

## **School Improvement: A Functional View of Enabling Equity of Opportunity**

(August, 2011)

### **Abstract**

The ongoing dilemma for those expected to improve schools is how to meet our society's basic aims for public education in ways that level the playing field. The dilemma is exacerbated by the need to do more with less. This brief approaches these matters in the context of three direct functions that are essential to school improvement: (1) facilitation of learning and development, (2) addressing barriers to learning and teaching, and (3) managing resources and school governance. The emphasis is on the short shrift given in school improvement planning to developing a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. In particular, the brief outlines what is involved in transforming current student and learning supports into such a system, highlights pioneering work underway across the country, and cites resources for moving forward.

\*The Center co-directors are Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor; it operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA,

Write: Center for Mental Health in Schools, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563  
Phone: (310) 825-3634 email: [smhp@ucla.edu](mailto:smhp@ucla.edu) website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Feel free to share and reproduce this document; no special permission is needed.  
( <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/functions.pdf> )

Please cite source as the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA

## **School Improvement: A Functional View of Enabling Equity of Opportunity**

**F**rom a society's perspective, public schools are established and education is made compulsory to meet basic societal needs. In particular, schools provide ways for a society to (1) participate more directly in the socialization of the young, (2) promote economic viability, and (3) preserve the prevailing political system. From a human and civil rights perspective, public schools are seen as a way to "level the playing field" by playing a role in enabling equity of opportunity at school and for future life.

Aspects of both perspectives are reflected in vision and mission statements formulated for schools. Not evident from such abstract, idealized statements, however, are the competing ideologies and political and economic forces that shape school improvement planning and what transpires in classrooms.

As debates rage about the appropriate agenda and standards for public schools and about how best to achieve desired outcomes, the ongoing dilemma for those expected to improve schools is how to meet society's basic aims in ways that enable equity of opportunity, not just in some but in all schools. And, the dilemma is exacerbated by the need to accomplish these complex outcomes with limited and often dwindling personnel and other resources.

### **Working on the Dilemma Requires a Strong Public Education System**

We take as given that a strong public education system must be preserved and that many schools need improvement.

Common sense suggests that the foundation upon which good schools are built involves recruiting and retaining the best and the brightest personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, and staff who provide student and learning supports). In most enterprises, recruitment and retention of a critical mass of the best and the brightest requires salaries that are competitive with other professional careers, strong initial preparation, and work conditions that ensure ever increasing effectiveness and opportunities for growth and advancement. Unfortunately, as is widely acknowledged, the majority of schools are not yet able to recruit and retain enough high quality personnel. Despite this, basic functions can and must be improved.

Effective schools are best understood in transactional terms. That is, effectiveness is a function of the fit between what the staff and other stakeholders bring to the situation and the situational factors that must be addressed. For example, a teacher brings a set of assimilated knowledge, skills, and attitudes, a current state of being (demographic status; immediate physiological, cognitive, and emotional states), and available institutional resources. The situation presents a host of demands and stressors which differ in terms of contextual factors such as locale, level

## Essential Functions of School Improvement

of schooling, and student readiness. Of course, there are considerable variations among schools and in classrooms with respect to the number of students who show up motivationally ready and able to pursue what a teacher has planned to teach on a given day. And, there are wide resource disparities among schools due to differences in family income and support for school learning. At any given juncture, the situational demands and stressors may or may not be a good fit with what the teacher, school, and home can mobilize effectively.

All this complicates meeting society's needs and enabling equity of opportunity.

Current policy and plans for turning around, transforming, and continuously improving schools are too limited because they focus mainly on improving instruction and how schools manage resources. Although there are a variety of student support programs and services, they are marginalized in policy and practice and pursued in piecemeal and fragmented ways. Throughout many years of school reform, little or no attention has been paid to rethinking these student and learning supports. This state of affairs works against ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

