



*A Center Brief**

Rethinking District Budgets to Unify and Sustain a Critical Mass of Student and Learning Supports at Schools

(March, 2012)

Abstract

Education cut-backs are likely to worsen in the short run. This makes it imperative for policy makers to reverse trends toward lopsided cutbacks that decimate efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching. Furthermore, it is essential to move forward in more cost-effective ways by unifying student and learning supports and braiding remaining categorical funding in ways that reduce redundancy and counterproductive competition for sparse resources. This brief highlights these matters.

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Rethinking District Budgets to Unify and Sustain a Critical Mass of Student and Learning Supports at Schools

With each year's budget projections getting smaller and smaller, we are forced to think of more efficient ways to do business. We know the tremendous responsibility we have to do the right thing for our children. ... and we have to make tough choices.... The key is integrating educational funds to achieve the sustainability of "system change" for improved student outcomes.

From *Tools for Integrating Education Funds*,
Louisiana Department of Education

Districts across the country have had to cut staff and other resources to balance their budgets. Clearly, this is not a situation that is likely to facilitate school improvement. Indeed, the probability is that it will set back improvement efforts. While money is not the only factor in making schools better, drastic budget cuts certainly are not a tenable path to improvement. As administrators, teachers, support staff, parents and other stakeholders consistently caution: "Wherever you cut, you are going to hurt the kids."

The nation's commitment to ensuring every student has an equal opportunity to succeed at school requires balancing budgets in ways that do not completely undermine this ideal. Cutbacks increase the challenge of using every dollar and every resource in the most productive ways to improve outcomes for *all* students. Unfortunately, in many instances, budget cuts are decimating the capacity of schools to provide essential student and learning supports. In turn, this is subverting teachers' efforts to build effective learning connections with their students.

Education cut-backs are likely to worsen over the short run. This makes it imperative for policy makers to reverse trends toward lopsided cutbacks that counter efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching. Furthermore, it is essential to move forward in more cost-effective ways by unifying student and learning supports and braiding remaining categorical funding in ways that reduce redundancy and counterproductive competition for sparse resources. This brief highlights these matters.

Lopsided Cutbacks

If any major enterprise (corporation, hospital, legislature, school) disproportionately cuts segments of its staff, it risks undermining its mission and may completely immobilize itself.

In *practice*, there are three primary and overlapping components in ensuring students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school:

- *the instructional component* – which includes all direct efforts to facilitate learning and development
- *the enabling or learning supports component* – which embraces direct efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching
- *the management component* – which encompasses managerial and governance functions.

In *policy*, however, the enabling/learning supports component is not given the same priority and attention as the other two. Efforts to address interfering factors are enacted in a piecemeal and ad hoc fashion and implemented in fragmented ways. And, as budgets tighten, the trend often is for such supports to be among the early cuts and for the cuts to be lopsided. That is, student support staff (as compared to other staff) often are disproportionately laid off. In some instances, the ranks of school counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and other support staff are decimated. Examples abound. Last year in Spokane, out of 238 layoff notices, 55 went to school counselors. In Cleveland, layoff notices went out to all 15 district social workers and 32 nurses (about half the total of nurses). In Seattle, the school board voted to eliminate the position of elementary school counselors to help close its budget gap. And these are not anomalies.

In schools serving high numbers of students who are not doing well, learning supports are inequitably underwritten.

What makes all this especially unacceptable is that, in schools serving high numbers of students who are not doing well, learning supports already are inequitably underwritten. For example, Heuer & Stulich (2011) report finding “from 42% to 46% of Title I schools (depending on school grade level) had per-pupil personnel expenditure levels that were below their district’s average for non-Title I schools at the same grade level.”

As can be seen in recent reports from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the focus on student supports is highly circumscribed and poorly defined and the budget allocation is small. The NCES (Cornman, & Noel, 2011) categorizes district level expenditures as follows:

- Instruction and instruction-related: Salaries and benefits for teachers, teaching assistants, librarians, in-service teacher trainers, curriculum development, student assessment, technology, and supplies and services related to these activities.
- Student support service: Attendance and social work, guidance, health, psychological services, speech pathology, audiology, and other student support services.
- Administration: Expenditures for school and school district administration (school principal’s office, the superintendent and board of education and their immediate staff, and other local education agency staff.
- Operations: Expenditures for the operation and maintenance of school and school district facilities, and expenditures related to student transportation, food services and enterprise operations.

In the period from 1990 through 2008, the proportion of expenditures in each of these categories has changed very little:

- Instruction and instruction staff services represent about 65% of public school expenditures
- Student supports is about 5% of expenditures
- Administration, operations, transportation, food services is about 22% of expenditures (NCES, 2010).

The apparent reason for the small amount of student support expenditures is the tendency to think of such supports mainly as supplementary assistance for compensatory and special education populations. As Baker (2001) notes:

“The compensatory needs of at-risk students were formalized in federal legislation in 1965 as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. States responded to the federal program by creating state level policies to recognize and provide financial support for local districts to provide compensatory programs ... for at-risk children in predominantly low-income schools.... The case of limited English proficient children is ... similar to compensatory education in that the impetus for most state policy and local district program expansion was the implementation of Title VII of ESEA in 1976.”

Moreover, population and school finance equity research has long stressed that it is low-income students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency who “require more inputs” (Wilson, Lambright, & Smeeding, 2004). And it is this body of research that has made the case that “equal dollars do not buy equally productive inputs” or results.

The tendency to think of student and learning supports mainly in terms of compensatory and special education has been challenged, and approaches that address the needs of all students have been formulated (e.g., see Adelman & Taylor, 2006). However, efforts to develop such approaches are hampered by the trend to skew budget cuts in ways that eviscerate student and learning supports (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2010; 2011a).

Cuts to student and learning supports exacerbate inequities among schools and further limit availability of essential supports.

In sum, school finance inequities are well documented (Addonizio, 2009; Baker & Elmer, 2009; Baker & Ramsey, 2010; Duncombe & Yinger, 2004). And cuts to student and learning support resources exacerbate the inequities among schools and further marginalize and limit availability of essential inputs. Given this, districts and schools need to revisit the problem of lopsided cuts. By now it should be evident that no major urban district can ensure equity of opportunity for all students to succeed without developing a unified and comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

A major irony related to cutbacks that work against developing a potent system of learning supports is that such a system can help a district enhance its finances. For instance, it is clear that “while enrollment propels district costs, ... revenues are largely driven by the yearly average of students who attend” (EdSource, 2007). Given that absences drive down revenue, they not only jeopardize the ability of students to succeed at school, they undermine the capacity of schools to achieve their mission (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011a). Absenteeism arises from a variety of factors, many of which can be countered by a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports.

Moreover, such a system can reduce the amount of resources expended in reacting to behavior problems and can decrease the number of inappropriate referrals for special assistance and special education. And all this can help increase graduation rates and counter teacher dropout.

Braiding Categorical Funds to Better Address Barriers to Learning and Ensure Engagement (and Re-engagement) in Instruction

Within the constraints of government budgets, policy makers have addressed barriers to learning through categorical funding streams (e.g., targeted programs, “silos”), some of which were designated as entitlements (i.e., the dollars follow the students) and others were designed as competitions for funding. As Reyes & Rodriguez (2004) stress, such categorical programs are intended to “address either a particular or targeted education policy goal or the special needs of a category of eligible student populations.” As part of a school finance formula, these tend to reflect an acknowledgment by policy makers of the need for additional resources at certain schools and for certain student populations.

The widespread failure related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and the impact of special education encroachment on a district’s general operating funds have led to policy backlash. Categorical funding has been designated as too inflexible and as perpetuating a reactive “waiting for failure” approach. There have been increasing calls for block funding or at least waivers from categorical silos and for strategies that can stem the tide of students requiring additional funding (Baker, 2001). Examples of the latter include calls for an expanded focus on prevention, greater emphasis on early intervening and use of response to intervention, and renewed concern for enhancing classroom/school climate (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Brown-Chidsey, & Steege, 2010; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2012; National School Climate Council, 2007).

While it is illegal simply to ignore categories and blend all incoming funds, it is legitimate and feasible to braid certain resources across categories to achieve better outcomes and enhance cost-effectiveness. As work undertaken by the Louisiana Department of Education (2011) stresses:

We must put aside our "turfs" and our "purse-strings," in order to overcome the challenges that dwindling resources present for school improvement planning. It is critical for all leaders at the district level to support this effort, in order to empower all personnel to collaborate in new and effective ways. Leaders must remain engaged in this new way of planning and allow personnel the flexibility to think outside of the box to transform the way we do business. ... Managing change is difficult and to be successful, we have to meet the needs of all children, regardless of the ways we choose to fund programs. Far too often, in our silos we have said, "No, we can't do that because...", rather than working together to eliminate the silos. We are [too] comfortable with the inflexibility we have created.

With respect to student and learning supports, braiding for overlapping goals can be done related to special education, dropout prevention, family and home involvement, crisis response and prevention, support for transitions, community outreach, assistance for students and families with social and emotional needs, and more. And, besides school funds, strategic system-building can weave in community resources (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011b).

Examples of Flexible Use and Braiding of Resources

From California: "The average school district in California gets about 30% of its funding from programs targeted to particular programs, such as Student Assessment, and to students with special needs, such as Special Education. There are currently about 20 state programs whose regulations have been left intact. ... In 2008-09, leaders in Sacramento reduced funding for about 40 state categorical programs and made them discretionary through 2012-13. This means that the funds may be spent for any educational purpose during that time. The flexibility was granted to help districts manage their budgets in a time of revenue downturns."

EdSource (2011)

From Louisiana: The Louisiana Department of Education analyzed the range of funding sources for learning supports (e.g., funds personnel, and programs from No Child Left Behind Titles I, II, III, VI and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). They then developed a manual and tools to guide and assist local education agencies in understanding how to integrate multiple funding sources to accomplish efforts such as the development of the state's design for a Comprehensive Learning Supports System.

Louisiana DOE (2011)

Unifying What's Left to More Effectively Address Factors Interfering with Learning and Teaching

Shortcomings in distribution of dollars are exacerbated at the district and school levels by unimaginative and unproductive resource allocation and use practices.... The major findings are that dollars are not used in ways that directly raise student achievement. Districts tend to use most of any increased revenues to hire more teachers, typically to reduce class size or provide more out of classroom services. Neither strategy boosts students achievement very much.

Odden & Clune (1995)

Despite cuts, resources will continue to be deployed to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems, especially in schools serving low income families. This reality underscores the importance of improving how factors that lead to such problems are addressed and how such problems are handled after they arise.

By balancing cuts, braiding categorical resources, and strategically weaving in community resources to fill gaps, districts and their schools can still proactively pursue, over the coming years, development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports at schools. This can be accomplished by strategically:

- reducing fragmentation and redundancy and redeploying how existing resources are used
- reframing the roles and functions of remaining student support staff
- implementing “Response to Intervention” (RTI) in ways that appropriately reduce the need for out-of-classroom referrals and the related overemphasis on expensive services (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2012).

Development of a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports also requires reworking district and school operational infrastructures to ensure dedicated and nonmarginalized leadership and work groups (Adelman & Taylor 2006; 2008; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011c,d,e,f). Finally, the work calls for establishment of an effective school-community collaborative to provide a mechanism for weaving together related school and community resources (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011b).

To these ends, every school improvement plan needs a substantial focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. The aim should be to unify current ad hoc, piecemeal activity and redeploy sufficient resources to begin the process of developing a comprehensive system of learning supports (e.g., see Education Development Center, 2012; Louisiana Department of Education, 2010). In this respect, it should be noted that provisions in both the *No Child Left Behind Act* and in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* allow use of some allocated federal funds for integration of programs and services.

(Appended to this brief is a brief discussion of why schools should develop a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports.)

Concluding Comments

In the face of dwindling education funding and cutbacks of personnel and other resources, recent data reports also make it clear that barriers to learning and teaching are on the rise and are exacerbated by the economic downturn. For example, the 2012 *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy*,

The impact of the economic downturn is widespread among schools across the country. ... Many teachers, as well as students and parents themselves, note an increase in need among students and their families. ... A majority (64%) of teachers report that in the last year, the number of students and families needing health and social support services has increased, while 35% of teachers also report that the number of students coming to school hungry has increased. At the same time, many teachers have seen reductions or eliminations of health or social services (28% overall, including 34% of high school teachers) and after-school programs (29% overall, including 32% of high school teachers).

From a civil rights perspective, a 2012 report from the U.S. Department of Education focuses light on continuing school disparities related to many students of color in general and especially those in schools serving low income families. In this respect, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that:

The undeniable truth is that the everyday educational experience for many students of color violates the principle of equity at the heart of the American promise. It is our collective duty to change that.

This brief underscores the need to rethink district budgets to unify and sustain a critical mass of student and learning supports at schools. Long-term budget policy and current budget cutbacks marginalize such supports. Initiatives, programs, and services are not well-conceived, are stuck onto schools and districts, and are implemented in piecemeal and fragmented ways. As a result, while each may have a small positive effect, the tendency is to see the work as dispensable when budgets must be cut.

What gets lost in all this is that so many schools must address a multitude of barriers to learning and teaching if they are to ensure equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and thus increase graduation rates (and reduce teacher dropouts). Available outcome data and the scale of need both underscore that relying solely on instructional improvement is insufficient. Clearly every school must offer the best instruction possible, but for many students to benefit from good instruction, schools must also develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.

Despite budget cuts, pioneering initiatives across the country are showing how to improve instruction and also move forward in reworking student/learning supports. For example:

- the Gainesville City School District in Georgia has created new policies and modified or expanded existing strategies, policies and practices to develop a system of student and learning supports that enables learning

and enhances equity of opportunity for succeeding at school. Results-to-date: Graduation rates have increased from 73.3% in 2009 to 81.3% in 2010 and 84.9% in 2011. Referrals for disciplinary action in the middle and high schools have dropped from 91 disciplinary tribunals in 2008-09 to 47 in 2010-11, and the elementary schools saw a 75% decrease. (Education Development Center, 2012).

- Over the past two years, Louisiana's Department of Education (2010) 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; a position for Regional Learning Supports Facilitators has been outlined; and implementation is underway with the first adopter. And the department has developed a manual and tools to guide and assist local education agencies in understanding how to integrate multiple funding sources to accomplish the work (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010).
- A nationwide initiative by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) in collaboration with our center at UCLA and Scholastic Inc. 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://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/wheresithappening/tusdbrochure.pdf>).

These trailblazing efforts are moving forward by balancing cut-backs so that remaining resources can be used to improve both instruction and build an effective system that addresses barriers to learning and teaching and re-engages disconnected students. Policy makers need to encourage others to do the same.

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Appendix

Why Schools Should Develop a Unified and Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports

*Unifying student and learning supports is long overdue;
cut-backs make it essential to do it now!.*

It is time 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 to fundamentally rethink student and learning supports. The intent is to develop a comprehensive and cohesive system. Such a system encompasses a full continuum of interventions and covers a well-defined and delimited set of classroom and schoolwide supports (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf>).

Developing the system entails

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

Starting points include ensuring that 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 to pursue priorities (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf>).

The best way to approach the topic of evidence related to why districts and schools should develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports is to stress two sets of data:

- data showing the need for such systemic changes related to school improvement efforts
- data on the value of moving toward a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. (See Exhibit on next page.)

Exhibit

Data on Why Schools Should Develop a Unified and Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports

(1) Data pointing to the shortcomings of current school improvement efforts

- excessive absences,
- high student dropout rates,
- high teacher dropout rates,
- the continuing achievement gap,
- the plateau effect related to efforts to improve achievement test performance
- the growing list of schools designated as low performing,
- the degree to which high stakes testing is taking a toll on students

Related to this is the evidence that current school improvement planning does not adequately focus on the need for schools to play a significant role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. See:

>"*School Improvement Planning: What's Missing?*"

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/whatsmissing.htm>

>"*Addressing What's Missing in School Improvement Planning: Expanding Standards and Accountability to Encompass an Enabling or Learning Supports Component*"

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enabling/standards.pdf>

The above all indicate the need for new directions in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and moving school improvement policy from a two- to a three-component framework.

(2) Moreover, the combined data from a variety of efforts that have been undertaken provide an extensive and growing body of research indicating the value of moving toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports. *The various studies show improvements in school attendance, reduced behavior problems, improved interpersonal skills, enhanced achievement, and increased bonding at school and at home.*

See, for example:

>*Rebuilding for Learning -- Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching, and Re-engaging Students* online at -- <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/casestudy.pdf>

This report from the Education Development Center (EDC) highlights the processes and outlines the successes of Gainesville City Schools (GA) as they create a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports.

>"*Addressing Barriers to Student Learning & Promoting Healthy Development: A Usable Research- Base*" online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/BarriersBrief.pdf>

>Lists of Empirically Supported/evidence Based Interventions for School-aged Children and Adolescents annotated at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/aboutmh/annotatedlist.pdf>

>CASEL – http://www.casel.org/downloads/SEL_and_Natl_Policy_Final.pdf

>Statewide example of data indicating a significant relationship across secondary schools between California's *Academic Performance Index* (API) scores and three-quarters of the survey indicators on the Healthy Kids Survey – <http://www.wested.org/chks/pdf/factsheet.pdf>

>Excerpts from the Executive Summary of an American Institutes for Research (AIR) evaluation that gathered data related to Iowa's first implementation steps – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/wheresithappening/airiowa.pdf>