

Preface

“What more can I do to help the children in my class who are not making it?” the teacher asked with a note of despair.

Before either of us could respond, someone shouted, “Why don’t we talk about improving schools to keep kids from having problems?” It was more a statement than a question, and the feelings accompanying it were strong. Some in the audience nodded their agreement. Others, concerned about their children with special needs, said that they wanted more specialized programs and staff. They didn’t feel general classroom and school improvements would do the job, and it was too late to prevent their kids’ problems. And so it goes whenever student problems and learning supports are discussed.

Every day a wide range of learning, behavioral, emotional, and physical problems interfere with students participating effectively and fully benefiting from the instruction teachers provide. Even the best schools find that *too many* youngsters are growing up in situations where significant barriers regularly interfere with their reaching full potential. This book is concerned with a broad range of learning and related behavior problems and the types of learning supports needed to address barriers to learning and teaching.

The notion of *barriers to learning* encompasses both external and internal factors. Some students bring with them to school a wide range of problems stemming from restricted opportunities associated with poverty, difficult and diverse family conditions, high rates of mobility, lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, problems related to substance abuse, inadequate health care, and lack of enrichment opportunities. Some youngsters also bring with them intrinsic conditions that make learning and performing difficult.

As a result, at every grade level there are students who come to school each day not quite ready to perform and learn in the most effective manner. Students’ learning and behavior problems are exacerbated as they internalize the frustrations of confronting barriers to learning and the debilitating effects of performing poorly at school. All this and the conditions under which they must teach interfere with teachers’ effectiveness.

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The world around us is changing at an exponential rate—so must the way we approach learning and related behavior problems. As we all are called upon to play a role in doing something about the many individuals who have trouble learning academic skills, it is essential that we all have a broad understanding of what causes such problems and what society in general and schools in particular need to do. It is time to move forward in the discussion of what it means to ensure that all youngsters have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

To these ends, this volume is designed as a guide for ensuring that every school has a comprehensive and adaptable system of learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide. The frameworks and practices presented are based on our many years of work in classrooms and schoolwide and from efforts to enhance school-community collaboration.

Some of what we have learned comes from our direct efforts to introduce, sustain, and scale up innovations. Other insights come from theory and the large body of relevant research. And equally instructive is what we have derived from lessons learned and shared by many school leaders and on-the-line staff who strive every day to do their best for children.

Although we emphasize the need to address barriers, we hasten to stress that this is not at odds with a focus on strengths, resilience, assets, and protective factors. Efforts to enhance positive development and improve instruction clearly can improve readiness to learn. However, it is the case that preventing problems often requires direct action to remove or at least minimize the impact of barriers.

Previous initiatives for enhancing student supports provide evidence about what must be changed and what new directions hold promise. Educators recognize, and research supports, that barriers to learning and teaching demand high-level, consistent, systemwide attention. The need for new directions in no way is meant to demean anyone's current efforts. We know that the demands placed on those working in the field go well beyond what common sense says anyone should be asked to endure. And we know that school staff often feel as if they are swimming against the tide and making too little progress.

Our objectives in writing this guide are to highlight some of the systemic reasons it feels that way, to improve the situation, and to enhance school outcomes. Some of what we propose is difficult to accomplish. We hope that the fact that there are schools, districts, and state agencies already trailblazing the way will engender a sense of hope and encouragement to those committed to improving how schools address barriers to learning.

Throughout the book, we include a variety of tools. They offer details about teacher and learning support staff practices that can make new directions a reality every day. They provide guides for capacity building as teachers and support staff team together for planning and implementation. And because leadership is essential in developing a comprehensive system of learning supports, a companion to this volume is available: *The School Leader's Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning*.