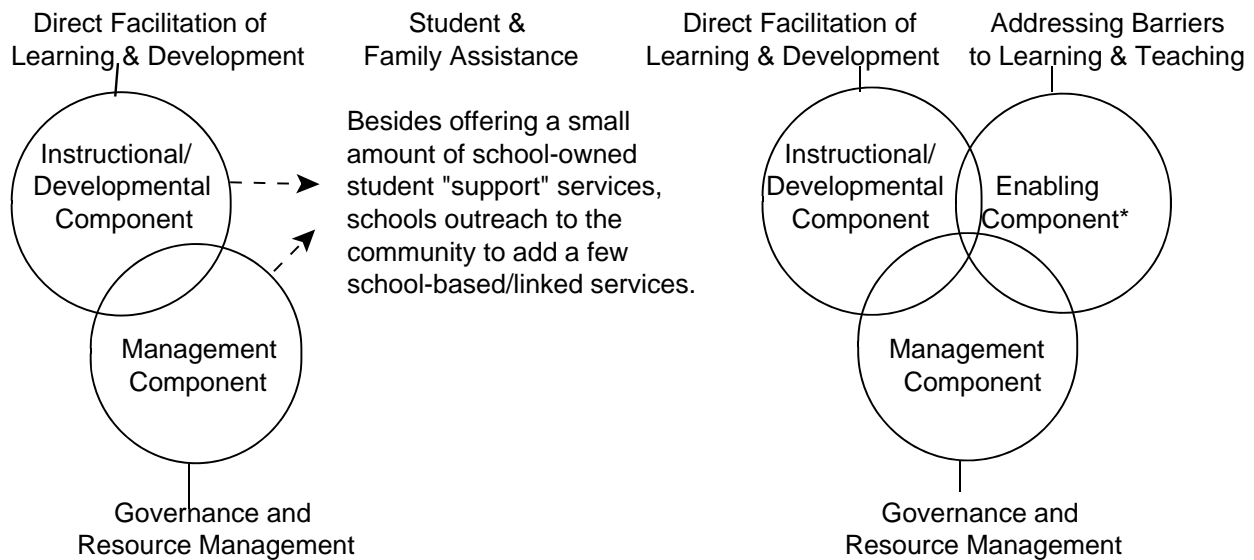
Policy for improving schools needs to shift from a two- to a three- component functional framework. The third component provides a unifying concept and umbrella under which all resources currently expended for student and learning supports are woven together. Properly conceived, the component provides a blueprint and roadmap for transforming the many pieces into a comprehensive and cohesive system at all levels.

From this perspective, then, there are three direct and overlapping functions that are essential to school improvement. As diagramed on the following page, these are:

- (1) *facilitation of learning and development* (i.e., the component focused on instruction and curriculum)
- (2) *addressing barriers to learning and teaching* (i.e., the component focused on enabling learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students -- sometimes called the Enabling Component, sometimes designated as the Learning Supports Component)
- (3) *managing resources and school governance* (i.e., the component focused on management and governance).

## Moving to a Three Component Policy Framework for School Improvement

Current State of Affairs → Moving toward a Comprehensive System



To enable equity of opportunity, school improvement planners must engage available personnel and other resources in ways that treat each of three components as fundamental (i.e., primary and essential). This may seem obvious but the prevailing approach to school improvement has given short shrift to the component focused on addressing barriers to learning. That is, although improvement plans incorporate some recommendations relevant to this component, there is no systemic focus on developing the type of unified and comprehensive system necessary to address the many overlapping barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. For example, sparse attention is given to (a) rethinking and restructuring the work of student and learning support professionals, (b) redeploying existing resources used for student and learning supports, and (c) weaving school and community resources together. As a result, there is little recognition of the role such improvements can play both in helping teachers enhance engagement and re-engagement in classroom learning and in establishing the type of caring climate in classrooms and school-wide that promotes progress and well-being.

These systemic changes are especially essential in schools that desperately need to improve equity of opportunity. And the timing is critical given the lack of balance in cutbacks and because of the inadequacy of prevailing ideas for using whatever resources are left for addressing the many problems undermining student outcomes.

### ***Much More than Coordination!***

If you think we are simply talking about improving coordination of existing programs, services, and personnel, please delve deeper. While *coordination* certainly is part of the picture, the essence of our focus on transforming student and learning supports involves development of a unified and comprehensive system. This calls for (1) *integrating* existing school resources into an enabling/learning supports component, (2) *integrating* the component fully into school improvement planning, and (3) *integrating* with community resources to fill gaps in the component. With this accomplished, the concern then becomes that of ensuring *coordinated* implementation within and across school and community.

Dictionary definitions help clarify the distinction between coordination and integration:

>"Coordinate: to act in harmonious combination, to work together"

>"Integrate: to bring together or incorporate parts into a whole; to combine into one unified system"

With this distinction in mind, it seems clear that enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school involves much more than coordinating interventions and linking with and collocating agency resources. The critical need is for *integrating* all the resources, people, and programs focused on enabling learning into a unified system to more effectively address barriers and re-engage students to enable school learning. The need is exacerbated by the economic downturn because (1) those student support staff who are not laid off will continue to be asked to help far more students than is feasible, and (2) despite limited and dwindling agency resources, there will be increased emphasis on schools making better connections with whatever limited public services are still available.

Pioneering initiatives are moving to develop a unified and comprehensive enabling/learning supports component as a fundamental function in their school improvement plans. These initiatives are pushing *beyond* individual and small group services and ideas such as linking with and collocating agency resources and enhancing coordination. No one denies that such strategies have a place. But the need is for unifying and reconceiving supports and fully integrating them with direct instructional and management efforts to better meet the needs of all students.

### **Operationalizing the Enabling/Learning Supports Component**

As illustrated in the following Exhibit, the intent of an enabling/learning supports component is to support all students by both addressing interfering factors and re-engaging disconnected students. Work related to pioneering initiatives around the country is providing realistic and cost-effective guidance for operationalizing the component. The emphasis is on

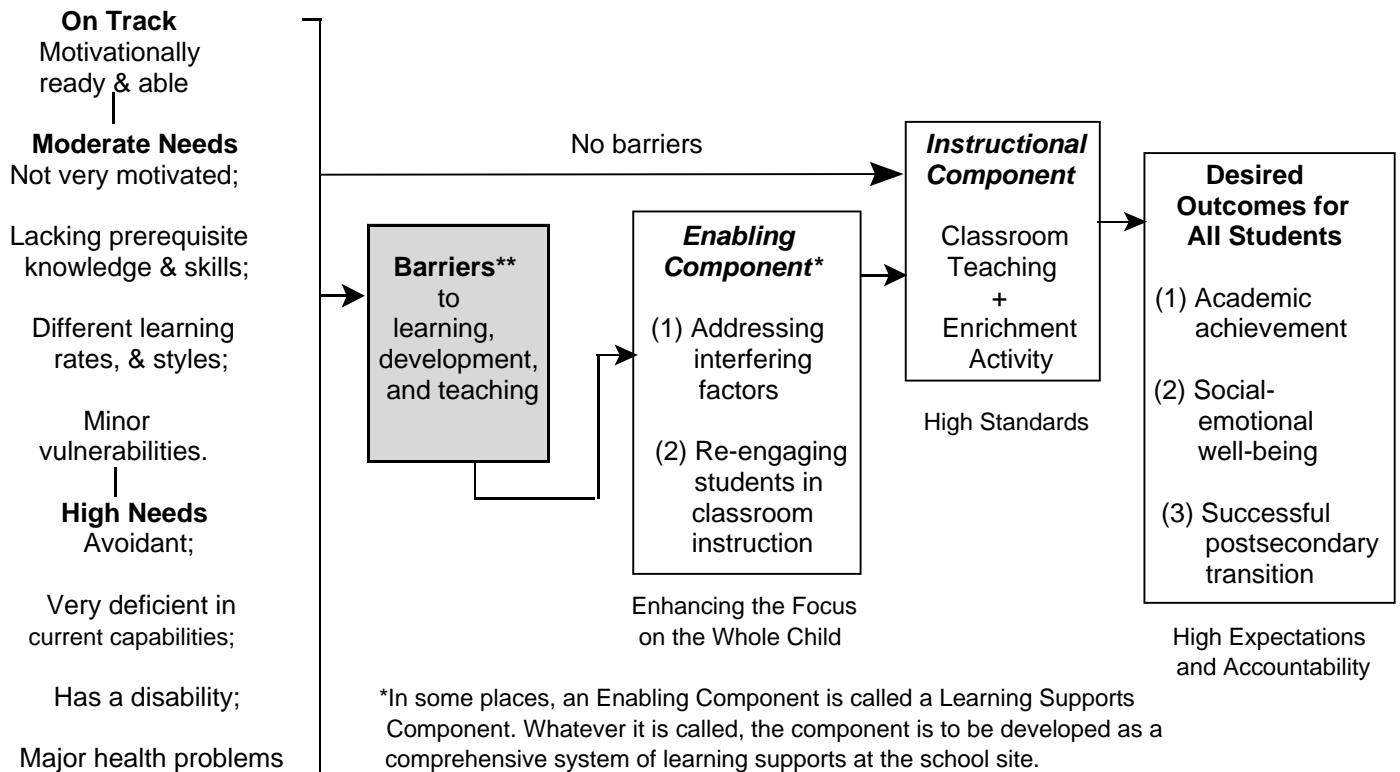
- rethinking and coalescing existing student and learning support programs, services and personnel in order to develop a unified and comprehensive system
- reworking operational infrastructure to weave together different funding streams, reduce redundancy, and redeploy available resources at school and from the community.

## Exhibit

### An Enabling or 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)



#### \*\*Examples of Risk-Producing Conditions that Can be Barriers to Learning

Environmental Conditions			Person Factors
Neighborhood	Family	School and Peers	Individual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt;extreme economic deprivation</li> <li>&gt;community disorganization, including high levels of mobility &amp; unemployment</li> <li>&gt;violence, drugs, crime, etc.</li> <li>&gt;minority and/or immigrant isolation</li> <li>&gt;Lack of positive youth development opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt;chronic poverty</li> <li>&gt;domestic conflict/ disruptions/violence</li> <li>&gt;parent/sibling substance abuse or mental illness</li> <li>&gt;modeling problem behavior</li> <li>&gt;abusive caretaking</li> <li>&gt;inadequate provision for quality child care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt;poor quality school</li> <li>&gt;negative encounters with teachers</li> <li>&gt;negative encounters with peers &amp;/or inappropriate peer models</li> <li>&gt;many disengaged students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt;medical problems</li> <li>&gt;low birth weight/ neurodevelopmental delay</li> <li>&gt;psychophysiological problems</li> <li>&gt;difficult temperament &amp; adjustment problems</li> <li>&gt;inadequate nutrition and health care</li> </ul>

Note: A reciprocal determinist view of behavior recognizes the interplay of environment and person variables with negative environmental conditions exacerbating person factors.

Our Center's research and development clarifies that an enabling/learning supports component encompasses a full continuum of interventions and covers a well-defined and delimited set of classroom and schoolwide supports (see resource list). All this is operationalized as a system.

Developing the system entails

- (1) unifying all direct efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching at a school
- (2) connecting families of schools (such as feeder patterns) with each other and with a wider range of community resources
- (3) weaving together school, home, and community resources in ways that enhance effectiveness and achieve economies of scale.

Starting points include ensuring the work is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice, reworking operational infrastructure, setting priorities for system development, and (re)deploying whatever resources are available in keeping with priorities. More specifically, the transformation:

**Needed: a system that includes a full continuum of interventions and a well-defined and delimited set of classroom and schoolwide supports**

- Reframes current student support programs and services and redeploys the resources to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system for enabling learning
- Develops both in-classroom and schoolwide approaches that enhance 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
- Realigns district, school, and school-community infrastructures to weave resources together in order to enhance and evolve the learning supports system
- Pursues 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 management/governance
- Expands accountability systems both to improve data-based decision-making and reflect a comprehensive picture of students' and schools' performance that incorporates efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching.

Our Center has delineated a set of seven basic steps for how to proceed in developing a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports. See:

*Establishing a comprehensive system of learning supports at a school:*

*Seven steps for principals and their staff*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf>

The steps include specific ways to mobilize school stakeholder commitment and how to organize staff to rethink, design, and implement the changes over the next few years as an essential and integrated component of school improvement.

### Concluding Comments

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, (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, and (c) there will be a continuing trend to over-refer many common learning and behavior problems for specialized services.

As Congress considers reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), it is time and it is essential to include a unifying and comprehensive focus on addressing barriers to learning and re-engaging disconnected students.

At the state and regional levels, it is time and it is essential for education agencies to reorganize student and learning supports into a cohesive unit and provide guidance and capacity building support for districts to build a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated system of learning supports.

At the district and school level, it is time and it is essential to go beyond thinking in terms of providing traditional services, linking with and collocating agency resources, and enhancing coordination. These all have a place, but they do not address how to unify and reconceive ways to better meet the needs of the many, rather than just providing traditional services to a relatively few students.

***It is time and it is essential to fundamentally  
rethink student and learning supports.***



## Appendix A

### ***Pioneering Initiatives are Underway!***

In motion across the country are trailblazing initiatives by state education agencies and school districts (e.g., in Louisiana, Iowa, Georgia, Florida, Arizona – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm> ).

For example:

- Over the past two years, Louisiana's Department of Education has developed its design for a *Comprehensive Learning Supports System* and has begun district-level work. The design has been shared widely throughout the state; positions for Regional Learning Supports Facilitators have been created; and implementation is underway with first adopters (<http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/uploads/15044.pdf> ).
- A nationwide initiative by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) in collaboration with our center at UCLA and Scholastic aims at expanding leaders' knowledge, capacity, and implementation of a comprehensive system of learning supports (<http://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=7264> ).
- In the Tucson Unified School District, the process of unifying student and learning supports into a comprehensive system has begun with the employment of a cadre of Learning Supports Coordinators to help with the transformation at each school ([http://www.tusd.k12.az.us/contents/depart/learningsupport\\_es/index.asp](http://www.tusd.k12.az.us/contents/depart/learningsupport_es/index.asp) <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/wheresithappening/tusdbrochure.pdf> ).

Such pioneers are moving forward to better balance cut-backs across all three components and to use remaining resources in ways that begin system building for the future.

#### SEE THE BROCHURES & PAMPHLETS

- > Hawaii - Comprehensive Student Support System (CSSS)  
[http://doe.k12.hi.us/programs/csss/csss\\_pamphlet.pdf](http://doe.k12.hi.us/programs/csss/csss_pamphlet.pdf)
- > Louisiana - Overview of the state's Comprehensive Learning Supports System -  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/lalearningsupport.pdf>
- > Ohio - Student Success: A Comprehensive System of Learning Supports  
<http://education.ohio.gov/GD/DocumentManagement/DocumentDownload.aspx?DocumentID=54970>
- > Tucson Unified School District - Learning Supports System  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/wheresithappening/tusdbrochure.pdf>
- > Indian River County Public School District (FL) - Learning Supports Collaborative  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/aasa/irlsc.pdf>

#### REVIEW THE MAJOR DESIGN DOCUMENTS

- > Louisiana Department of Education – <http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/uploads/15044.pdf>
- > Iowa Department of Education –  
[http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_download&gid=2588](http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=2588)
- > Gainesville City Schools – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/aasa/aasagainesville.pdf>

## Center Resources

### One Hour Introductory Webinar

Our Center developed this introduction in collaboration with the American Association of School Administrators and Scholastic. It is entitled: *Strengthening School Improvement: Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching*.  
<https://scholastic.webex.com/scholastic/lsr.php?AT=pb&SP=TC&rID=48915112&rKey=09f14db0881f5159&act=pb>

### Online Leadership Institute

If the presentation whets your appetite, you and your colleagues can go into greater depth on the various topics by accessing the online Leadership Institute modules we developed in collaboration with Scholastic's Rebuilding for Learning initiative as aids in planning and system building for better addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. These webinar sessions are online at - <http://rebuildingforlearning.scholastic.com/>

The six module online institute currently includes discussion of:

- I. Why new directions for student and learning supports is an imperative for school improvement.
- II Framing a comprehensive intervention system to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.
- II Reworking school and district operational infrastructure and policy to effectively build such a system.
- IV Expanding professional development related to engagement and re-engagement to include an enhanced understanding of intrinsic motivation.
- V. School transformation in terms of systemic change phases and tasks.
- II Planning and strategically pursuing implementation of a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports as an integrated part of school improvement.

### Books

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

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006b). *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

### Handbook

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2008). *Rebuilding for learning: Addressing Barriers to learning and teaching, and re-engaging students*. NY: Scholastic, Inc.  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/rebuild/RebuidlingV11RD28.pdf>

### Center Documents Online

*Toward next steps in school improvement: Addressing barriers to learning and teaching*.  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf> .

*Frameworks for systemic transformation of student and learning supports*.  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf>

*Funding stream integration to promote development and sustainability of a comprehensive system of learning supports*. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fundingstream.pdf>

*Improving Outcomes for Students and Schools Requires a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improvingoutcomes.pdf>

*Cut-Backs Make it Essential to Unify and Rework Student and Learning Supports at Schools and Among Families of Schools.* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/cutbacks.pdf>

*What every leader for school improvement needs to know about student and learning supports.* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/whateveryleader.pdf>

*Moving beyond the three tier intervention pyramid: Toward a comprehensive framework for Student and learning supports.* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/threetier.pdf>

*Establishing a comprehensive system of learning supports at a school: Seven steps for principals and their staff.* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf>

*Leadership at a School Site for Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports.* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/studentssupport/toolkit/aidd.pdf>

*Learning Supports and Small Schools.* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/learningsupportssmallschools.pdf>

*Resource Oriented Teams: Key Infrastructure Mechanisms for Enhancing Education Supports* [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Report/resource\\_oriented\\_teams.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf)

*What Might a Fully Functioning Enabling or Learning Supports Component Look Like at a School?* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/whatmightafully.pdf>

*Personalizing Personnel Development at Schools: A Focus on Student Engagement and Re-engagement.* <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagement.pdf>

## **Toolkit**

Includes many resources for Rebuilding Student Supports into a Comprehensive System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

## **WANT MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ANY OF THIS?**

For additional resources related to understanding how schools can better address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

The resources cited can be used for professional development related to system development and specific interventions to enhance equity of opportunity for students to succeed at school.

For anyone ready to begin the work described in this report, a good starting point is the guidance document entitled:

*Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports at a School:  
Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff*  
online at - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf>

And feel free at any time to email [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu) or [adelman@psych.ucla.edu](mailto:adelman@psych.ucla.edu) or the center email [smhp@ucla.edu](mailto:smhp@ucla.edu)