realities of what it takes to improve academic performance and the direction in which many policy makers and school reformers led the public. The disconnect is especially evident in schools serving what often are referred to as “low wealth” families. While the new education act calls for the addition of at least one “nonacademic” accountability indicator, the move to a three component policy framework is intended to more comprehensively expand the framework for school accountability.⁴

About Standards for a Learning Supports Component. Current discussions about standards for school improvement have become locked into debates over the initiative for Common Core State Standards. This limited focus is another indicator of the type of disconnect from reality resulting from the prevailing two component policy framework. The move to a three component framework provides a focus on the need to complement curriculum and teaching standards with standards and related quality indicators for student/learning supports.⁵

While not easy, moving to a three component policy framework is essential to student success at school and beyond. Estimates indicate there are now over 15,000 school districts and over 90,000 schools in the USA. Given the scale of the task, enhancing equity of opportunity for students to succeed is a daunting goal and an unlikely one as long as school improvement policy essentially remains a two-component framework.

An expanded policy framework can be a major driving force for transforming how schools address the many overlapping problems they must deal with each day. The three-component framework also is crucial in advancing the agenda for equity of opportunity, closing the achievement gap, whole child development, and enhancing school climate.

Reframing Intervention for Student and Learning Support

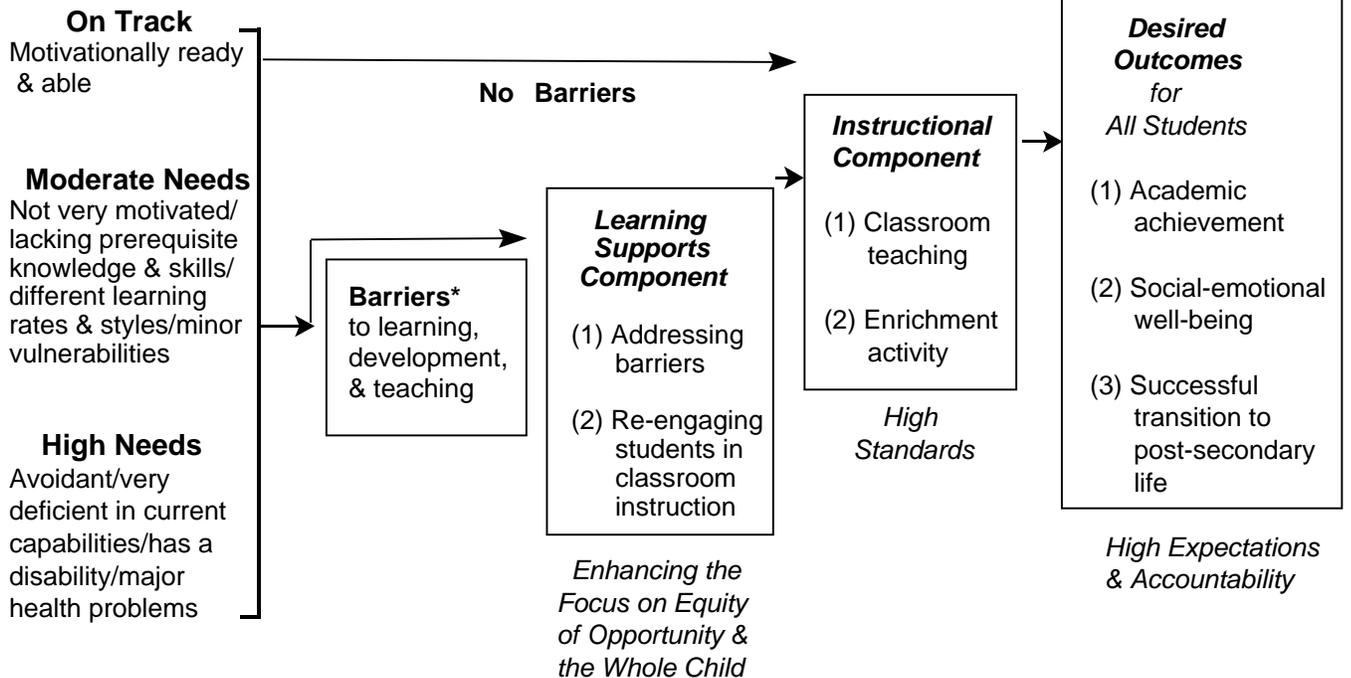
A learning supports component is established by coalescing existing student and learning supports into a cohesive unit and, over a period of several years, developing the component into a comprehensive intervention system that is fully interwoven into instructional efforts. Such a unified and comprehensive system is key to enabling *all* students to have an equal opportunity to learn at school and *all* teachers to teach effectively. Transforming student and learning supports into a unified component is especially important where large numbers of students are not succeeding.

As illustrated in Exhibit 5, a learning supports component encompasses classroom and school-wide approaches and is designed to enable students to get around the barriers *and* re-engage in classroom instruction.

Exhibit 5. A Learning Supports Component to Address Barriers and Re-engage Students in Classroom Instruction

Range of Learners

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



Intervention Prototype

A learning supports component is operationalized as a unified, comprehensive, equitable, and systemic approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. In keeping with public education and public health perspectives, interventions are designed to provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports to enable learning and engagement for *all* students and especially those experiencing behavior, learning, emotional, and physical problems. The interventions are meant to play out in the classroom and school-wide at every school and in every community. In promoting engagement and re-engagement, the interventions stress a reduced emphasis on using extrinsic reinforcers and an enhanced focus on intrinsic motivation as a process and outcome consideration.

While interventions are commonly framed in terms of tiers or levels, such a framework is an insufficient organizer. To escape the trend to generate laundry lists of programs and services at

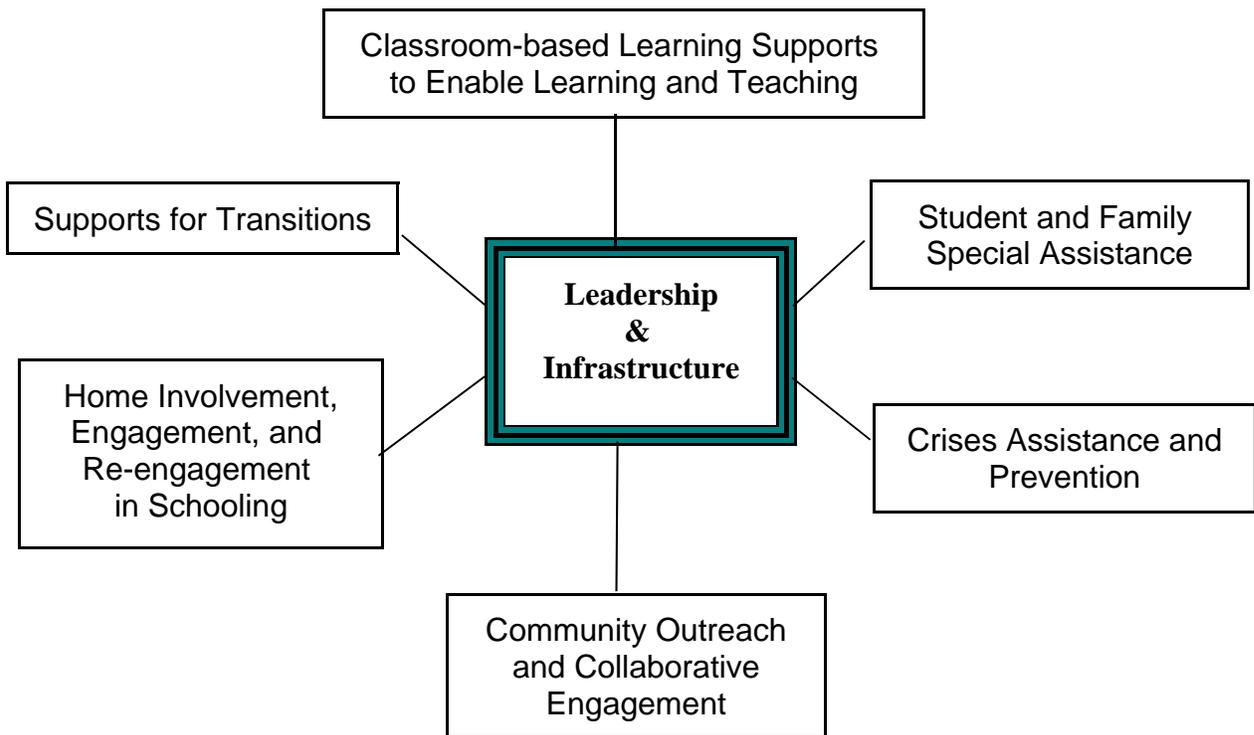
each level, it is necessary also to group them into a circumscribed set of arenas reflecting the *content purpose* of the activity. Thus, the intervention prototype developed by our Center has two facets:

- one organizes programs and services into a circumscribed set of *content arenas of activity*;
- the second conceptualizes levels of intervention as a full *continuum of integrated intervention subsystems* that interweave school-community-home resources.

Content Arenas of Activity. The first concern is providing a range of supports in the classroom and as necessary outside the classroom so that teachers can enable the learning of students who are not doing well. Research over many years stresses that the content of student and learning supports clusters usefully into six arenas. (We think of these arenas as the curriculum of learning supports.) As Exhibit 6 highlights⁶, the arenas encompass efforts to

- *enhance strategies in regular classroom to enable learning* (e.g., working collaboratively with other teachers and student support staff to ensure instruction is personalized with an emphasis on enhancing intrinsic motivation for all students and especially those manifesting mild-moderate learning and behavior problems; re-engaging those who have become disengaged from learning at school; 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 intervening)
- *support transitions* (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate the many hurdles encountered during school and grade changes, daily transitions, program transitions, accessing supports, and so forth)
- *increase home and school connections and engagement* (e.g., addressing barriers to home involvement, helping those in the home enhance supports for their children, strengthening home and school communication, increasing home support of the school)
- *increase community involvement and collaborative engagement* (e.g., outreach to develop greater community connection and support from a wide range of entities, including enhanced use of volunteers and other community resources, establishing a school-community collaborative)
- *respond to, and where feasible, prevent school and personal crises* (e.g., preparing for emergencies, implementing plans when an event occurs, countering the impact of traumatic events, implementing prevention strategies; creating a caring and safe learning environment)
- *facilitate student and family access to special assistance* (including specialized services on- and off-campus) as needed

Exhibit 6.
Prototype for Six Content Arenas



Note: All categorical programs can be integrated into these six content arenas. Examples of initiatives, programs, and services that can be unified into a comprehensive system of learning supports include positive behavioral supports, programs for safe and drug free schools, programs for social and emotional development and learning, full service community schools and family resource and school based health centers, CDC's Coordinated School Health Program, bi-lingual, cultural, and other diversity programs, compensatory education programs, special education programs, mandates stemming from education legislation, and so forth.

Continuum of Integrated Subsystems: Expanding the 3-tier Model. Beyond intervention content, a fundamental second facet of a unified and comprehensive system or learning supports is an integrated continuum of interventions that strives to

- promote healthy development and prevent problems
- intervene early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible
- assist with chronic and severe problems.

As graphically portrayed in Exhibit 7, (a) each level represents a subsystem, (b) the three subsystems overlap, and (c) all three require integration into an overall system that encompasses school and community resources. Note that this framework expands thinking beyond the three tier pyramid and related Multi-Tiered Systems of Support that many schools currently use.

Exhibit 7.
Intervention Continuum: Interconnected Subsystems

School Resources
 (facilities, stakeholders,
 programs, services)



Community Resources
 (facilities, stakeholders,
 programs, services)

Examples:

- General health education
- Social and emotional learning programs
- Recreation programs
- Enrichment programs
- Support for transitions
- Conflict resolution
- Home involvement
- Drug and alcohol education

- Drug counseling
- Pregnancy prevention
- Violence prevention
- Gang intervention
- Dropout prevention
- Suicide prevention
- Learning/behavior accommodations & response to intervention
- Work programs

- Special education for learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and other health impairments

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)

Examples:

- Recreation & Enrichment
- Public health & safety programs
- Prenatal care
- Home visiting programs
- Immunizations
- Child abuse education
- Internships & community service programs
- Economic development

- Early identification to treat health problems
- Monitoring health problems
- Short-term counseling
- Foster placem’t/group homes
- Family support
- Shelter, food, clothing
- Job programs

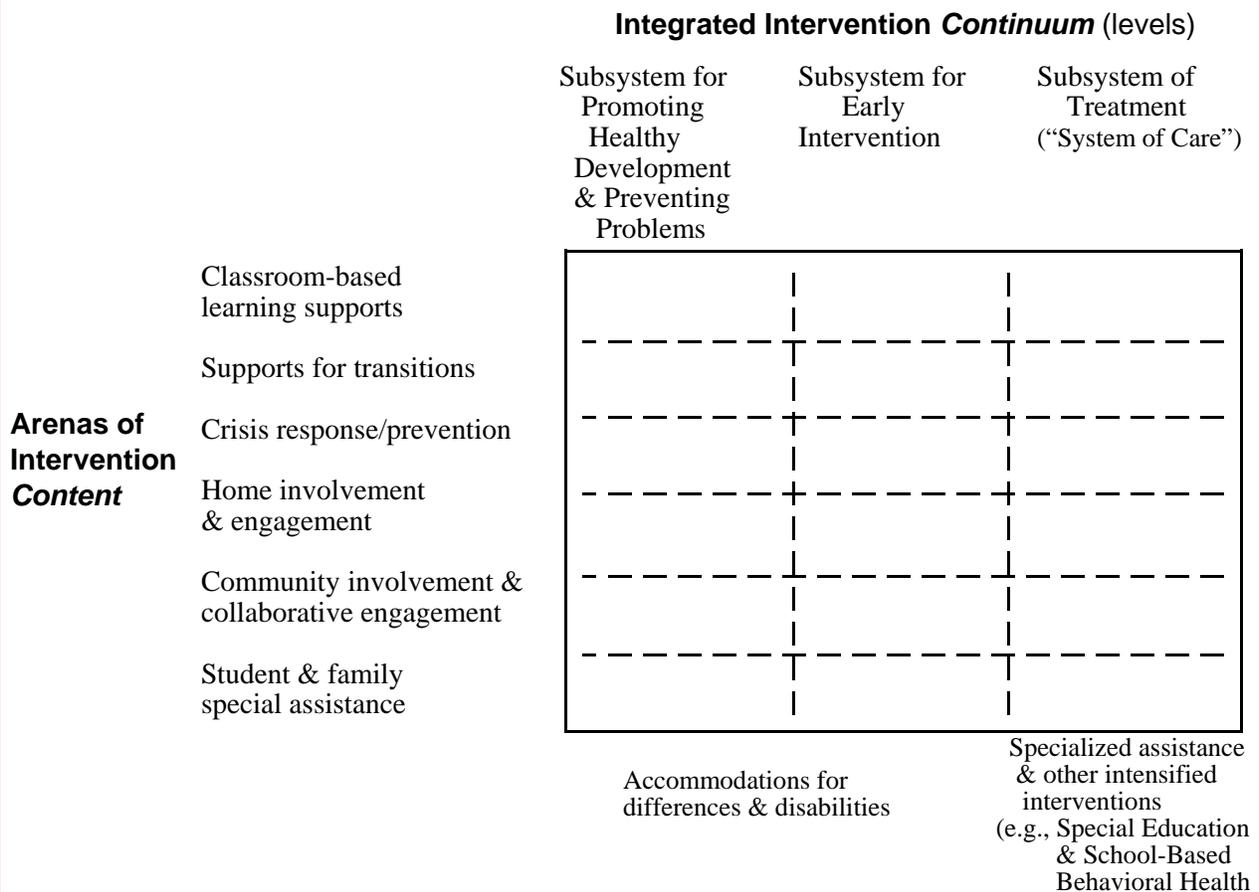
- Emergency/crisis treatment
- Family preservation
- Long-term therapy
- Probation/incarceration
- Disabilities programs
- Hospitalization
- Drug treatment

As noted, the prevailing formulation of the intervention continuum in education mainly stresses a multi-tiered model, especially in the context of turning Response to Intervention (RtI) and positive behavioral supports (e.,g., PBIS) into school-wide practices.

The simplicity of the tiered presentation as widely adopted is appealing and helps underscore differences in levels of intervention. However, focusing simply on levels of intervention, while essential, is insufficient. Three basic concerns about such a formulation are that it mainly stresses levels of intensity, does not address the problem of systematically connecting interventions that fall into and across each level, and does not address the need to connect school and community interventions. As a result, it has done little to promote the type of intervention framework that policy and practice analyses indicate is needed to guide schools in transforming student and learning supports into a unified and comprehensive system.

As illustrated in Exhibit 8, the six *arenas* and the *continuum* constitute the prototype intervention framework for a comprehensive system of learning supports. Such a framework is meant to guide and unify school improvement planning related to developing a learning supports component. The matrix provides a framework for mapping what is in place and analyzing gaps.

Exhibit 8.
Intervention Prototype Framework for a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports



Concluding Comments

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

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

In doing all this, a learning supports component is meant to enhance equity of opportunity and whole child development and play a major role in improving student and school performance. Effective implementation also should foster productive school-community relationships and promote a positive school climate.

Over a decade ago, Dennie Wolf, then director of the Opportunity and Accountability Initiative at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, stated:

“Clearly, we know how to raise standards. However, we are less clear on how to support students in rising to meet those standards” Then, she asked: “Having invested heavily in ‘raising’ both the standards and the stakes, what investment are we willing to make to support students in ‘rising’ to meet those standards?”

Ultimately, the answer to that question will affect not only individuals with learning, behavior, emotional, and physical problems but the entire society.

It is time for school improvement to encompass policy and planning that enables every school to replace its outdated patchwork of programs and services used in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. If every student is to succeed, states and districts must use the new education act as a catalyst for transforming student and learning supports.

Notes

¹ *Making the Grade: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports* (2014). Child Trends. <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-07ISSPaper.pdf>

Developing Structure and Process Standards for Systems of Care Serving Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs (2014). Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs (AMCHP) and the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health.

<http://cshcn.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Developing-Structure-and-Process-Standards-White-Paper.pdf>

CDC’s Coordinated School Health Program. <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/cshp/schools.htm>

² *Policies and Practices for Addressing Barriers to learning: Current Status and New Directions* (1996). Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools.

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

³ See examples and lessons learned in *Where's it Happening?* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/nind7.htm> .

⁴ For an accountability prototype that focuses not only on achievement, but on personal and social development and on improvements that directly address barriers to learning and teaching, see Appendix A “Expanding the Accountability Framework for Schools” in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf>

⁵ For a prototype of standards and indicators for a learning supports component, see *Standards & Quality Indicators for an Enabling or Learning Supports Component* (2014). Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/qualityindicators.pdf>.

⁶ A brief discussion of and examples related to each of the six content arenas is offered in Part II of *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf>