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Enhancing the Blueprint for School Improvement in the ESEA Reauthorization: *Moving From a Two- to a Three-Component Approach*

As Congress considers reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), it is essential to include a consolidated and cohesive focus on addressing barriers to learning and re-engaging disconnected students. External and internal barriers to learning pose some of the most pervasive and entrenched challenges to educators across the country, particularly in chronically low performing schools. Failure to directly address these barriers ensures that (a) too many children and youth will continue to struggle in school, and (b) teachers will continue to divert precious instructional time to dealing with behavior and other problems that can interfere with classroom engagement for all students.

Currently, the need to systemically lower or eliminate barriers to learning and teaching is given only marginal attention in our national debate about the policies and programs needed to improve schools. As long as this is the case, the best improvements in curriculum, instruction, management, and governance will be insufficient to improve outcomes for large numbers of students.

A More Complete Policy Blueprint Framework

To date, federal policy addresses two components as primary and essential to school reform. One emphasizes instructional factors that impact learning; the other addresses governance and operations of schools. Research has clarified the need for a third component that directly and comprehensively focuses on (a) addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (b) re-engaging students who have become disconnected from classroom instruction.¹ In most school systems today, the supports necessary to accomplish these objectives are treated as secondary to school improvement efforts, resulting in the delivery of piecemeal services with no comprehensive or integrated focus. Typically, these interventions are provided by school employed student support personnel (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, etc.) who collaborate with and link to community-based resources. Access to these services improves behavior, academic performance, instruction, school climate, family engagement, and data-based decision-making.² However, the resources and leadership dedicated to supporting the work of these professionals remain marginalized and fragmented in most schools, making them less effective and cost-efficient than they could be.

Defining a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports for Policy Purposes

Learning supports are 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 and by re-engaging disconnected students.

A comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive learning support system provides essential interventions in classrooms and school-wide. To ensure effectiveness, it is fully integrated in school improvement policies and practices designed to enhance instruction and school management.

In place of the fragmented interventions generated by current school policy (Exhibit 1A), an effective third component of school improvement facilitates the development of a comprehensive and cohesive system of learning supports that is fully integrated with management and instruction (Exhibit 1B).

Exhibit 1. Moving From a Two- to a Three-Component Framework for Improving Schools

A. Current School Improvement Framework

PRIMARY FOCUS

Direct Facilitation of Learning
(Instructional Component)

- High quality teachers
- Improved academic assessment systems
- Standards-based instruction
- Staff development

- Shared governance
- Improved data collection systems
- Increased accountability
- Building-level budget control and management
- Flexible funding

Governance, Resources, & Operations
(Management Component)

SECONDARY/MARGINALIZED FOCUS

Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching
(Learning Supports—Not a Unified Component)

Despite the fact that student and learning supports are essential to student success, they are not implemented as a comprehensive system and are not treated in school improvement policy and practice as a primary component of school improvement.

A few examples of programs currently implemented are:

- School-wide positive behavioral supports and interventions
- Response to intervention
- Safe Schools, Healthy Students Program
- Coordinated School Health Program
- Full Service Community Schools Initiatives
- School-Based Health Centers
- Specialized Instructional Support Services
- Compensatory and special education interventions
- Bullying prevention
- Family resource centers
- Foster Child and Homeless Student Education
- Student assistance programs

B. Needed: Policies to Establish an Umbrella for School Improvement Planning Related to Addressing Barriers to Learning and Promoting Healthy Development

Direct Facilitation of Learning

Addressing Barriers to Learning & Teaching

Instructional Component

Learning Supports Component

Management Component

Governance, Resources, & Operations

Full Integration of Learning Supports Component

The **Learning Supports Component** establishes an umbrella for ending marginalization by unifying fragmented efforts and evolving a comprehensive system. Major content areas for developing learning supports are:

- Building teacher capacity to re-engage disconnected students and maintain their engagement
- Providing support for the full range of transitions that students and families encounter as they negotiate school and grade changes
- Responding to and preventing academic, behavioral, social-emotional problems and crises
- Increasing community and family involvement and support
- Facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed

Effective integration of this component is dependent upon promoting collaborative models of practice that value and capitalize on school and community resources and expertise. By integrating the learning supports component on par with the instructional and management components, the marginalization of associated programs, services, and policies ceases and a comprehensive school improvement framework is established.

Addressing Barriers, Supporting Teachers, Re-Engaging Learners

Failing to address barriers to learning has high costs. The good news is that there are many schools where the majority of students are doing just fine, and in any school, one can find youngsters who are succeeding. The bad news is that in any school one can find youngsters who are failing, and there are too many schools, particularly those serving lower income families, where large numbers of students are doing poorly. Nearly 2,000 high schools (about 13% of American high schools) account for more than 50% of all high school dropouts. Located in rural, suburban, and urban areas with typically high poverty and high minority populations, these schools see the typical freshman class shrink by 40% or more by the time students reach their senior year.³ Any combination of the factors highlighted in Exhibit 2 can put a student at risk, but the higher the concentration of risk factors, the greater the risk of dropping out.^{1, 4}

The costs of dropping out are high for individuals and pose a significant threat to our nation's economic security. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that if the 1.2 million high school dropouts from the Class of 2008 had graduated instead of dropping out, the U.S. economy would have seen an additional \$319 billion in wages over these students' lifetimes. Over a decade, these losses are projected to total more than one trillion dollars.⁵

Exhibit 2. Examples of Conditions That Can Increase Barriers to Learning

Environmental Conditions		Person Conditions	
<p>Neighborhood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High poverty ▪ High rates of crime, drug use, violence, gang activity ▪ High unemployment, abandoned/floundering businesses ▪ Disorganized community ▪ High mobility ▪ Lack of positive youth development opportunities 	<p>Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Domestic conflicts, abuse, distress, grief, loss ▪ Unemployment, poverty, and homelessness ▪ Immigrant and/or minority status ▪ Family physical or mental health illness ▪ Poor medical or dental care ▪ Inadequate child care ▪ Substance abuse 	<p>School and Peers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poor quality schools, high teacher turnover ▪ High rates of bullying and harassment ▪ Minimal offerings and low involvement in extracurricular activities ▪ Frequent student–teacher conflicts ▪ Poor school climate, negative peer models ▪ Many disengaged students and families 	<p>Internal Student Factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Neurodevelopmental delay ▪ Physical illness ▪ Mental disorders ▪ Disabilities ▪ Inadequate nutrition and healthcare ▪ Learning, behavior, and emotional problems that arise from negative environmental conditions exacerbate existing internal factors

The move from a two- to a three-component policy framework significantly enhances efforts to develop a blueprint and roadmap for transforming school improvement policy and practice to deal with such barriers. It does this by providing a unifying umbrella policy under which all resources expended for student and learning supports can be woven together. Doing so increases effectiveness and reduces costs. Specifically, this requires a systematic focus on how to:

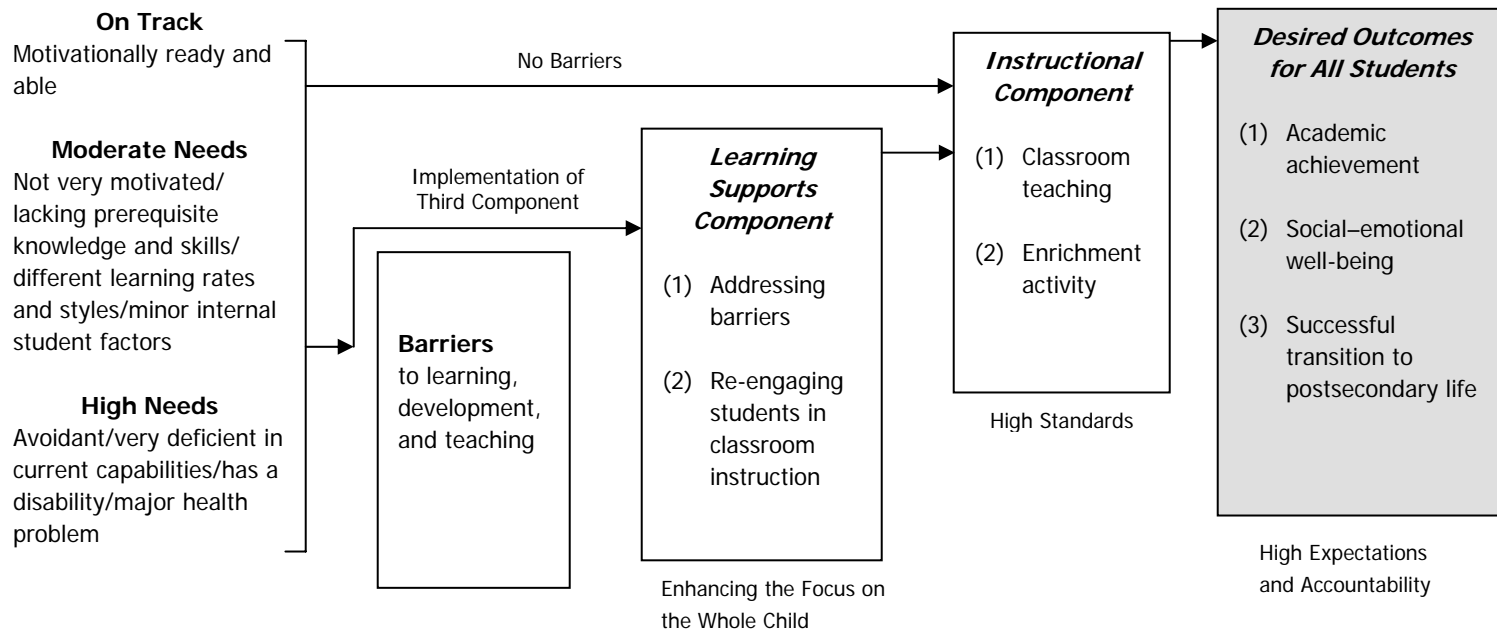
- Reframe current student support programs and services and redeploy the resources to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system for enabling learning
- Develop both in-classroom and school-wide approaches that reinforce individual student interventions—including interventions to support transitions, increase home and community connections, enhance teachers' ability to respond to common learning and behavior problems, and respond to and prevent crises
- Realign district, school, and school–community infrastructures to weave resources together with the aim of enhancing and evolving the learning supports system
- Pursue school improvement and systemic change with a high degree of policy commitment to fully integrate supports for learning and teaching with efforts to improve instruction and school governance
- Expand accountability systems both to improve data-based decision-making, and to reflect a comprehensive picture of students' and schools' performance that incorporates efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching^{1, 2}

Exhibit 3 below illustrates that the intent is to support *all* students by both addressing interfering factors and re-engaging students who have become disconnected from classroom instruction.

Exhibit 3. 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)



The Time for Moving to a Three-Component Blueprint for School Improvement Is Now

A common thread identified throughout the ESEA reauthorization recommendations from many stakeholder groups, including the U.S. Department of Education and members of Congress, is the need to address barriers to learning and teaching. The recommendations, however, typically lack a systemic or integral approach.⁶ Now is the time to correct this deficiency.

Pioneering work in states already is moving learning supports from the margins to play a central role in school improvement.^{7, 8} Federal policy that provides a cohesive vision and structure for sharing this work will make it possible to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of learning supports in every school, to the benefit of all children and the nation at large.^{1, 2} Properly conceived and implemented, such a system can close the achievement gap, enhance school safety, reduce dropout rates, shut down the pipeline from schools to prisons, and promote well-being and responsible citizenship.

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