Blueprints for Education Reform: Have You Analyzed the Architects' Vision?

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Abstract

Blueprints for education reform have become trendy. Over the last few year, President Obama, governors, chief state school officers, local superintendents' associations, policy institutes, foundations, and business leaders have formulated such documents to guide school improvement. This brief highlights:

I.   The focus of current blueprints
II. What's missing in most of the plans
III. An expanded vision that directly addresses barriers to learning and teaching
IV. Cautions that
     >More is involved than improving *coordination* and *services*
     >More is involved than specifying adoption of a community school approach

Blueprints for Education Reform:
Have You Analyzed the Architects' Vision?

Blueprints for education reform have become trendy. In 2010, anticipating reauthorization of the ESEA, President Obama offered his administration's *Blueprint for Reform* (see http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf). Over the last few year, governors, chief state school officers, local superintendents' associations, policy institutes, foundations, and business leaders have been offering their own blueprints (e.g., for California, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oregon, Virginia). On April 30, 2012, N.Y. Gov. Cuomo joined the trend, establishing an education reform commission tasked with building a blueprint for making the state's system "a national and even global model" (see http://www.governor.ny.gov/press/4302012EducationReformCommission).

This brief highlights the focus of current blueprints and underscores how they fundamentally ignore or marginalize efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching. To correct the deficit, an expanded policy and practice framework for school improvement is described. It moves the vision for education reform from a two- to a three component model. A prototype for operationalizing the new component also is outlined. Finally we caution that such a component involves much more than better coordinating and enhancing services or simply adopting the concept of a community school.

What's the Focus of Current Blueprints?
Analysis of prominent blueprints finds considerable overlap and a great deal to commend. Naturally, they all couch the need for reform in terms that suggest benefits both for society and for students. Blueprint introductions commonly refer to ensuring students are college and career ready and are prepared to compete in the global marketplace.

In general, there is an emphasis on improving:

- **Personnel** (e.g., enhanced teacher and principal recruitment, performance, and evaluation – including rewards for effectiveness and increased accountability for institutions that prepare education personnel)

- **Finance** (e.g., enhanced and equitable distribution of funding for schools; reformed salary structure; zero based budgeting; tax credits as an incentive to encourage private sector investment)

- **Standards** (e.g., high expectations and standards for students; improved accountability measures for schools – using a simplified method for grading schools)

- **Research-Base Practice** (e.g., greater emphasis on evidence-based practices)

- **Technology** (e.g., more online and digital learning; enhanced technology skills for students)

- **Stakeholder Involvement** (e.g., more parent, family, youth, and community engagement in education)

- **Charters** (e.g., in some blueprints, charter schools and districts are prominently advocated).

In addition, blueprints that focus on secondary schools emphasize raising high school graduation rates and increasing readiness for succeeding in post-secondary education and careers. Those focusing on school readiness reflect the increasing policy emphasis on early monitoring to identify children who are significantly behind in reading skills; some of these call for third grade retention until the skills of these students are appropriate for performing in fourth grade. (Note: Various degrees of intervention are delineated for those who are behind, and some exemptions are cited, such as for disabilities, limited English proficiency.)
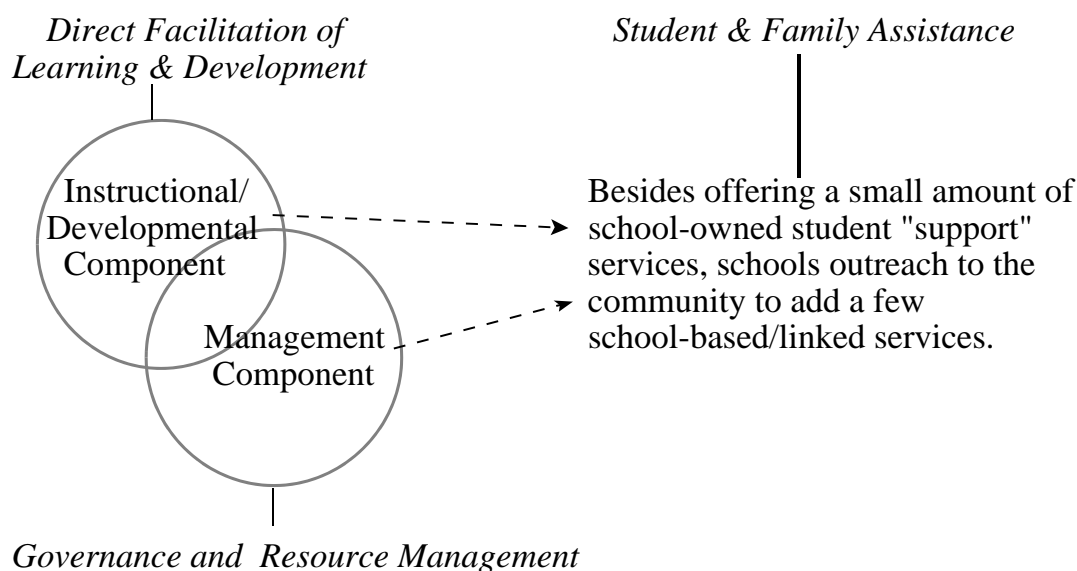
What's Missing in Most Plans?

Given the differences in political agenda, no one should be surprised that the different groups of architects guiding development of blueprints vary in their vision for the future of public education. A blueprint only spells out what a particular group of architects wants built. And so, the plans detailed in blueprints across the country often conflict with each other.

Our concern here is not with the conflicts. Others have and will continue to analyze such differences. Rather, our focus is on what's not been well envisioned. Specifically, even though most blueprints acknowledge that significant numbers of students are not functioning at grade level, our analyses find that few reflect a well-developed *vision* for addressing factors interfering with student progress and well-being. As a consequence, few provide a detailed and comprehensive plan for directly addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

Why is this the case? As illustrated in Exhibit 1, for the most part, the visions guiding blueprints for education reform remain mired down in the two component framework for improving schools that has long dominated educational thinking. (See the appended list of a sample of Center references supporting this analysis.) That is, anything besides instruction and management planning is marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. This was clearly stated in a blueprint we reviewed that recognized the need to improve low-income students access to quality programs, BUT *only after other proposed improvements are in place*.

Exhibit 1. The Prevailing Two-component Framework for School Improvement*

Direct Facilitation of
Learning & Development

Student & Family Assistance

Instructional/
Developmental
Component

Management
Component

Besides offering a small amount of
school-owned student "support"
services, schools outreach to the
community to add a few
school-based/linked services.

Governance and Resource Management

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*Most school improvement efforts primarily focus on enhancing instruction
and school management/governance. Because of concerns for school safety
and greater family and community involvement, schools also embed a few
scattered programs and services to address these matters.

No one argues against the necessity of good instruction or good school
management. The problem with the current state of affairs is that improved
instruction alone does not address many barriers to learning and teaching.
And, analyses indicate that the student "support" programs and services that
schools do add to address such barriers are too limited, fragmented, and
marginalized.

It is commonplace for those staffing the student and learning support
interventions to be organized and function in relative isolation of each other
and other stakeholders. Furthermore, a great proportion of existing student
and learning supports are oriented to discrete problems and over-rely on
specialized services for individuals and small groups.

All this not only is expensive in terms of direct costs, it produces
inappropriate redundancy and counter-productive competition and works
against developing cohesive approaches to maximize results. Continued
limited efficacy and cost effectiveness seem inevitable in the absence of
significant transformation in school improvement policy and practice.

Be clear. We are not saying blueprints ignore the reality of students who need education supports. As with President Obama's blueprint, some even include a few details about enhancing "education supports." Thus, concern about addressing barriers to learning is not totally ignored, but the way "education support" is discussed almost always moves the concern right back into a marginalized status.

For example, when education support is discussed, the emphasis usually is on improving coordination and finding ways to provide a few more health and human services. Sometimes this focus is on school personnel; more often, the vision is to link with community services and, as feasible collocate community providers on campus. The reality, of course, is that in too many schools the number of students experiencing behavior, learning, and emotional problems far outstrips the possibility of providing more than a small percentage with such services (even if this were the best way to address the many factors interfering with their school performance).

The currently marginalized status of education supports inevitably limits how *schools* and *communities* enhance equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and in their future lives.

Why do you say education reform is a paradox.

Because everyone supposedly is going down the same road ... *but* they are going in different directions!
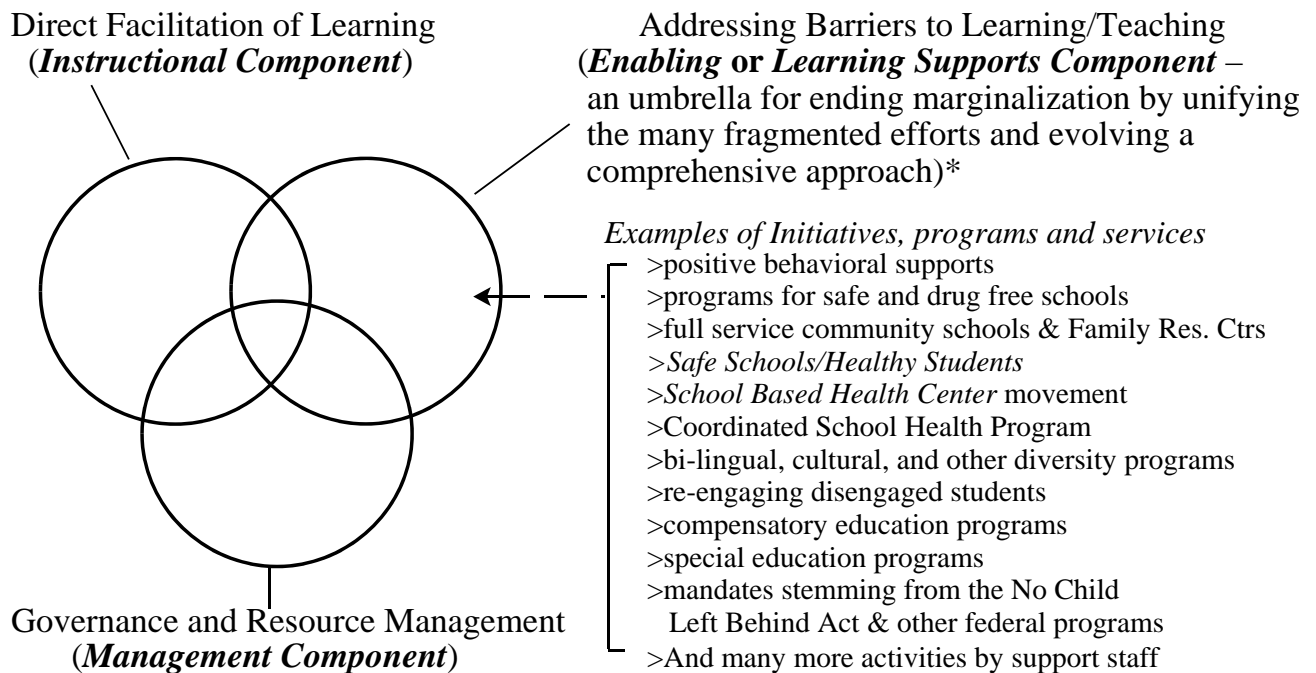
**An Expanded
Vision that
Directly
Addresses
Barriers
to Learning
and Teaching**

For many youngsters, student and learning supports are essential to (re)engaging them at school and enabling classroom learning. And, the straight forward psychometric reality is that in schools where a large proportion of students encounter major barriers to learning, test score averages are unlikely to increase adequately until barriers to learning and teaching are effectively addressed.

Given all this, school policy makers and administrators must envision a dedicated component for addressing barriers and re-engaging disconnected students as essential to enabling equity of opportunity to learn at school. Based on such a vision, blueprints must then detail development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. Properly designed, such a system can play a key role in reducing student (and teacher) dropout rates and narrowing the achievement gap.

The time is long overdue for escaping old ways of thinking about education reform in general and student and learning supports in particular. Leaders at all levels need to move school improvement efforts in substantively new directions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The foundation for doing so involves adopting a three component conceptual framework to guide development of a comprehensive enabling or learning supports component at every school. Such a policy framework is illustrated in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. A Three Component Policy Umbrella for School Improvement Planning

Direct Facilitation of Learning
(***Instructional Component***)

Addressing Barriers to Learning/Teaching
(***Enabling** or **Learning Supports Component*** – an umbrella for ending marginalization by unifying the many fragmented efforts and evolving a comprehensive approach)*

Examples of Initiatives, programs and services
>positive behavioral supports
>programs for safe and drug free schools
>full service community schools & Family Res. Ctrs
>*Safe Schools/Healthy Students*
>*School Based Health Center* movement
>Coordinated School Health Program
>bi-lingual, cultural, and other diversity programs
>re-engaging disengaged students
>compensatory education programs
>special education programs
>mandates stemming from the No Child
  Left Behind Act & other federal programs
>And many more activities by support staff

Governance and Resource Management
(***Management Component***)

*Comprehensive approaches to student and learning supports involve much more than enhancing availability and access to health and social services or limiting the focus to any other piecemeal and ad hoc initiatives for addressing barriers to learning, development, and teaching.

Prototypically, operationalization of the third component requires *system transformation* within and across a *continuum of interventions* and organization of interventions into content arenas. The continuum encompasses integrated *subsystems* for

> (a) promoting healthy development & preventing problems,

> (b) responding as early after problem onset as is feasible, and

> (c) providing for those whose serious, pervasive, and chronic problems require intensive assistance and accommodation.

Just as efforts to enhance instruction emphasize well delineated and integrated curriculum content, so must efforts to address external and internal factors that interfere with students engaging effectively with that curriculum. At schools, the content (or curriculum) for addressing a full range of interfering factors can be coalesced into six classroom and school-wide arenas. These focus on:

*Blueprints need
to be analyzed
from the
perspective
of how well
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addresses
barriers to
learning and
teaching & the
re-engagment
of disconnected
students*

> (1) *enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning* (e.g., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems)

> (2) *supporting transitions* (i.e., assisting students/families/staff in negotiating school and grade changes and many other transitions)

> (3) *increasing home and school connections*

> (4) *responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises*

> (5) *increasing community involvement and support* (outreaching to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)

> (6) *facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.*

The complexity of factors interfering with learning, development, and teaching underscore the need to coalesce efforts to address the variety of factors that interfere with a school accomplishing its mission. A number of institutional indicators and evidence from pioneering work on moving in new directions to enhance student and learning supports all herald a paradigm shift supporting development of a *comprehensive system* encompassing the scope and content outlined above and illustrated in Exhibit 3. The matrix integrates the continuum of interventions with the content of student support and provides a planning tool to guide school improvement in clarifying where current and proposed activity fits and what is missing.

Exhibit 3. Combined Continuum and Content Arenas: Framework for a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports (an Enabling Component)*

Levels of Intervention

	Subsystems for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	Subsystems for Early Intervention (Early after problem onset)	Subsystems of Care
Intervention Content Arenas			
Classroom-Focused Enabling			
Crisis/ Emergency Assistance & Prevention			
Support for transitions			
Home Involvement in Schooling			
Community Outreach/ Volunteers			
Student and Family Assistance			

Accommodations for differences & disabilities

Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., Special Education & School-Based Behavioral Health)

*Note: Various venues, concepts, and initiatives will fit into several cells of the matrix. Examples include venues such as day care centers, preschools, family centers, and school-based health centers, concepts such as social and emotional learning and development, and initiatives such as positive behavior support, response to interventions, and the coordinated school health program. Most of the work of the considerable variety of personnel who provide student supports also fits into one or more cells.

Work related to trailblazing initiatives around the country designed to develop an innovative *system of learning supports* is providing realistic and cost-effective guidance for operationalizing the component.* Their initial emphasis is on

- rethinking and coalescing existing student and learning support programs, services and personnel in order to develop a unified and comprehensive system

- reworking operational infrastructure to weave together different funding streams, reduce redundancy, and redeploy available resources at school and from the community.

As the work progresses, it entails:

- unifying all direct efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching at a school – starting with rethinking and restructuring the work of district/ school-funded student and learning support professionals

- 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.

These systemic changes are especially essential in schools that desperately need to improve equity of opportunity. And the timing is critical given the lack of balance in cutbacks and because of the inadequacy of prevailing ideas for using whatever resources are left for addressing the many problems undermining student outcomes.

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*Pioneering initiatives are moving to develop a unified and comprehensive enabling/learning supports component as a fundamental function in their school improvement plans – see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm

These initiatives are pushing beyond individual and small group services and ideas such as linking with and collocating agency resources and enhancing coordination. No one denies that such strategies have a place. But the need is for unifying and reconceiving supports and fully integrating them with direct instructional and management efforts to better meet the needs of all students.

Those blueprints that do mention improving education supports have a tendency to focus mostly on enhancing coordination and linking with community services. This tendency is being exacerbated by the economic downturn. The irony of course is that there is less to coordinate and link as programs, services, and personnel needed to support young people are cut-back. But the key concern is that such an emphasis does not represent a vision for developing a unified and comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

With this in mind, some cautions are in order.

More is Involved than Improving *Coordination* **and** *Services*

Comprehensive means more than coordination. Those who think this is simply a matter of improving coordination of existing programs, services, and personnel need to delve deeper. While coordination certainly is part of the picture, the essence of the necessary transformation involves a major rethinking of student and learning supports. This calls for (1) integrating existing school resources into an enabling/learning supports component, (2) integrating the component fully into school improvement planning, and (3) integrating with community resources to fill gaps in the component. With this accomplished, the concern then becomes that of ensuring coordinated implementation within and across schools and with the community.

Coordination is not *Integration*

Dictionary definitions clarify the distinction between coordination and integration:

"***Coordinate:*** to act in harmonious combination, to work together"

"***Integrate:*** to bring together or incorporate parts into a whole;
to combine into one unified system"

Given this distinction, it seems clear that enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school involves much more than coordinating interventions and linking with and collocating agency resources. The critical need is for integrating all the resources, people, and programs focused on enabling learning into a unified system to more effectively address barriers and re-engage students to enable school learning.

More is Involved than Specifying Adoption of a Community School Approach

Some blueprints stress that schools should be encouraged to adopt a community school approach. *We love the idea of a Comprehensive Community School,* BUT we continue to be worried about how people understand what that is.

It is well to remember there is great variability among what are called "Community Schools." In particular, it is essential to differentiate those that are mainly interested in enhancing connections with community agencies from those committed to a vision for developing a comprehensive school-family-community collaborative. It is the latter that have the greatest potential for addressing the whole child and for doing so in ways that strengthen families, schools, and neighborhoods.

Blueprints and federal and state initiatives focusing primarily on linking community services to schools collude with tendencies to downplay the role of existing school and other community and family resources. They also contribute to perpetuation of approaches that overemphasize individually prescribed services, further the fragmentation of interventions, and underutilize the human and social capital indigenous to every neighborhood.

All this can interfere with developing the type of unified and comprehensive system needed to effectively address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. (For more on this, see the appended sample of Center resources).

Concluding Comments

Many years ago, a Carnegie Task Force on Education made the point as follows:

School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students.

However,

when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.

As blueprints for education reform are formulated, it is time and it is essential to meet the challenge by detailing a vision for a unifying and comprehensive focus on addressing barriers to learning and re-engaging disconnected students.

At federal, state, and regional levels, it is time and it is essential for education agencies to reorganize student and learning supports into a cohesive unit and provide guidance and capacity building support for districts to build a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated system of learning supports.

At the district and school level, it is time and it is essential 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 and it is essential to fundamentally
rethink student and learning supports.

Sample of Center Analyses that Support Expanding Current Blueprints

Policy Analyses

School Improvement Planning: What's Missing?
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolimprovement/whatsmissing.pdf

Moving Toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: The Next Evolutionary Stage in School Improvement Policy and Practice –
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/paradigmshift.pdf

Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching –
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf

Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports –
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf

Understanding Community Schools as Collaboratives for System Building to Address Barriers and Promote Well-Being – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/communitycollab.pdf

Pursuing Promise Neighborhoods: With or Without the Grant Program –
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/purpromneig.pdf

Race to the Top Applications for School Districts –
  http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rttd.pdf

Transforming School Improvement to Develop a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: What District Superintendents Say They Need to Move Forward –
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/superintendentssay.pdf

Books about the Third Component written by the Center Co-Directors

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006). *The School Leader's Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2006).*The Implementation Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2010). *Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2008). *Rebuilding for Learning:Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching and Re-engaging Students.* New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.

Pioneers Initiating the Third Component

Where's It Happening? Trailblazing and Pioneering Initiatives
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm