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Mental Health in Schools at a Crossroads:

Beyond Comprehensive School Mental Health, Toward a Unified System of Student and Learning Supports

(2026)

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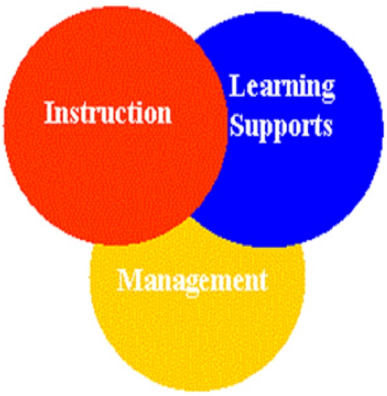

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To facilitate efforts to address barriers to learning, this resources is freely accessible online.
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*Initially, the Center was named the *Center for Mental Health in Schools*; in 2017, to more fully underscore the breadth of the work, the Center name was expanded.

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

Howard S. Adelman, Ph.D. is professor of psychology and co-director of the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA. He began his professional career as a remedial classroom teacher in 1960. From 1973-1986, he directed the Fernald School and Laboratory at UCLA. Since 1986, he, Linda Taylor, and the Center staff have continued to pursue ways
to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

Linda Taylor, Ph.D. is co-director of the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA. In her early career, Linda was involved in community agency work. From 1973 to 1986, she co-directed the Fernald Laboratory School and Clinic at UCLA. In addition to her co-director position at UCLA, she worked from 1986-2000 as a clinical psychologist in the Los Angeles Unified School District where she directed several large-scale projects.

Adelman and Taylor have worked together for over 40 years with a constant focus on improving how schools and communities address barriers to learning and teaching, reengage disconnected students and families, and promote healthy development. Over the years, they have led major projects focused on dropout prevention, enhancing the mental health facets of school-based health centers, and developing comprehensive, school-based approaches for students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Their work has involved them in schools and communities across the country. Their current focus is on policies, practices, and large-scale systemic transformation. This work includes facilitating the National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports.

Mental Health in Schools at a Crossroads:

Beyond Comprehensive School Mental Health, Toward a Unified System of Student and Learning Supports

This paper revisits and updates themes raised in *Schools and Mental Health: A Position Statement* (2021). As concern about students' mental health intensifies, the field of mental health in schools now stands at a critical crossroads. Schools face a convergence of problems unlike any seen in recent decades. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students remain disconnected from learning and school life, as reflected in elevated rates of chronic absenteeism, declining engagement, and growing concerns about motivation, belonging, and academic persistence. At the same time, school leaders and staff continue to experience high levels of stress, burnout, and workplace attrition. These conditions not only affect individual well-being but also diminish schools' capacity to respond effectively to student needs.

In this context, the challenges related to mental health in schools go beyond expanding mental health interventions and access. What is needed is a transformed system of student supports. Such a transformation requires establishing a third primary and essential component of school improvement policy and developing the component into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that fully embeds a broad range of mental health concerns.

Mounting concern about rising levels of student anxiety, depression, trauma exposure, chronic absenteeism, disengagement, and other barriers to learning and teaching has heightened attention to mental health in schools. Schools, districts, states, and federal agencies have invested unprecedented resources in social-emotional learning, school-based mental health services, trauma-informed practices, wellness centers, expanded counseling services, and other student mental health initiatives.

While these efforts are well intentioned and have expanded access to supports for some students, they have not produced the scale of improvement needed to substantially reduce the emotional, behavioral, and learning problems confronting schools across the country. Nor have they significantly altered how most schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

Instead, a patchwork of largely disconnected programs, services, and initiatives has emerged, frequently competing for limited resources and operating in relative isolation from one another. Efforts to improve mental health, attendance, behavior, school climate, family engagement, and learning often remain fragmented and peripheral to core school improvement agendas. While some students have benefitted, the overall impact has fallen far short of what is needed to ensure that all students have an equitable opportunity to succeed (Adelman & Taylor, 2021, 2024a).

Mental health in schools has therefore reached a critical crossroads. One path expands mental health programs, services, and access by adding initiatives and encouraging greater use of third-party providers reimbursement for services. The other embeds mental health concerns into a transformed system of student and learning supports that addresses a broad range of factors affecting student learning, well-being, and development. The choice between these paths will determine whether schools continue to marginalize mental health and increase intervention fragmentation or undertake the systemic transformation needed to improve student and learning supports in ways that significantly reduce the opportunity and achievement gaps.

The convergence of post-pandemic disengagement, persistent staffing shortages, growing concern about youth mental health, the expansion of MTSS and community school initiatives, and increasing pressure to improve educational equity has created an unusual opportunity for systemic change. For perhaps the first time, major initiatives focused on mental health, student supports, equity, school climate, and whole-child development are converging around a common realization: schools need a unified approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

We begin by highlighting *Comprehensive School Mental Health* – the framework that has come to dominate current school-based mental health policy and practice.

What is Comprehensive School Mental Health?

National organizations such as the National Center for School Mental Health, the School-Based Health Alliance, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the Mental Health Technology Transfer Centers have helped frame and advance comprehensive school mental health approaches across the country. As defined by the National Center for School Mental Health:

> Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems (CSMHS) provide a full array of tiered supports and services that promote a positive school climate, social and emotional learning, and mental health and well-being, while reducing the prevalence and severity of mental illness and substance use. CSMHSs are built on a strong foundation of district and school professionals, including administrators and educators, specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, school nurses, and other school health professionals), in strategic collaboration with students, families, and community health and mental health partners. These systems also assess and address the social, political, and environmental structures, including public policies and social norms, that influence mental health outcomes.

Although specific models vary, most comprehensive school mental health frameworks incorporate a multi-tiered approach that includes schoolwide efforts to promote well-being, identify emerging concerns, prevent problems, and provide increasingly intensive interventions for students requiring additional support (Center on PBIS. 2024). Considerable emphasis is placed on increasing access to services through school-community collaborations, referrals to community providers, and reimbursement mechanisms such as Medicaid and private insurance.

During the past decade, substantial federal, state, and local investments have expanded school-based mental health initiatives. Districts increased staffing for school psychologists, school social workers, counselors, and mental health coordinators; strengthened linkages with community agencies; implemented social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices; and expanded access in underserved areas to school-based and tele-mental health services.

These developments have increased awareness of student mental health concerns, improved access to services, emphasized prevention efforts, and enhanced collaboration between schools and community providers (Evans, Owens, Bradshaw, & Weist, 2023; Hoover & Bostic, 2021; Lekamge et al. 2025; National Center for School Mental Health, 2023). However, important questions remain regarding their capacity to produce broad and sustainable improvements in student learning, engagement, well-being, and school success.

More recently, however, shifts in funding priorities and program requirements have created uncertainty about the sustainability of some federal investments. At the same time, growing fiscal pressures, competing demands, staffing shortages, and budget constraints have heightened concerns about whether expanding comprehensive school mental health initiatives through additional programs and fee-for-service interventions will, by themselves, produce substantial improvements in student functioning and performance. These concerns have contributed to growing interest in broader frameworks that embed mental health within a comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

A key concern is that comprehensive school mental health initiatives frequently operate as specialized programs rather than as fully integrated components of a broader system of student and learning supports. As a result, they may contribute unintentionally to the fragmentation of efforts designed to address barriers to learning and teaching. In addition, many initiatives focus primarily on the assessment and treatment of students with identified mental health concerns. While such services are essential, they often serve a relatively small proportion of students compared with the much larger number whose learning and well-being are affected by disengagement, attendance problems, ineffective transitions, adverse school climate conditions, family and community stressors, and other barriers to learning and teaching (Adelman & Taylor, 2026).

Moreover, insufficient attention is often given to systemic factors that influence both mental health and learning, including school climate, student and famly engagement, instructional experiences, student and learning supports, and community conditions. Consequently, opportunities to promote well-being, prevent problems, and strengthen learning for all students is limited.

The question is not whether schools should support student mental health. They should. The problem is that a mental health framework provides an insufficient foundation for addressing the broad range of barriers that interfere with learning and teaching.

Why MH Must Be Embedded Within a Student/Learning Supports System

Mental health is a critical component of healthy development, but it is only one of many factors influencing student learning, engagement, and well-being. Schools also must address academic difficulties, chronic absenteeism, disengagement from learning, adverse school climate conditions, ineffective transitions, family and community stressors, inequitable opportunities, and other factors that affect student success (Adelman & Taylor, 2020, 2024a; Cantor et al., 2019).

Moreover, mental health encompasses more than the absence of mental illness. It includes fostering resilience, positive relationships, social competence, self-regulation, belonging, and purpose (Atkins et al., 2010; Greenberg, 2023). Consequently, promoting mental health overlaps substantially with broader efforts to support healthy development and successful learning (Furlong, Gilman, & Huebner, 2022).

Although counseling, psychological services, and other clinical interventions are essential for some students, most barriers to learning and teaching are not best understood or addressed solely through a clinical lens. Student outcomes are shaped by the interaction of personal, family, school, peer, and community influences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Improving student well-being therefore requires a comprehensive framework that addresses this wider ecology of factors.

At the same time, schools face an increasingly complex set of challenges, including chronic absenteeism, disengagement, academic difficulties, behavioral concerns, family stress, community violence, housing instability, and staff shortages (Attendance Works, 2024a; RAND Corporation, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). These challenges are highly interconnected and often reinforce one another. No single initiative, including school mental health, can adequately address this complexity.

Despite substantial investment in student support initiatives, schools continue to rely on fragmented approaches. Mental health programs, attendance initiatives, social-emotional learning efforts, behavioral supports, school climate initiatives, family engagement activities, and academic intervention programs frequently operate as parallel efforts rather than as components of a cohesive system (Adelman & Taylor, 2024a, 2026; Hoover & Bostic, 2021). The Multi-Tiered System of Support framework (MTSS) has provided schools with an adaptable framework for starting to organize interventions across tiers of support in terms of intervention intensity. In this respect, the framework can be seen as a step toward building a unified and comprehensive system of student/learning supports, including organizing the content of student and learning supports into a comprehensive set of domains for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

About MTSS

MTSS is primarily an intervention framework. It helps schools organize and deliver supports across tiers of intervention. However, MTSS was not designed to address the broader policy, organizational, and infrastructure changes required for system transformation. As a result, while it can help classify and coordinate interventions, it does not by itself resolve the longstanding fragmentation of student supports.The challenge now is not to replace MTSS, but to build upon it and related initiatives as part of a unified, comprehensive system of student and learning supports. This requires more than arranging interventions by tier. It requires systematizing the full continuum of supports and organizing interventions into a defined set of support domains that establish a comprehensive framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

The widespread fragmentation of student and learning supports has major consequences:

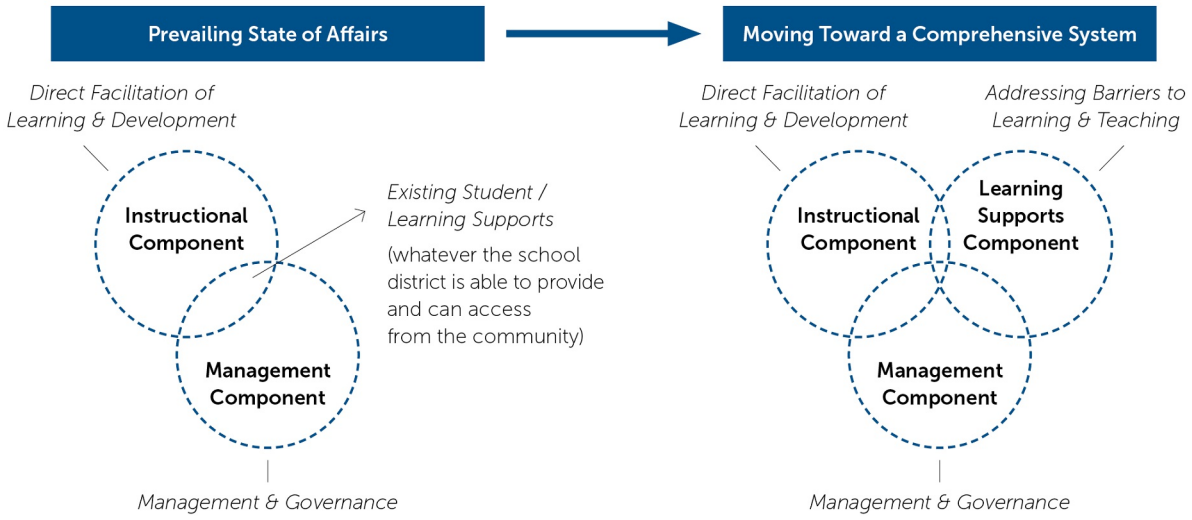
- Resources are used inefficiently.
- Programs compete rather than complement one another.
- Service gaps and redundancies persist.
- Prevention and early intervention receive insufficient emphasis.
- Access to supports remains uneven and inequitable.
- Improvements are difficult to sustain over time.

The fundamental problem is not a lack of initiatives. Rather, it is the absence of a unifying framework that organizes existing resources, personnel, programs, services, and collaborations into a comprehensive and equitable system of student and learning supports (Adelman & Taylor, 2024a, 2026).

This challenge reflects a broader limitation in current school improvement policy. Educational reform continues to focus primarily on two matters: improving instruction and management/governance. As illustrated in Exhibit 1, this two component framework alone are insufficient. School improvement policy must explicitly incorporate a third component focused on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students (Adelman & Taylor, 2020, 2024a). Without a fully developed and integrated third component, efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching likely will remain marginalized and fragmented and have limited effectiveness.

From this perspective, the core policy concern is not about how to strengthen school mental health; it is how to expand the school improvement policy framework and establish a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.

Exhibit 1. **Expanding the School Improvement Policy Framework**



Viewed from this perspective, mental health is not the organizing framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. It is an essential facet of a larger system designed to promote healthy development, strengthen engagement, enhance equity of opportunity, and improve outcomes for all students. Moving forward, the field needs to counter the marginalization and fragmentation of student and learning supports and begin the systemic transformation of such supports into a cohesive system.

None of this is meant to deny that comprehensive school mental health efforts have contributed to increased awareness, improved access to services, encouraged prevention efforts, and encouraged school-community partnerships. These contributions provide a foundation for future progress. However, they do not resolve the broader challenge of creating a cohesive system that addresses a broad range of barriers to learning and teaching.

Enhancing Equity of Opportunity Requires System Transformation

In many schools, supports related to mental health, attendance, learning, behavior, family engagement, special education, and school climate continue to operate as largely separate initiatives (Coalition for Community Schools, 2024). This fragmentation creates gaps in service, unnecessary duplication, uneven access to resources, and inconsistent outcomes. Consequently, disparities in engagement, opportunity to learn, achievement, school connectedness, graduation, and well-being persist despite substantial investments in student support initiatives.

Although education policy supports the ideal of equity, a two-component framework for school improvement inherently limits efforts to reduce opportunity gaps. When student supports are developed as auxiliary and fragmented efforts, equitable access too often depends on where students attend school, which initiatives happen to be funded, whether personnel are available, and how effectively families can navigate a complex array of services. As a result, students with the greatest needs frequently encounter the greatest barriers to obtaining timely and appropriate assistance.

The consequences are particularly significant for students affected by poverty, discrimination, disability, chronic health conditions, housing instability, trauma, language barriers, or other circumstances that interfere with learning and participation at school. When supports are fragmented, these students often must navigate multiple disconnected systems precisely when coordinated assistance is most needed.

Advancing equity therefore requires more than expanding individual programs or services. It requires transforming how schools organize and deliver supports. A comprehensive system of student and learning supports provides a framework for ensuring that all students, not only those eligible for categorical services or fortunate enough to encounter a particular initiative, have access to a coherent set of resources designed to address barriers to learning and teaching. Such a system emphasizes prevention as well as intervention, promotes early identification of emerging concerns, integrates school and community resources, and strengthens the capacity of schools to respond effectively to student needs.

From this perspective, enhancing equity of opportunity is fundamentally a systemic issue. It depends on whether schools have the infrastructure necessary for ensuring resources are deployed strategically, coordinated effectively, and made accessible to all students whose learning and development are affected by academic, social, emotional, health, economic, or environmental barriers. Without such system transformation, even well-funded initiatives are likely to produce uneven benefits and leave significant gaps in opportunity. With such transformation, schools can move closer to ensuring that every student has an equitable opportunity to engage, learn, succeed, and thrive.

What Has Changed Since 2021?

Since 2021, schools have expanded mental health services, increased attention to whole-child development, and adopted new student support initiatives. At the same time, many of the challenges affecting learning and well-being have persisted or intensified (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; Learning Policy Institute, 2023).

Key developments include:

- Chronic absenteeism remains elevated in many schools, highlighting persistent challenges related to student engagement, belonging, school connectedness, and barriers to attendance.
- Student disengagement has become more visible, with growing concerns about motivation, participation, persistence, and academic purpose.
- Staff burnout and workforce attrition persist, affecting teachers, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and administrators.
- School mental health interventions have expanded, including counseling, wellness centers, telehealth, social-emotional learning initiatives, trauma-informed practices, and school-community collaborations.
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) have become more widespread, although implementation remains uneven.
- Community school and whole-child initiatives continue to gain momentum, with greater attention to coordinated supports and services.
- Fragmentation remains a major problem, with many initiatives and funding streams operating as separate efforts rather than as facets of a coherent and sustainable system.
- Prevention and early intervention continue to receive insufficient emphasis, despite broad recognition of their importance.
- Fiscal uncertainty is growing as schools face budget pressures, staffing shortages, expiring pandemic-era supports, and increasing demands for services, heightening the need to use limited resources strategically and effectively.
- Recognition is growing that addressing barriers to learning and teaching requires systemic transformation of student and learning supports rather than continued reliance on fragmented initiatives.

Together, these developments create a pivotal moment for education.

School improvement is at a crossroads. The core issue is not whether student mental health deserves attention. Rather, it is whether schools will continue expanding fragmented initiatives or move toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports that addresses barriers to learning and teaching while promoting engagement, well-being, healthy development, and academic success for all students.

Toward a Unified System of Student and Learning Supports

Despite decades of investment in programs, services, personnel, and collaborations, efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching remain largely fragmented. Schools have accumulated a wide array of initiatives focused on specific concerns such as mental health, attendance, behavior, bullying prevention, school climate, safety, family engagement, substance abuse, and learning supports. Although many of these efforts are individually valuable, they often operate independently of one another, resulting in duplication, intervention gaps, competition for limited resources, and difficulties coordinating support.

Consequently, much of the current discussion about improving student supports focuses on integration, alignment, and coordination. Such efforts are important but insufficient. Fragmentation is not the fundamental problem; it is a symptom of a deeper policy problem. Student and learning supports continue to be treated as supplementary rather than as a primary and essential component of school improvement. As long as this remains the case, new initiatives are likely to be layered onto an already fragmented subsystem, limiting both effectiveness and sustainability (Adelman & Taylor, 2020, 2026).

Integration and Transformation Are Not the Same

- Integration seeks to improve coordination among existing programs, services, & initiatives.
- Transformation seeks to redesign the policies, infrastructure, leadership, and framework guiding those interventions.
- Integration reduces fragmentation.
- Transformation addresses the conditions that continually reproduce fragmentation.

The focus, therefore, is not merely to connect existing initiatives more effectively. The aim is to establish a unified framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching that organizes and guides all efforts to promote student engagement, well-being, healthy development, and academic success.

In this context, system transformation refers to redesigning the policies, infrastructure, leadership mechanisms, resource deployment, and accountabilities that shape how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. The aim is to develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice. Such a system weaves together school and community resources, organizes interventions along a continuum from promotion and prevention through intensive assistance, and provides a coherent structure for addressing the many factors that affect learning and development (Adelman & Taylor, 2024a, 2026).

Appendix A highlights key center resources for transforming student and learning supports.

At its core, the system transformation we stress emphasizes:

- Elevating the priority of addressing barriers to learning and teaching within school improvement policy.
- Establishing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports as a primary and essential component of school

- Fully integrating student and learning supports with instructional improvement efforts.
- Establishing leadership and governance mechanisms that support implementation, scale-up, accountability, and sustainability.
- Weaving school and community resources together to expand capacity and improve outcomes.

Efforts to advance equity frequently focus on expanding access to programs and services. While important, access alone is insufficient. Achieving equity of opportunity requires transforming how schools organize resources and supports so that all students benefit from a coherent, comprehensive, and sustainable system designed to address barriers to learning and teaching and enable success in school (Adelman & Taylor, 2024a).

Moving Forward: A Call to Action

Rather than continuing to operate separate initiatives, schools and districts must align and braid resources devoted to mental health, attendance improvement, behavioral supports, family engagement, school climate, wellness, and crisis response within a unified system of student and learning supports. The objective is to create conditions that prevent problems whenever possible, identify concerns early, provide timely assistance, and reconnect students who have become disengaged from learning and school life.

Responsibility for these efforts cannot rest solely with specialized support personnel. Counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, teachers, administrators, family liaisons, and community partners all have important roles to play within a shared framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Building this capacity requires systemic leadership, infrastructure, and accountability.

Sustainable transformation requires attention not only to what changes are needed, but also to how change is implemented, scaled, institutionalized, and continuously improved over time. Although implementation will vary across settings, several core strategies are essential for moving from fragmented initiatives to a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports (Adelman & Taylor, 2024b):

- Adopting a three-component framework for school improvement that fully integrates instruction, management, and student and learning supports.
- Establishing governance and leadership structures for student and learning supports.
- Mapping, analyzing, redeploying, and coordinating existing resources while identifying and addressing critical gaps.
- Weaving school and community resources into an integrated continuum of supports.
- Organizing interventions along a full continuum that ranges from promotion and prevention to intensive assistance.
- Developing accountability measures related to student and learning support outcomes.
- Embedding these efforts within district and school improvement plans and implementing them through a multi-year process of continuous improvement.

The task ahead is to transform student and learning supports into a cohesive, comprehensive system that enhances equity of opportunity by addressing factors that interfere with learning, teaching, and healthy development.

Concluding Comments

The field of school mental health has made important progress. Awareness has increased, access to services has expanded, and schools have devoted unprecedented attention to student well-being. These advances should be sustained and strengthened.

At the same time, the convergence of expanded school mental health initiatives, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, community school efforts, whole-child approaches, and growing concern about educational equity creates a unique opportunity for more fundamental change. Many of the building blocks for transformation already exist.

The challenge is no longer simply to expand mental health services. Nor is it merely to improve coordination among fragmented initiatives. The challenge is to establish a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports as a third primary component of school improvement policy and practice.

From this perspective, mental health is not a separate agenda, an add-on program, or an isolated service sector operating at the margins of education. It is an essential component of a broader framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, promoting healthy development, reengaging disconnected students, enhancing equity of opportunity, and improving outcomes for all students.

The field now faces a fundamental choice. One direction continues expanding mental health initiatives while leaving the underlying school improvement framework largely unchanged. The other embeds mental health within a unified, comprehensive system of student and learning supports that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice.

The first path expands services. The second transforms schools. That is the crossroads now confronting the field.

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Appendix A

Key Center Resources for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

The growing challenges confronting schools will not be addressed through additional fragmented initiatives. Lasting progress requires transforming student and learning supports into a fully integrated and essential component of school improvement. The Center's resources are intended to help guide that process. The Center has developed a wide range of resources to help districts, schools, and communities move beyond fragmented programs and services toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports. These resources address both the rationale for transforming current approaches and practical strategies for accomplishing systemic change. All are available at no cost through the Center's website -- https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu

Key Starting Resources for Leaders

For administrators, policymakers, school board members, and other leaders seeking a practical entry point into transforming student and learning supports:

>***Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions***

>***Transforming Student/Learning Supports and Enhancing Equity of Opportunity: A Journey of Lessons Learned***

>***Building on MTSS to Enhance How Schools Address Barriers to Learning***

Together, these resources outline the need for change, clarify the limitations of fragmented approaches, and provide guidance for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.

Additional Guides for Improving Student and Learning Supports with Existing Resources

An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports: A Month-by-Month Guide

Criteria & Rubric for a Best Practice Approach to Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Starting the Process

Related Books

Improving School Improvement

Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide

Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change

Briefs on System Transformation

Implementation Science and School Improvement

Framing Implementation Science for Sustainable System Transformation: Four Connected Concerns

Additional Related Reports

New Directions for Student and Learning Supports: From Fragmented Initiatives to System Transformation

Are Initiatives to Improve School-Based Mental Health Services Hindering Efforts to Transform Student/Learning Supports?

Additional Resources

The resources listed above are only a small sample of the many free publications, practice aids, and technical assistance materials developed by the Center. In addition, the Center's online Clearinghouse provides access to more than 130 Quick Find topics from us and from a variety of other sources https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm