

# A Brief Guide to Addressing Equity of Opportunity for All Students



# *Addressing Barriers to Learning*

Our system does not distribute opportunity equitably. Our leaders decry but tolerate disparities in student outcomes that are not only unfair, but socially and economically dangerous. Our nation's stated commitments to academic excellence are often eloquent but, without more, an insufficient response to challenges at home and globally.

The Equity and Excellence Commission

If anyone doubts the need to address barriers to learning and teaching, the Equity and Excellence Commission's 2013 report should open their eyes. The Commission is a federal advisory committee chartered by Congress. Its report to the Secretary of Education is entitled: *For Each and Every Child – A Strategy for Education Equity and Excellence*. The report stresses that:

Achieving excellence in American education depends on providing access to opportunity for all children, regardless of where they live or how much money their parents make. But, many of the problems our schools face begin elsewhere—in the home and family poverty, with inadequate health care, in dangerous communities and slum housing, in peer groups, in the larger culture. These external factors are, at best, explanations, not excuses.

To move beyond excuses, the report provides the following five-part framework "of tightly interrelated recommendations to guide policymaking:

- **Equitable School Finance** systems so that a child's critical opportunities are not a function of his or her zip code;
- **Teachers, Principals and Curricula** effective enough to provide children with the opportunity to thrive in a changing world;
- **Early Childhood Education** with an academic focus, to narrow the disparities in readiness when kids reach kindergarten;

- **Mitigating Poverty's Effects** with broad access not only to early childhood education, but also to a range of support services necessary to promote student success and family engagement in school; effective measures to improve outcomes for student groups especially likely to be left behind including English-language learners, children in Indian country or isolated rural areas, children with special education needs, and those involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems; and
- **Accountability and Governance** reforms to make clearer who is responsible for what, attach consequences to performance, and ensure that national commitments to equity and excellence are reflected in results on the ground, not just in speeches during campaigns."

Everyone who is concerned with the well-being of children and our society will want to read the report in its entirety. If all goes well, it will be highly influential.

At the same time, it is essential to correct and enhance facets of the work. To this end, what follows is our Center's analysis of and effort to address limitations in the section of the report entitled *Meeting the Needs of Students in High-poverty Communities*. Specifically, we discuss the need to embed the outlined interventions into a unified and comprehensive framework in order not to repeat past failures associated with strategies for enhancing supports for students and their families.

### **About Barriers to Learning and Teaching**

Excerpts from the Report

"Students from high-poverty backgrounds are at greater risk of academic failure, are more likely to be suspended from school and are more likely to drop out of school than are middle-income students. These students also sometimes face additional obstacles—such as homelessness, foster care, alcohol or drug problems, abuse and delinquency—that place them at even greater risk of never completing high school. Students who become involved in the criminal justice system must also be a policy priority, because these at-risk students cost society in both social-humanitarian and monetary terms.

Twenty-two percent of American schoolchildren live in conditions of poverty—a poverty rate higher than that of any other advanced industrial nation in Europe, North America or Asia. Nearly half of today's schoolchildren qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches. The achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families is 30 to 40 percent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born 25 years earlier. Poverty rates are disproportionately high for students of color.

Although these conditions do not absolve schools from their responsibility to expect and support educational excellence, they underscore the formidable barriers to school success for millions of students and their families. Achievement gaps for most disadvantaged children begin before they start school and widen throughout their educational careers. Most students enjoy advantages that are largely absent from the lives of the more than 16 million children now living in poverty. These advantages, long held to be important to students' success in school, include early educational experiences that prepare them for grade-level work, adequate physical (mental, dental and vision services) health care, extended learning experiences that reinforce and augment what is learned in school, and family support that ensures students are motivated and prepared to learn."

## **Broadening the Commission's Intervention Framework for Meeting the Needs of Students in High-poverty Communities**

The commission stresses that their recommendations on school finance and access to high-quality early childhood education “serve as a baseline for determining the needs of low-income students.” They further state that, “in redesigning their finance systems, states should determine the additional programs, staff and services needed to address the extra academic, social and health needs of students in communities with concentrated poverty and ensure adequate funding so districts and schools can meet those needs.”

The reports further notes that:

Beyond this baseline, with proper encouragement and support from the states and the federal government, school districts can enter into productive relationships with other government agencies and community-based organizations that can ensure the efficient and cost-effective provision of a broad array of necessary services to students from poverty backgrounds. To address these disparities, the United States should provide universal access to quality prekindergarten programs, support parent engagement, act to extend learning time and work to ensure that families in all communities can address the health needs of students.

Communities, tribes, states and the federal government must work together to create a policy infrastructure for providing these services by crafting standards, parallel to K-12 education standards, for early childhood, expanded learning time, health care and health education, family engagement and at-risk children. They should explore options to limit the concentration of poor students in particular schools, and the federal government should provide incentives for states to do so. Schools serving high concentrations of low-income students should also undertake an annual needs assessment for each child to determine not only the student's academic needs, but also the particular additional supports and services that he or she needs for school success.

Following discussion of the need for early childhood education to reduce the disparities found in kindergarten readiness, the report details the importance of and offers specific recommendations for enhancing access to “a range of support services necessary to promote student success and family engagement in school.” In essence the call is for policy to support a *broad array* of interventions, but they discuss only four topics: (1) “parent engagement and education,” (2) “working with communities to meet health needs,” (3) “extended learning time,” and (4) “at-risk student populations.”

These four topics represent important concerns. *They do not, however, represent a well-conceived intervention framework for promoting student success and family engagement in school.*

For example, the recommendations for “at-risk” populations provide the following nice list of *shoulds* for keeping students in school and progressing toward high school graduation:

- Federal and state governments should work together to develop and fund effective programs that increase the chances that at-risk students will graduate.
- States, in developing their finance formulas, should support implementation of dropout- prevention programs and high-quality alternative education to provide appropriate educational settings for those students who have not been successful in traditional learning environments.
- States should be encouraged to reform their rules pertaining to school discipline, where appropriate, to ensure local districts and charter schools provide preventive services in the first instance; if formal discipline is necessary, afford students and their families ample due process; and require high-quality alternative education for any student expelled or removed from a traditional school setting.
- Local school boards should ensure that enrollment and assignment policies promote equity. When considering how to reassign groups of students within a district when a school is closed, for example, school boards should ensure that schools receiving new students have the capacity to meet the educational needs of those students
- Schools should champion effective dropout-prevention programs, targeting at-risk students.

*Such recommendations are laudatory but hardly a blueprint for transforming the current unsatisfactory state of affairs related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and promoting student success and family engagement in school.*

### **Toward Transforming the Current State of Affairs**

Schools already are trying to promote equity of opportunity through a range of programs designed to mitigate and alleviate problems related to school adjustment, attendance, mobility, substance abuse, violence, physical and sexual abuse, dropouts, and more. Some of these programs are provided throughout a school district, others are carried out at – or linked to – targeted schools. Some of the programs are owned and operated by districts; some are managed by community agencies. The interventions may be for all students in a school, for those in specified grades, for those identified as “at risk,” or for those in need of compensatory or special education.

As is widely recognized, such programs currently are fragmented and marginalized in school improvement policy and practice. At some schools, it is commonplace for support staff to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with too much of the work oriented to addressing discrete problems and providing specialized services for relatively few students, rather than enhancing equity for all.

Given all this, the Commission's focus on *meeting the needs of students in high-poverty communities* would benefit from being embedded in a broad framework that unifies the many ad hoc and piecemeal interventions at schools and in communities. As they stand, the recommendations are likely to add to the fragmentation and marginalization of efforts to enhance equity of opportunity. Moreover, it should be noted that the commission's stress on *services* (presumably health and social services) tends to underplay the larger concern for weaving together the array of school and community *resources* essential for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, re-engaging disconnected students, and strengthening families, schools, and neighborhoods.

### An Example of a Broad Intervention Framework

Our research has found that for schools to play a greater role in enhancing equity of opportunity requires developing a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. Clustering the essential needs identified by schools and communities yields six major intervention arenas – all of which play a role in dropout prevention, closing the achievement gap, and increasing graduation rates. Working from the classroom outward, these are:

- (1) **Regular classroom strategies to *enable* learning** – teachers collaborate with other teachers and student support staff to ensure learning is personalized for all students and especially those manifesting mild-moderate learning and behavior problems. There is a focus on enhancing the range of learning options, extending learning opportunities, and providing learning supports, accommodations, and special assistance as needed and within the context of implementing “Response to Intervention.” Special attention is given to re-engaging those who have become disengaged from learning at school.

### Learning supports in the classroom and school-wide

A key to enhancing learning supports in the classroom is “opening classroom doors” to bring others into the classroom. Besides in-class collaboration with student support staff and other teachers, there is an emphasis on training volunteers to assist with and mentor students-in-need.

A learning supports system in the classroom aims to *enable* student learning by assisting, supporting, and enhancing the capability of teachers to (a) prevent problems, (b) intervene as soon after problems arise, (c) enhance intrinsic motivation for learning, and (d) re-engage students who have become disengaged from classroom learning. All this helps stem the tide of out-of-class referrals.

- (2) **Supports for transitions** – programs and systems designed to assist students and families as they negotiate hurdles to enrollment, adjust to school, grade, and program changes, make daily transitions before, during, and after school, access and effectively use supports and extended learning opportunities, and so forth.

Successful transitions require a range of interventions that address potentially disruptive changes affecting students, families, and teachers. In the classroom and school-wide (and sometimes at the district level), such supports are designed to (a) enhance successful transitions, (b) prevent transition problems, (c) use transitions to enhance acceptance and reduce alienation, and (d) use transitions to increase positive attitudes/motivation toward school and learning and enable achievement.

Students and their families frequently experience difficulty when making transitions

- (3) **Home involvement and engagement** – programs and systems designed to increase and strengthen the home and its connections with school.

While policy calls for *parent* involvement, the reality is that many students are cared for by grandparents, aunts, siblings, and foster families. Also, it must be recognized that, because of past experiences, many care-providers are not motivated to connect with the school, and some are so angry with schools that they are unreceptive when contacted.

Those in the home often need assistance before they can play a potent role in supporting a child

A learning supports system develops a full range of classroom and school-wide (and sometimes district level) interventions to assist and then engage and re-engage key stakeholders in the home. The supports aim to (a) strengthen the home situation, (b) enhance home involvement in and capability for problem solving, (c) increase home support for student learning and development, and (d) enlist the home in strengthening school and community.

- (4) **Community involvement and engagement** – programs and systems designed to increase and strengthen outreach to develop greater community involvement and support from a wide range of entities. This includes agency collaborations and use of volunteers to extend learning opportunities and help students-in-need.

Most schools reach out to a few community partners, especially those offering mental and physical health and social services. A learning supports system aims to go further. The intent is to fill critical systemic gaps by weaving in relevant community resources to work collaboratively on mutual concerns related to strengthening students, schools, families, and neighborhoods. For schools and the district, this requires programs and systems to increase and strengthen outreach that builds linkages and collaboration with a wide range of entities and resources. Examples include agencies, businesses, youth and recreational groups, art and cultural institutions, faith-based and charitable organizations, service clubs, the local library, and legal aid groups.

Look to the community for more than health and social services

Many school and neighborhood crises are preventable

- (5) **Crisis response and prevention** – programs and systems designed to respond to, and where feasible, prevent school and personal crises and trauma, including creating a caring and safe learning environment and countering the impact of out-of-school traumatic events.

The broad category of crisis assistance and prevention stresses not only effective emergency response and aftermath help, but a major emphasis on prevention that fits nicely with concerns for creating a positive and supportive school climate. A general focus on crisis prevention encompasses bullying and violence prevention and other efforts to curtail problems and minimize the need for discipline and suspensions. The supports in this arena require integrated classroom, school-wide, and district programs and systems that (a) respond to crises, (b) minimize the impact of crises, (c) where feasible, prevent school and personal crises and trauma, (d) counter the impact of out-of-school traumatic events. and (e) create a caring and safe learning environment.

Equitable access to effective services for students and families when needed

- (6) **Student and family assistance** – programs and systems designed to facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance on campus and in the community as needed.

Here, the focus is on what has been the traditional emphasis of student support services – helping students and families who are identified as needing personal and specialized assistance. Such supports usually require programs and systems to facilitate access of specific students and families to effective health and social services and other special assistance and alternative settings as needed. This arena also encompasses career and college planning.

Finally, it should be noted that each of the six arenas intersect with a full continuum of interventions. The continuum encompasses three subsystems: (1) promoting healthy development and preventing problems, (2) responding early after problem onset, and (3) treating chronic and severe problems. While such a continuum is often portrayed as three levels or tiers, this is too limiting a perspective of student and learning supports. Development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports to promote equity of opportunity requires a framework that emphasizes weaving school and community resources together to integrate each of the continuum's subsystems with each other and with the six content arenas (see Exhibit on next page). *Effectively implementing such a system is key to enhancing a positive school climate and establishing a comprehensive community school.*

## LEVELS OF AN INTERVENTION CONTINUUM

**System for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems**     
 **System for Early Intervention** (Early after problem onset)     
 **System of Care**

<b>CONTENT ARENAS</b>	<b>Regular classroom strategies to enable learning</b>			
	<b>Supports for transitions</b>			
	<b>Home involvement and engagement</b>			
	<b>Community involvement and engagement</b>			
	<b>Crisis response and prevention</b>			
	<b>Student and family assistance</b>			

### A Policy Umbrella

*Enhancing equity of opportunity requires adding a third primary component for school improvement policy*

As noted above, the commission’s recommendations for *Meeting the Needs of Students in High-poverty Communities* risk repetition of the history of providing partial and temporary assistance for a relatively few schools and students and further fragmenting efforts to enhance equity of opportunity for success at school. And the recommendations do not recognize the fundamental need for policy that unifies currently marginalized and fragmented programs and services aimed at the many interrelated emotional, behavioral, and learning problems manifested at schools.

If schools are to play a potent role in enhancing equity of opportunity, they must transform the ways in which they address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. For this to happen, school improvement policy must be expanded.

Current policy is based on a two component model that emphasizes (1) instruction and (2) management/governance. A third primary component is essential to the equity agenda. The focus of this third component is on unifying and developing a comprehensive set of interventions to support students and their families. Such a component

*Good ideas and missionary zeal are sometimes enough to change the thinking of individuals; they are rarely, if ever, effective in changing complicated organizations (like the school) with traditions, dynamics, and goals of their own.*

must be fully integrated into school improvement policy and practices in ways that advance the transformation of public education. A three component policy already is taking root at some state departments of education and districts. Many are referring to it as their *Learning Supports Component* or their *Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*.

A unified student and learning supports component provides an umbrella for schools and communities to work together to enhance equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond. To this end, the component must be designed to (a) play out effectively in classrooms and school-wide, (b) connect effectively with district programs, and (c) outreach to the surrounding community to fill intervention and resource gaps and collaborate in addressing overlapping concerns.

(Note: Adoption of a three component policy framework for school improvement requires a dedicated set of standards and an expanded framework for school accountability. These are highlighted in *Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports*.)

## **Reworking Operational Infrastructure**

The commission's report is relatively silent on necessary operational infrastructure changes. Introducing major improvements across a district to enhance equity of opportunity requires *implementation mechanisms and mechanisms for the systemic changes* involved in transformation, replication to scale, and sustainability. These implementation and systemic changes require a significant reworking of existing operational infrastructures.

In transforming student and learning supports, it is important first to conceive what is needed at the school level. (Changes mean little if they don't play out effectively at schools; moreover, equity calls for ensuring essential school improvements play out at all schools in a district.) With the school level well conceived, the focus moves to connecting feeder patterns or families of schools, and then to ensuring the district infrastructure is supportive of school and feeder pattern operations.

## **Reconceiving School Operational Infrastructure**

With specific respect to student and learning supports, the trend has been for districts to distribute personnel to schools, but to pay little attention to operational concerns. At most schools, the current infrastructure for student and learning supports consists of a couple of teams that process individuals referred for learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems. One of these teams, often called a student study or assistance team, focuses on those students who have moderate-severe problems but are not seen as appropriate referrals for special education consideration. The other team, usually called the IEP team, focuses on individuals where a disability is of concern.

Since there usually is not a specified administrative leader assigned to improve student and learning supports, such supports are not well-represented at decision making tables where school improvement is discussed, budgets are allocated, and so forth.

The consequences of this ongoing marginalization is that too little attention is paid to

- the policy and systemic deficiencies related to efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching
- the need to rethink how student and learning support resources are used
- exploring major innovations that can make student and learning supports more effective and equitably available for all students instead of just a few.

Establishment of learning supports as a third primary and essential set of functions calls for reworking the operational infrastructure at a school to ensure there is administrative leadership and the type of work groups (teams, committees) necessary to carry out the functions. The Exhibit on the next page presents a prototype for such an infrastructure.

As illustrated, the learning supports component has an administrative leader and a leadership team that works with that leader in designing and guiding development of a comprehensive system of learning supports and ensuring the system is fully integrated into school improvement planning. Together, the administrative leader and the leadership team establish work groups focused on intervention and system development and make certain that the two teams focused on individual students are fully integrated.

## Connecting Schools

Toward cohesive and equitable deployment and pooling of resources to achieve economies of scale

After a school has established a *Learning Supports Leadership Team*, it can connect with other schools to form a multi-site council (e.g., a *Learning Supports Leadership Council*) consisting of 1-2 representatives from each school in the feeder pattern or family of schools. Such a council provides a leadership mechanism focused on integrating the efforts of high schools and their feeder middle and elementary schools to help ensure cohesive and equitable deployment of resources and enhance the pooling of resources to achieve economies of scale. Particular attention is paid to overlapping concerns related to intervening with students and their families and connecting with community resources.

For instance, families often have children enrolled at all three levels of schooling. Too often, some families find that they have a child in trouble at each level. When this is the case, each school tends to intervene with the family separately. This, of course, is not cost effective and usually is not a good intervention approach. The multi-site council can work out processes that enable a coordinated and cost-effective strategy.

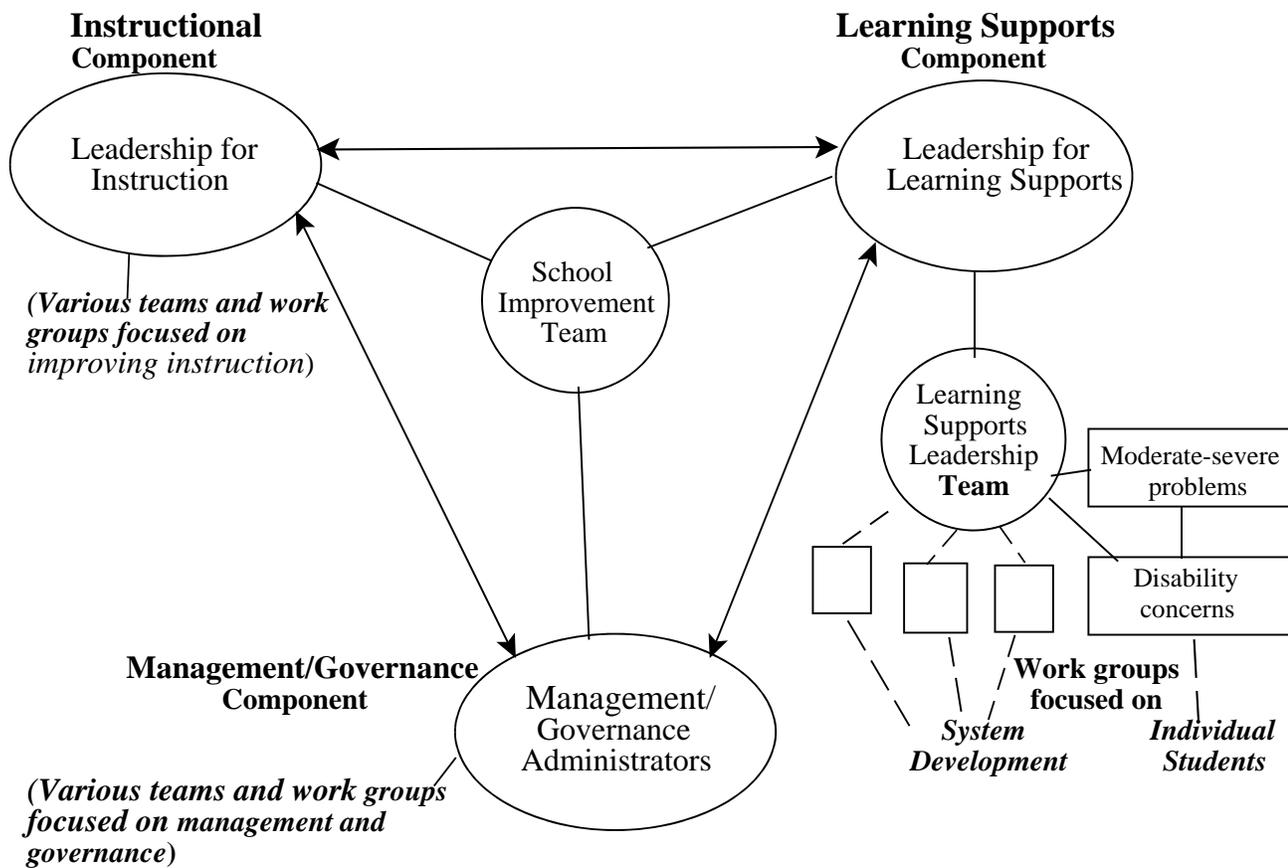
With respect to connecting with community resources, multi-site teams are especially useful to community agencies that often don't have the time or personnel to make independent arrangements with individual schools. In this last regard, the council can play a special role in community outreach both to create formal working relationships and make sure that all participating schools have equitable access to such resources.

As an outgrowth of the school teams, the Learning Supports Leadership Councils are well positioned to help district management and governance bodies be well-informed about

- how schools are addressing barriers to learning and teaching
- where each is in the process of system development
- what major gaps exist
- school and feeder pattern priorities for moving forward
- what capacity building supports are needed.

Such information is fundamental to district strategic planning for school improvement. The information also positions the district to interface with community agencies and resources in ways that further enhance formal working relationships and equitable access for all schools.

**Example of an Integrated Infrastructure at the School Level**  
(Should be paralled at the district level)



## **District Changes**

With respect to the three components, the operational infrastructure at the district level needs to parallel that at the school. The learning supports component requires a high level district administrative leader and a leadership team to work with the leader in strategically planning the district's role in helping schools develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. In addition to central office staff, this team should include 1-2 representatives from each multi-site council. Together, the administrative leader and team establish working groups focused on content, system development, capacity building, replication to scale, and sustainability.

To ensure informed support for the district's role, it is invaluable to have the school board establish a formal subcommittee focused on the efforts to unify and develop a comprehensive system of learning supports. Such a subcommittee can assure a broad approach to enhancing equity of opportunity for all students.

## **School-Community Collaboratives**

In weaving school and community resources together, the need is for a school-community collaborative that includes a wide array of community stakeholders and has an effective operational infrastructure. School-community collaboration is a fundamental concern in developing a comprehensive system of learning supports and is a particular emphasis in the arena designated as community involvement and engagement.

While a school-community collaborative can be established by any group of stakeholders, it usually works out best when schools and the district take the lead. Certainly, every school is expected to initiate some degree of outreach to immediate neighborhood entities (including students' families).

For the larger community, the district needs to play a significant role in helping establish and support school-community collaboratives. Given that school-community collaboratives aim at effecting system change, they need to be (a) generated by policy, (b) driven by a clear vision, aims, and rationale, (c) allocated operational resources, (d) focused on delineated functions and tasks, (e) organized into an operational infrastructure that can strategically accomplish the functions, and (f) oriented to outcomes.

## **Concluding Comments**

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

John Maynard Keynes

At every step of schooling, the tendency is to breathe a sigh of relief when a youngster moves on to the next grade. Concern for specific individuals creeps in when learning, behavior, and emotional problems interfere with progress. Public health concerns arise when large numbers of youngsters are reported as not doing well. Civil rights concerns spring forth when large scale disparities become evident. And economic concerns emerge with enhanced visibility about the costs to society of so many students dropping out before high school graduation and the impact on global competitiveness of too few students going on to and succeeding in postsecondary education.

***At this juncture, it is clear that equity of opportunity at school is essential to addressing society's aspirations and disparities.***

**But to get from here to there, schools have to escape old ways of thinking about student and learning supports**

Anyone involved in trying to change schools has experienced the problem of how hard it is for some stakeholders to escape old ideas! In pursuing equal opportunity for all students to succeed at school, policy makers and school improvement planners need to:

- (1) Escape the idea that effective school improvement can be accomplished without ending the continuing marginalization of efforts to address barriers to student learning in school improvement policy and practice.
- (2) Escape the idea that addressing barriers for the many students-in-need can be accomplished through policy focused 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 intensive and specialized services.
- (3) Escape the idea that improving student and learning supports mainly involves enhancing coordination of interventions; the focus must be on transforming the enterprise into a comprehensive system that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice.
- (4) Escape the idea that adopting a continuum or levels of interventions is a sufficient framework for transforming current student/learning support services; learning supports also have a *content* focus.
- (5) Escape the idea that co-locating a few community services on school campuses is the same as systematically integrating a variety of community resources to fill critical intervention gaps at schools and enhance community engagement.
- (6) Escape the idea that development of a system that transforms and sustains how schools address barriers to student learning can be accomplished without a well developed strategic plan for *systemic change* and by personnel who have the capacity to effect the changes.

## The Animal School (a parable)

Once upon a time, the animals decided that their lives and their society would be improved by setting up a school. The basics identified as necessary for survival in the animal world were swimming, running, climbing, jumping, and flying. Instructors were hired to teach these activities, and it was agreed that all the animals would take all the courses. This worked out well for the administrators, but it caused some problems for the students.

The squirrel, for example, was an “A” student in running, jumping, and climbing but had trouble in flying class, not because of an inability to fly, for she could sail from the top of one tree to another with ease, but because the flying curriculum called for taking off from the ground. The squirrel was drilled in ground-to-air take-offs until she was exhausted and developed charley horses from overexertion. This caused her to perform poorly in her other classes, and her grades dropped to “D's”.

The duck was outstanding in swimming class – even better than the teacher. But she did so poorly in running that she was transferred to a remedial class. There she practiced running until her webbed feet were so badly damaged that she was only an average swimmer. But since average was acceptable, nobody saw this as a problem -- except the duck.

In contrast, the rabbit was excellent in running, but, being terrified of water, he was an extremely poor swimmer. Despite a lot of makeup work in swimming class, he never could stay afloat. He soon became frustrated and uncooperative and was eventually expelled because of behavior problems.

The eagle naturally enough was a brilliant student in flying class and even did well in running and jumping. He had to be severely disciplined in climbing class, however, because he insisted that his way of getting to the top of the tree was faster and easier.

It should be noted that the parents of the groundhog pulled him out of school because the administration would not add classes in digging and burrowing. The groundhogs, along with the gophers and badgers, got a prairie dog to start a private school. They all have become strong opponents of school taxes and proponents of voucher systems.

By graduation time, the student with the best grades in the animal school was a compulsive ostrich who could run superbly and also could swim, fly, and climb a little. She, of course, was made class valedictorian and received scholarship offers from all the best universities.

( George H. Reeves is credited with giving this parable to American educators.)





"This course was developed from the public domain document: The Challenge of Addressing Equity of Opportunity for All Students: Broadening the Work of the Equity and Excellence Commission - National Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA."