

Balancing Cut-backs at Schools is Essential to Ensuring Equity of Opportunity

Lay-offs, cut-backs, increased class size, austerity measures. Each day there is another story about how the troubled economy is hurting education. Chief state school officers, district superintendent, principals, education associations, and unions have detailed the impending crisis that can't be offset by the replacement dollars from the federal stimulus bill.

As has always been the case when education budgets tighten, the tendency is to trim student support efforts more severely than other budget items. This reflects the long-standing *marginalization* in policy and practice of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.¹

Given the pressing need for learning supports to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school, it is time for everyone to recognize that current cut-backs are so unbalanced that essential efforts to address factors that interfere with learning at school will be subverted. While all cuts are harmful, the extreme cuts related to student and learning supports will undermine the hope of ensuring equity of opportunity.

Lessons learned from efforts to improve schools underscore that high quality teaching, enhanced instruction aligned with assessment, collaborative staff development, and home involvement are necessary but insufficient. At the same time, research has made it clear that prevailing school improvement designs remain too limited in nature and scope to counter barriers to learning and teaching.²

Transforming Schools for the 21st Century Requires Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

Despite a troubled economy, new leadership at national, state, and local levels offers significant opportunities for transforming schools. However, as leaders across the country face the prospect of preparing students to be productive contributors in the world of the 21st century, excessive cuts to learning supports ensure the maintenance of

- student dropout rates and delinquency
- teacher dropout rates
- student disengagement in classroom learning
- the achievement gap
- the plateau effect related to student achievement
- the growing list of schools designated as low performing.

It *was* easy to say “No Child Left Behind!” It *is* easy to say: “All children will be prepared to be productive contributors in the world of the 21st century!” The reality is that, before schools can succeed in ensuring students acquire 21st century skills, school policy makers and planners must deal with the following fundamental question:

What does it take to ensure that all students have an *equal opportunity* to succeed at school and as 21st century citizens?

A critical component in answering this is the need to ensure effective efforts are in place to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage students in formal learning. Clearly, this need cannot be met by completely gutting student and learning supports.

Cut-backs must be balanced; remaining resources must be redeployed appropriately. In cutting and redeploying, decision makers must pay special attention to ensuring schools can still address barriers and re-engage students who have become disengaged from classroom instruction.

The focus in balancing budget cuts and redeploying resources should be on ensuring there is a critical mass of school resources allocated for student and learning supports to enable schools to redeploy and then outreach to leverage and braid with a wide range of community resources. Given sparse resources, the emphasis must be on meeting *high priority* intervention needs in new and more cost effective ways. At the same time, the long-term aim must remain that of moving toward developing a comprehensive system to provide student and learning supports. Clearly, none of this is feasible when resources are utterly stripped away.

Learning Supports Are Imperative in Enabling Equity of Opportunity

This is a mind-boggling time in the country's history of public education. The economic downturn is causing massive budget cuts. There is new national leadership. For better and worse, there are frequent changes in leadership at state and local levels. Education leaders and the general public are divided over how to make things better. And, as the reauthorization of the federal *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* comes closer, there is considerable controversy over how to improve this flawed guide to improving schools.

One constant in all this is the long-term, continuous failure in policy and practice to focus on transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and how to re-engage students who have actively disengaged from classroom instruction. As a result, little progress has been made in enabling equity of opportunity for success at school.

As the February 2009 report from a summit sponsored by the HOPE Foundation recognizes: *For the better part of the last generation, our systems of education have been unable to meet the needs of too many students.* Among the summit recommendations, the first call is for *assuring readiness* of youngsters not only as they start school but everyday thereafter. The participants state:

Success in the classroom requires that children arrive ready to learn – cognitively, physically, and psychologically everyday throughout their school years. While efforts have been made to increase learning supports from early childhood through high school, commitment and progress has been uneven across the states. There are large funding disparities within and between states that translate into dramatic differences in children's opportunities to learn. To have a major impact on public education, the Obama administration should take actions that ensure that all students have access to high quality learning environments and support systems regardless of where their schools are located.³

As always with recommendations, the devil is in the details. Additional piecemeal and ad hoc actions are not an answer. As we have stressed for some time, moving student and learning supports in new directions involves more than expanding and coordinating health and social services, co-locating and integrating community resources on school sites, and applying a three tier continuum of interventions. Learning support systems encompass these matters, but involve much more. The need is for fundamental transformation into a comprehensive system of learning supports.

Moving Forward

Over many years, our Center has offered analyses underscoring the marginalization of student and learning supports and the imperative for systemic transformation, and we have developed and spread prototype frameworks to guide new directions for policy and practice. Given the urgency of the current state of affairs, we plan to escalate our efforts. Last week, as part of our collaboration with Scholastic Inc.'s Community Affairs Unit, we met with Gene Wilhoit and several of his staff at the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) as well as with staff from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). The agenda involved beginning to work out details for connecting CCSSO and AASA to the *Rebuilding for Learning* initiative (which you will be

hearing more about in the near future).⁴ The commitment of major national organizations renews hope for moving schools forward in developing a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging students.

Concluding Comments

Effective instruction is, of course, fundamental to a school's mission. None of us want to send our children to a school where teachers do not have high standards, expectations, and competence. At the same time, the reality is that many factors can interfere with learning and teaching. Teachers in low performing schools point to how few students appear motivationally ready and able to learn what the daily lesson plan prescribes. Teachers in the upper grades report that a significant percentage of their students have become actively disengaged and alienated from classroom learning. And, "acting out" behavior, especially bullying and disrespect for others, is rampant. (So is passivity, but this attracts less attention.) One result of all this is seen in the increasing number of students misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorders (ADHD). Another result is the number of dropouts, pushouts, and fadeouts (students and teachers).

Teachers need and want considerable help in addressing barriers to student and school success. Unfortunately, the sparse help they currently receive is grossly inadequate. Unbalanced budget cut-backs can seriously hamper moving toward a comprehensive system of student and learning supports to enable all students to learn and all teachers to teach effectively.

(February, 17, 2009)

Notes:

¹Adelman, 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.

²Center for Mental Health in Schools (2006). *School Improvement Planning: What's Missing?* Los Angeles: Author. Online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/whatsmissing.htm>

³Hope Foundation (2009). *Courageous Leadership for Shaping America's Future IV*. Bloomington, IN: Author. <http://www.hopefoundation.org/SAF2009/saf-consensus.pdf>

⁴For information on the Rebuilding for Learning initiative, go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/rebuild/rebuilding.htm>

For additional resources, see the Center's Policy Reports and articles online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

The national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspice of the School Mental Health Project in UCLA's Dept. of Psychology.

Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563

(310) 825-3634 Fax: (310) 206-8716; E-mail: smhp@ucla.edu

Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

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