Improving Schools, Engaging Students

*Center Policy Notes**

Integrated Student Supports and Equity:
What's Not Being Discussed?

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Abstract

Connecting school, home, and community resources is essential to the well-being of children and youth and to enhancing equity of opportunity for them to succeed at school and beyond. With this in mind, many initiatives and policy reports have focused on addressing the widespread fragmentation of supports for families and their children. Considerable policy emphasis has centered on the notion of integrated student supports. While most of the discussion of integrated student supports is well-intentioned, the examples most frequently cited have little chance of enhancing equity of opportunity for students across the country. Moreover, as practiced, serious unintended negative consequences have been observed. This set of policy notes stresses the need and directions for moving forward.

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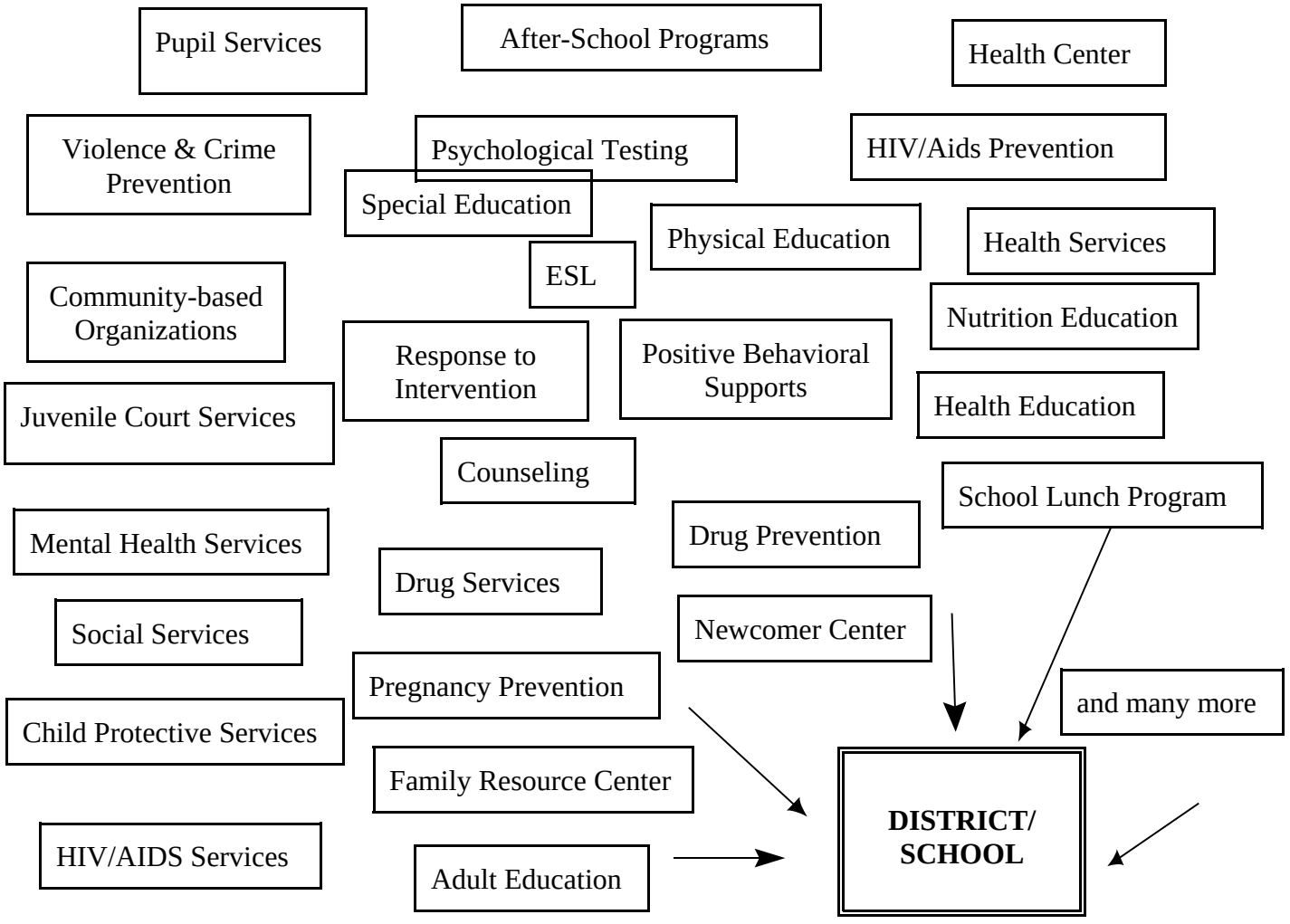
> From an intervention perspective, it is evident that dealing with multiple, interrelated concerns, such as poverty, child development, education, violence, crime, safety, housing, and employment requires multiple and interrelated solutions. Interrelated solutions require various forms of collaboration. Thus, schools, homes, and communities must work together in pursuing shared goals related to the general well-being of the young and society.
>
> Adelman & Taylor (2008)

Those who want to better coordinate and integrate supports for students have long been concerned about the poor linkages between communities and schools and within schools. (Early concern was seen in the human-service integration movement of the 1960s .)

A Graphic Illustration of the Problem



A great deal of activity, but interventions are fragmented!

How has this Long-standing Problem been Addressed?

Over the last 25 years, the fragmentation of community and school practices for supporting families and their children has been the focus of many initiatives and policy reports. These have generated terms such as school-linked services, integrated services, one-stop shopping, wraparound services, seamless service delivery, coordinated school health, co-location of services, integrated student supports, full-service schools, systems of care, and more. Recent policy-oriented reports have come from *Child Trends* using the term "Integrated Student Supports"[1] and from the *Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs (AMCHP) and the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health* focusing on "Systems of Care".[2] And, the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)* has revamped their "Coordinated School Health Program".[3]

All this activity underscores concern about the widespread fragmentation of school and community interventions. It also reflects an appreciation that connecting school-home-community is essential to the well-being of children and youth and to enhancing equity of opportunity for them to succeed at school and beyond. Such links are seen as a way to provide more support for schools, students, and families. For agencies, connection with schools also is seen as providing better access to families and their children, promoting greater engagement, and enhancing opportunities for having an impact on hard-to-reach clients. Moreover, the hope is that integrated interventions will increase the pool of resources for student and learning supports and address disparities.

It is noteworthy that the recent Child Trends' report adopts the term integrated student supports (ISS) and defines it as

> "an emerging field of practice that aims to address persistent disparities in educational achievement and attainment. ISS is a school-based approach to promoting students academic achievement and educational attainment by coordinating a seamless system of wraparound supports for the child, the family, and schools, to target students academic and non-academic barriers to learning."

We have a high regard for Child Trends, and clearly, the Child Trends' report is well-meaning and was designed with a limited focus. And, certainly, all the programs the report reviewed are interesting. However, with respect to integrated student supports, the report does not clarify that these programs have many other facets and exceptional resources, and, more importantly, the programs do little to address fundamental concerns that arise in efforts to *integrate school, family, and community resources into school improvement policy and practice.* Addressing such concerns is essential to enhancing equity of opportunity for students to succeed at school and beyond.

In general, the prevailing emphasis of much of the activity referred to as integrated student supports is on connecting *community* services to schools (e.g., health and social services, after-school programs). However, given the sparsity of community services, this usually means enhancing linkages and co-locating a few services to a couple of school campuses. This benefits the chosen schools but reduces resources available to other schools in the community, thereby increasing inequity.

In some instances, efforts are made to coordinate -- *but not integrate* -- with the work of the many school and district-based student support staff whose roles include preventing, intervening early, and treating students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Such school employed personnel include psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, dropout/graduation support staff, special educators, and others. Failure to integrate with school support staff is reflected in how often community and school personnel work with the same students and families with little shared planning or ongoing communication.

A well-intentioned Side-show

While integrating student supports is a well-intentioned endeavor, the examples most frequently cited are a side show and have little chance of enhancing equity of opportunity for students across the country. Moreover, as practiced, they can have serious unintended negative consequences.

We use the term *side-show* to underscore that most of the widely touted projects are built and are operating on an exceptional resource base and can't be taken to scale across a school district. (And since scalability is an essential facet of equity, it is well to keep in mind that there are over 15,000 school districts and over 90,000 schools in the USA.)

As to unintended negative consequences, our experience is that special projects often increase fragmentation and marginalization and engender counterproductive competition for sparse resources related to student and learning supports. This happens because of differences in the institutional mission, accountabilities, and tight resources of community agencies and schools. Moreover, some policy makers have developed the false impression that community resources are ready and able to meet all the support needs of students and their families. This impression already has contributed to serious cuts related to student supports (e.g., districts laying off student support personnel) in the struggle to balance tight school budgets. Such cuts further reduce the pool of resources available for improving equity of opportunity.

School Improvement Policy is the Culprit

Prevailing discussions focusing on integrated student supports fail to deal with an underlying and fundamental cause of the fragmentation, and disorganization; namely, that all efforts to connect school-home-community are *marginalized* in current school improvement policy.

Our Center's analyses indicate that school improvement policy and practice is primarily guided by a two component framework (i.e., an instructional component and a management component). As a result, all interventions for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students are given secondary consideration at best.

Advocacy for ending the disorganization and effectively weaving together whatever a school has with whatever a community is doing to confront barriers to equity of opportunity should be directed at establishing a three component school improvement framework. As illustrated below, the expanded policy framework is intended to ensure a *primary* commitment to addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

*States and districts are trending toward using the term *Learning Supports* for efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

In operationalizing the third component, ending the disorganization involves:

- integrating the third component fully into every school's improvement plan
- unifying at schools, districts, and state departments of education the many separate organizational and operational infrastructure entities that have been built up around the piecemeal and ad hoc establishment of initiatives, programs, and practices
- facilitating development of an effective operational infrastructure for weaving together school, home, and community resources
- using the reworked operational infrastructures to develop a unified and comprehensive school-community system of student and learning supports.

Because all this amounts to a fundamental *transformation* of current practices, policy also must ensure there is a well-designed and resourced process to facilitate implementation of essential systemic changes.

It's Time to Escape Prevailing Notions about Providing Student Supports

As John Maynard Keynes stressed:

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

So, here are six notions about providing student and learning supports that need to be left behind if schools are to ensure equity of opportunity.

(1) Escape the idea that effective school improvement can be accomplished without ending the continuing marginalization in school improvement policy of efforts to develop a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

(2) Escape the idea that addressing barriers for the large number of students in need can be accomplished relying only on one-on-one direct services and an emphasis on wrap-around services. (Much greater attention must be given to classroom and school-wide interventions that can reduce the need for such services.)

(3) Escape the idea that improving student and learning supports mainly involves enhancing coordination of interventions. (The focus must be on transforming student and learning supports into a unified and comprehensive system that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice.)

(4) Escape the idea that adopting a continuum of interventions is a sufficient framework for transforming the nature and scope of school-based student/learning supports. (The content focus o such supports must also be framed and integrated with the continuum.)

(5) Escape the idea that co-locating community resources on a school campus is equivalent to integrating student supports. (Integration involves school, home, community collaboration to systematically weave resources together with a view to filling critical intervention gaps and enhancing home and community engagement.)

(6) Escape the idea that development of a system that transforms and sustains how schools address student and learning supports can be accomplished without a well designed strategic plan for systemic change and by personnel who have the capacity to effect the changes.

Where's It Happening?

Places where efforts are being made to move to a three component policy framework for school improvement are highlighted on our Center's website in a section entitled *Where's it Happening – Trailblazing and Pioneering initiatives –*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm

Of particular note is the work currently underway in Alabama where the state education agency has developed a design for a *Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports* and has begun implementation in 10 districts and plans to add 20 more next year (see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/aladesign.pdf).

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

[2]*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

[3]CDC's Coordinated School Health Program. http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/cshp/schools.htm

Related Center Analyses

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (1997). Addressing barriers to learning: Beyond school-linked services and full service schools. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 67*, 408-421. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1037/h0080243/pdf

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006). *The implementation guide to student learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Addressing barriers to learning: Closing gaps in school-community policy and practice (1997) – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/barriers/closinggaps.pdf

School-community partnerships (2005) – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/guides/schoolcomm.pdf

About infrastructure mechanisms for a comprehensive learning support component (2005) – http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/infrastructure/infra_mechanisms.pdf

School improvement planning: What's missing? (2006) – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/whatsmissing.htm

Addressing what's missing in school improvement planning: Expanding standards and accountability to encompass an enabling or learning supports component (2006) – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enabling/standards.pdf

Addressing barriers to student learning & promoting healthy development: A usable research-base (2008) – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/BarriersBrief.pdf

Frameworks for systemic transformation of student and learning supports (2008) – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf

Community Schools: Working Toward Institutional Transformation (2008) – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/csinstitutionaltrans.pdf