



Addressing Barriers

to Learning



New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link

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Since the recent reauthorization of IDEA . . . , response to intervention (RTI) has become a major stimulus for discussion and action. . . .schools are increasingly adopting an RTI logic to organize and deliver both academic and behavioral support for **all** students.

Jeff Sprague (2006)

Response to Intervention

The concept of *Response to Intervention* is finding its way into schools with a significant push from the federal government and with a particular emphasis on reducing inappropriate diagnoses for special education. For example, as stated in the 4/20/06 U.S. Department of Education Request for Special Education Research Grants, “RTI holds significant promise when it is conceptualized as a multi-tiered (typically three-tiers) systems approach that integrates general and special education.”

Properly conceived and implemented, RTI is expected to improve the learning opportunities for many students and reduce the number who are diagnosed with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders. The intent is to use "well-designed and well-implemented early intervention" in the regular classroom as a way to deal with a student's problems. The aim also is to improve assessment for determining whether more intensive and perhaps specialized assistance and diagnosis are required.

The process calls for making changes in the classroom to address learning and behavior as they are noted. Student responses are used as data to identify other

in-classroom strategies as needed. The process continues until it is evident that a student's problems cannot be resolved through classroom interventions alone.

A core difficulty involves mobilizing unmotivated students (and particularly those who have become actively disengaged from classroom instruction). If motivational considerations are not effectively addressed, there is no way to validly assess if a student has a true disability or disorder.

RTI is currently being operationalized across the country. While there will be variability in practice, the tendency is to proceed as if all that is needed is more and better instruction. Clearly, this is a necessary, but insufficient emphasis. Therefore, the following intervention concepts are proposed as guides in operationalizing RTI.

First, ensure an optimal teaching environment. This means *personalized* teaching. Then, the focus expands, if necessary, to meet needs for *special assistance* in the classroom.

When classroom interventions prove insufficient, some supportive assistance outside the classroom is added to the mix to help students remain in the regular program. Referral for special education assessment only comes after all this is found inadequate.

To spell this out a bit:

Step 1 involves *personalizing instruction*. The intent is to ensure a student *perceives* instructional processes, content, and outcomes as a good match with his or her interests and capabilities.

The first emphasis is on *motivation*. Thus:

Step 1a stresses use of motivation-oriented strategies to (re)engage the student in classroom instruction. This step draws on the broad science-base related to human motivation, with special attention paid to research on intrinsic motivation and psychological reactance. The aim is to enhance student perceptions of significant options and involvement in decision making.

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The next concern is *developmental capabilities*. Thus:

Step 1b stresses use of teaching strategies that account for current knowledge and skills. In this respect, the emphasis on tutoring (designated as “Supplemental Services” in Title I) can be useful if the student perceives the tutoring as a good fit for learning.

Then, if necessary, the focus expands to encompass *special assistance*. Thus:

Step 2 stresses use of special assistance strategies to address any major barriers to learning and teaching, with an emphasis on the principle of using the least intervention needed (i.e., doing what is needed, but no more than that). In this respect, the range of strategies referred to as “Prereferral Interventions” and the programs and services that constitute student/learning supports are of considerable importance. (Again, the impact depends on the student’s perception of how well an intervention fits his or her needs.)

Note: Prereferral interventions identify regular classroom problems, identify the source of the problems (student, teacher, curriculum, environment, etc.), and take steps to resolve the problems within the regular classroom.

Building Capacity for RTI

Implied in all this is capacity building. There must be a process that ensures teachers have or are learning how to implement “well-designed early interventions” in the classroom. And, support staff must learn how to play a role directly in the classroom to expand the nature and scope of interventions.

Two capacity building concerns are particularly essential. One is professional development on how to implement the Step 1 and 2 interventions described above; the other involves ensuring classrooms and student support programs are designed in ways that allow enough time for implementation.

Central to all this is learning how to create a positive classroom climate. One that uses practices that enhance motivation to learn and perform, while avoiding practices that decrease motivation and/or produce avoidance motivation. Such practices include:

- regular use of informal and formal conferences with students to discuss options, make decisions, explore learners’ perceptions, and mutually evaluate progress;
- a broad range of options from which learners can make *choices* about types of learning content, activities, and desired outcomes;

- a broad range of options from which learners can make choices about their need for *support* and *guidance* during decision making and learning processes;
- active decision making by learners in making choices and in evaluating how well the chosen options match their motivation and capability;
- establishment of program plans and mutual agreements about the ongoing relationships between the learners and program personnel;
- regular reevaluations and reformulation of plans, and renegotiation of agreements based on mutual evaluations of progress, problems, and learners’ perceptions of how well instruction matches his or her interests and capabilities.

Teachers and support staff also must learn how to approach *special assistance* in a sequential and hierarchical manner. First, they must be able to use reteaching strategies to better accommodate individual needs and differences. They also must be prepared to teach prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes the student may not have learned along the way. Finally, they must be able to play a role in addressing major barriers that are interfering with student learning and performance.

And, to ensure RTI strategies can be implemented in a personalized way, schools must promote the type of collaborative classrooms and grouping strategies that have the effect of turning big classes into smaller units.

More Research Please!

As stated in the 4/20/06 U.S. Department of Education Request for applications (84.324) Special Education Research Grants, “Despite the preference for RTI, the empirical research to support its application to district and school practices and systems is very limited.” Nevertheless, the practice is seen as so important that the Department is investing significant resources to encourage the practice and to evaluate its impact.

Fortunately, the field doesn’t have to wait for evidence since the weight of available findings support the concepts underlying operationalization of a broad RTI approach. For example, there is an extensive literature



Center News

supporting the application of intrinsic motivation theory to classroom instruction. And, with respect to special assistance, a broad range of supporting research has been culled from general and special education and the student support field.

Brief Commentary

If *Response to Intervention* (RTI) is treated simply as a problem of providing more and better instruction (e.g., the type of direct instruction described by the National Reading Panel sponsored by NICHD), it is unlikely to be effective for a great many students. However, if RTI is understood to be part and parcel of a comprehensive system of classroom and school-wide learning supports, schools will be in a position not only to address problems effectively early after their onset, but will prevent many from occurring.

By themselves, Response to Intervention strategies, especially if narrowly conceived, do not address major barriers to student learning. Such strategies must be broadly conceived and embedded in a comprehensive system of learning supports if they are to significantly reduce learning, behavior, and emotional problems, promote social/emotional development, and effectively reengage students in classroom learning. This will not only reduce the numbers who are inappropriately referred for special education or specialized services, it also will enhance attendance, reduce misbehavior, close the achievement gap, and enhance graduation rates.

A Few References

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Journal Articles & Book Chapter

- “School and Community Collaboration to Promote a Safe Learning Environment,” July, 2006, *The State Education Standard, 7*, 38-42, National Association of State Boards of Education
- “Systemic change for school improvement.” *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* (in press).
- “Mental health of children and youth and the role of public health professionals.” *Public Health Reports, 121*.
- “Reorganizing student supports to enhance equity.” In E. Lopez, G. Esquivel, & S. Nahari (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural school psychology*.

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- >ED492310 “Grade Repetition; Social Promotion; Public Education; Educational Policy; Classroom Techniques; Educational Practices; Intervention.”
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- >ED490010 “Youngsters’ Mental Health and Psychosocial Problems: What are the Data?”
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- ED490008 “Resource-Oriented Teams: Key Infrastructure Mechanisms for Enhancing Education Supports.”
- ED491711 “Systemic Change for School Improvement: Designing, Implementing, and Sustaining Prototypes and Going to Scale.”
- ED490011 “Restructuring Boards of Education to Enhance Schools Effectiveness in Addressing Barriers to Student Learning.”

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FOCUS ON THE REAUTHORIZATION OF THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

Feedback continues to arrive about the Center report entitled: *For Consideration in Reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act ... Promoting a Systematic Focus on Learning Supports to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching* (online at – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/PromotingaSystematicFocus.pdf>)

A process has been initiated to gather proposed changes related to addressing barriers to learning (including psychosocial and mental health concerns). Initial sharing has stimulated discussion and other information. A synthesis and analysis are underway, with a view toward facilitating an integrated and cohesive set of proposed changes.

Please let us know any information you have about proposed changes. And, send us any ideas about how the Center can help ensure the reauthorization includes an enhanced emphasis on ways for districts to increase effectiveness in addressing many of the factors that interfere with succeeding at school.

Why do they tell us to be quiet in class?

Because so many kids are trying to sleep!



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See [613(f)(1)].

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LET US HEAR FROM YOU!

Also, phone, fax, E-mail, or snail mail us if you want to submit feedback, request resources, or send comments and info for us to circulate.



Don't believe everything you think.

INITIATIVE FOR NEW DIRECTIONS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT

The *National Initiative: New Directions for Student Support* stresses that new directions means rethinking *all* support programs, resources, and personnel. Besides traditional support staff, learning support is provided by compensatory education personnel (e.g., Title I staff), resource teachers who focus on prereferral interventions, and personnel who provide a variety of school-wide programs (e.g., after school, safe and drug free school programs). New Directions stem from rethinking how *all* these resources are used.

The initiative's growing impact is seen in the involvement of increasing numbers of states and localities and initiative co-sponsors. The trend has been to look to the National Initiative for support in mobilizing active networks. The staff at the UCLA Center provides facilitative support and leadership. Each month the Center generates outreach mailings in all states and is receiving a steady flow of requests for more information and assistance from state and local education agencies and boards of education seeking to move in new directions. Listservs have been established to facilitate communications. Special meetings/trainings are convened. Legislative action has been stimulated. Corwin Press recently published two books that support the initiative, and these may be the beginning of a New Directions series.

Stakeholders in each state, of course, differ in how they relate to and support the National Initiative and pursue work in their own states and localities. What is common across venues is that increasing numbers of stakeholders want to go in new directions through making systemic changes to develop comprehensive approaches. And, what is becoming clearer is that opportunities to move forward occur every time school improvement is an agenda item.

Interested in learning more about this? Go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm> and/or contact the Center.

Center Staff:

*Howard Adelman, Co-Director
Linda Taylor, Co-Director
Perry Nelson, Coordinator
... and a host of graduate and
undergraduate students*

**The best time
to plant a tree is
30 years ago.**

**The second best
time is now.**

Chinese proverb

Policy & Practice Concern Teacher Support is Student Support

At a recent Leadership Institute for the *National Initiative: New Directions for Student Support*, someone said: "Teachers need regular support too. Teachers who don't *feel* supported are unlikely to do a great job and are likely to leave the field."

A point well taken! There is a constant drone of teacher-bashing. When teachers raise concerns about factors making their job difficult, they are accused of fabricating excuses. At the same time, everyone agrees that teachers are oh-so important and need to be nurtured. The realities *are* that in many public schools teaching is overwhelming, and the supports provided for doing the job leave much to be desired.

Most schools pay too little attention to supporting teachers. And, through this neglect, they create a fundamental barrier to student learning and school improvement. This seems particularly ironic given all the emphasis in the *No Child Left Behind Act* on quality teachers and professional development. It seems a travesty given how many new teachers are leaving the field.

Because of teacher attrition, retirement, and increased student enrollment, it is estimated that the U.S. will need more than 3.9 million teachers by 2014. With teacher shortages have come renewed efforts to recruit from a variety of sources. And, recruitment strategies generally have yielded good returns. But, within a few years, the dropout rate of new teachers is as shocking as that of students in economically depressed urban and rural areas.

Teacher Dropouts

It is widely reported that almost 50 percent of new teachers leave during the first five years of teaching. In some large cities, 40 percent are gone after three years. The 2005 Digest of Education Statistics indicates that, from 1999 to 2001, the number leaving after one year or less was 10.5%, after two years 8.5 %, and after three years 7.5 %. As with the students, one has to ponder whether we are seeing dropouts or pushouts.

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The loss of so many newly minted teachers is extremely costly, economically, academically, and psychologically. And, it certainly is a barrier to ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. So, a primary equity concern is that of ensuring the type of staff support that enhances a desire to stay.

As with so many facets of school improvement, there is no simple and quick fix. Problem causes are many and run deep. They include a complex mix of stressors and inadequate supports. Focusing on addressing symptoms with “morale boosters” is a nice thing but fails to get to the roots of what’s wrong. Just as promoting student development is not only about preventing their problems, teacher support is not only about preventing burn-out.

One way to understand the problem is in terms of three psychological needs that theorists posit as major intrinsic motivational determinants of behavior. These are the need to *feel competent*, the need to *feel self-determining*, and the need to *feel interpersonally connected*. From this perspective, early attrition and burnout of school staff can be viewed as among the negative outcomes that result when these needs are threatened and thwarted. And, such needs are regularly threatened and thwarted by the prevailing culture of schools (see sidebar).

What Needs to be Done?

Besides a salary that is competitive with other fields, the solution requires reculturing schools in ways that minimize undermining and maximize enhancement of *intrinsic* motivation for all stakeholders. This involves ensuring a daily focus on (1) promoting staff and student well-being and (2) addressing barriers to teaching and learning. With specific concern for retaining new staff, the following are suggested as seven overlapping objectives that need to be a major systemic emphasis in all school improvement plans:

- Developing effective induction programs
- Ending the isolation of teachers in their classrooms
- Establishing a comprehensive system of learning supports in every school
- Focusing systematically on intrinsic motivation
- Broadening and personalizing staff development
- Expanding school accountability to focus on more than academics
- Restructuring school governance to enable shared decision-making.

Each of these matters has been explored in various Center documents and many other publications (see the Center’s website). So, highlighting a few points will suffice here.

A Culture that Undermines Motivation

“It’s too hard;” “it’s unfair;” “You can’t win;” “No one seems to care” – all are common comments made by school staff. They are symptoms of a culture that demands a great deal and too often fails to provide essential supports. It is a culture that undermines motivation.

Each day elementary school teachers enter a classroom, close their doors, and set out to work with about 30 students. Secondary teachers multiply that by a factor of at least five. The students bring with them a wide variety of needs, and a significant number have become disengaged from school learning. Most days are filled with stress and efforts to cope.

For student support staff, the list of students teachers refer for special assistance is so long that the reality is that appropriate services can be provided only to a small percentage. Many support personnel find it virtually impossible to live up to their professional standards.

Others who work at a school, such as front office staff, usually are overworked, underpaid, under-trained, and unappreciated. Their dissatisfaction frequently adds another layer of negativity to the school climate.

Accountability demands and daily problems produce a sense of urgency and crisis that makes school culture more reactive than proactive and more remedial than preventive. The result is an organization oriented more to enhancing external control and safety than providing caring support and guidance. This translates into authoritarian demands and social control (rules, regulations, punishment), rather than the promotion of self-direction, personal responsibility, intrinsic motivation, and well-being.

Given all this, it is not surprising how many staff (and students) find themselves in situations where they chronically feel over-controlled and less than competent. They also come to believe they have little control over long-range outcomes, and this affects their hopes for the future. And, all too common is a sense of alienation from other staff, students, families, and the neighborhood. The result: not only don’t they experience feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to significant others, such feelings tend to be undermined.

Induction Programs

Ideally, induction into a profession such as teaching and an organization such as a school encompasses *positive socialization, guidance, support, and helping*. Those coming to a new school need an orientation program that is welcoming and that transitions into a well-designed ongoing program of guidance and support. They also need to be inducted into the social fabric of the organization. And, they need frequent contact with optimistic role models who highly value the mission of the school and are dedicated to advancing the field of education.

The prevailing approach to teacher induction is piecemeal and highly variable in quality and impact. Orientations are provided, but usually are not extensive. Introductions to others at the school are a natural part of the transition-in process, but they do not ensure entry into social networks. Formal mentors increasingly are playing a central role, but they often are more concerned with what and how to teach than they are with positive socialization into the field of education. Other events and activities may be offered, but usually are one-time efforts.

Needed, we suggest, is an integrated induction program at every school to address positive socialization, guidance, support, and helping for all newcomers. Such a program should begin with the initial point of contact (e.g., entry for the first time at the school's front office) and cover all of the first year. In keeping with intrinsic motivation theory, the program design would emphasize maximizing newcomers' feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to significant others at school, while minimizing threats to such feelings.

Undoubtedly, formal mentoring will remain a core element of induction programs. However, appreciation of the importance of enhancing interpersonal relationships suggests the value of adding "buddy" systems and using the many natural opportunities for enhancing positive social and emotional connections that arise daily. Finally, as always, effective program implementation will require building the capacity and enhancing the commitment of the resident stakeholders at a school.

Ending Teacher Isolation

One teacher and a classroom full of students is not an optimal learning or teaching situation. And, it is a recipe for continuing the high rate of new teachers leaving the field. It is essential to change the situation by taking steps to "open the classroom door" in order to bring in support on a regular basis.

New staff especially need a considerable amount of support and on-the-job training. Good teaching calls for working closely with other teachers, as well as with parents,

professionals-in-training, volunteers, and so forth. Collaboration and teaming are key facets of mobilizing and enabling learning.

Schools also need to use specialist personnel (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, social workers, resource teachers) to mentor and demonstrate. That is, instead of *telling* teachers about how to address student learning, behavior, and emotional problems, specialists must be prepared to go into classrooms to model and guide teachers in implementing new practices for engaging and re-engaging students at school.

The crux of the matter is to ensure that effective mentoring and other collegial approaches are used to provide positive socialization experiences, ongoing supports, and personalized inservice learning. Opening the classroom door to invite in support is a major step toward preventing teachers from feeling isolated and alienated.

Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

Not infrequently, students bring problems to school that affect their learning and interfere with the teacher's efforts to teach. In some places, many youngsters bring a wide range of problems stemming from restricted opportunities associated with poverty and low income, difficult and diverse family circumstances, high rates of mobility, lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, problems related to substance abuse, inadequate health care, and lack of enrichment opportunities. Teachers must be prepared to enable the learning of such students. School-wide support programs that enable teachers to be effective also must be developed. When necessary learning opportunities and supports are not in place, teachers are likely to feel less and less successful and begin to think about leaving the field.

In highlighting the above matters, we are not minimizing the importance of schools providing the best curriculum and instruction feasible. Every teacher must have the ability and resources to bring a high standards curriculum to life and make learning meaningful. However, equally important is that teachers and student support staff have the capacity to enable learning by addressing factors that interfere – especially factors leading to low or negative motivation for schooling. To meet this need, we have framed a *system of learning supports* that we call an *enabling component*.

What is an enabling component? Think in terms of the type of *classroom* strategies that can transform a big classroom into a set of smaller units, prevent or at least address problems as soon as they arise, foster a caring

context for learning, and re-engage students who have become actively disengaged from instruction. Think in terms of the type of *school-wide* support programs needed to (a) facilitate the many transitions students experience daily and over the years of schooling, (b) respond to and prevent crises, (c) enhance home and school connections, (d) increase community involvement and support, and (e) facilitate access to specialized assistance as needed for individual students and their families. Included in the school-wide focus are enrichment programs to engage and re-engage students at school and promote positive development and intervention systems for preventing student problems and responding as early after onset as feasible when problems arise.

In short, an enabling component provides the context for ensuring that teachers *are* supported and *feel* supported as they strive to help students move around barriers to learning and connect effectively with good instruction. (For more on the nature and scope of such a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, see references on the Center's website).

Systematic Focus on Intrinsic Motivation

For the most part, preservice professional preparation programs for teachers (and support staff) tend not to have a systematic focus on intrinsic motivation. Many preservice and inservice programs overemphasize reinforcement theory and behavior modification in discussing human motivation. As a result, there is a tendency for teachers and support staff to overrely on social control and extrinsic reinforcers in working with students and each other. This is hardly a sophisticated basis for promoting student and staff engagement or for enhancing effectiveness with respect to re-engaging those who have disengaged. Thus, we suggest it is time to provide crash courses on understanding and applying intrinsic motivation principles and practices.

Motivational theory has immense implications for learning, teaching, parenting, and psychosocial interventions. Two common reasons people give for not bothering to do something are "It's not worth it" and "I know I won't be able to do it." In general, the amount of time and energy spent on an activity seems dependent on how much the activity is valued by the person and on the person's expectation that what is valued will be attained without too much cost. Thus, an appreciation of expectancy times value ($E \times V$) theories of human motivation provide a fundamental basis for understanding behavior.

Moreover, an increased understanding of intrinsic motivation clarifies how essential it is to avoid processes that make people feel controlled and coerced, that limit the range of options, and that limit the focus to a day-in, day-out emphasis on short-term outcomes. From a motivational

perspective, such processes often can produce avoidance reactions and thus reduce opportunities for positive learning and the development of positive attitudes.

Beyond Reinforcement Theory

It is essential to understand that, in addition to seeking rewards and avoiding punishment, people pursue some things because of what has been described as an innate striving for competence; humans seem to value *feeling competent*. We try to conquer challenges, and if none are around, we often seek one out.

Another important intrinsic motivator appears to be an internal push toward self-determination. People seem to value *feeling that they have some degree of choice* and freedom in deciding what to do. And people seem to be intrinsically moved toward establishing and maintaining relationships with significant others. That is, people tend to value *feelings of being interpersonally connected*.

Motivation, and especially *intrinsic* motivation, must be considered in all efforts to retain staff and enhance teaching and learning. What's required is

- developing a high level of *motivational readiness* (including reducing avoidance motivation) so individuals are mobilized
- establishing *processes that elicit, enhance, and maintain motivation* so that they stay mobilized
- *enhancing motivation as an outcome* so that the desire to improve oneself and address problems increasingly becomes a positive intrinsic attitude that mobilizes continuous learning and activity

Broadening and Personalizing Inservice

As is widely recognized, preservice education only prepares a person to be a beginner in the complex system and culture that is a school. Teachers are among the first to acknowledge that preservice education didn't prepare them adequately for students who manifest behavior, learning, and emotional problems. And, student support staff readily acknowledge their limitations with respect to classroom teaching.

What we have in schools currently is high stakes expectations and low-powered staff development. With prevailing demands for higher standards and enhanced achievement test performance, the focus is mainly on

curriculum content and instruction. Analyses indicate that implicit in most inservice efforts to improve instruction is a presumption that students are motivationally ready and able to absorb what is being taught. Short shrift is given to the problem of what to do when students are not motivationally ready and able to respond appropriately to instruction. In settings where many students are not doing well and many are “acting out,” this is a serious gap in training and one which teachers widely decry.

This is not to suggest that pre- and inservice programs fail to recognize that teachers must deal with behavior and learning problems. The concern is that these are matters generally treated as separate from instruction, with strategies emphasizing classroom management, tutoring, and referrals for specialized assistance. The primary focus, too often, is on techniques for social control. Examples include eye contact, physical proximity, being alert and responding quickly before a behavior escalates, using rewards as a preventive strategy, assertive discipline, and threats and other forms of punishment. All this skirts right by the matter of what is causing student misbehavior and ignores the reality that social control can be incompatible with enhancing student engagement. Indeed, such practices can lead to greater disengagement and problems.

We suggest that there is a need to broaden inservice instruction so that teachers learn practices that enable them to engage and re-engage students in classroom learning. This can help stem the tide of referrals for special assistance, which fits well with the policy trend toward *Response to Intervention* as a desired best practice. And, it should play a potent role in countering teacher dropout.

Simultaneously, it is time to acknowledge the reality that staff differ in their inservice needs. This is a particularly important matter related to the retention of new staff. The implication is that a great deal of inservice should be designed as personalized staff development.

As is the case for all learners, staff members need instruction and support that is a good match for both their motivation and capabilities. This includes:

- inservice programs that account for interests, strengths, weaknesses, and limitations
- approaches that overcome avoidance motivation
- structure that provides personalized support and guidance
- instruction designed to enhance & expand intrinsic motivation for learning and problem solving.

Some staff also require additional, specialized support, guidance, and accommodations.

Learning from colleagues is not just a talking game. It involves directly modeling and guiding learning, practice, and initial implementation, and following-up to improve and refine. Depending on practicalities, such inservice can take place in a teacher’s own classroom or in that of colleagues. Some of it can occur in the context of team teaching.

Personalized inservice not only enhances competence, it increases opportunities for support, guidance, and social contact and promotes involvement in meaningful decision-making. All of this can help counter alienation and burnout and increase the likelihood that teachers will stay in the field.

Expanding School Accountability

Policy makers want schools, teachers, and administrators (as well as students and their families) held accountable for higher academic achievement. As measured by what? As everyone involved in school improvement knows, the only measure that really counts right now is achievement test scores. These tests drive school accountability, and what such tests measure has become the be-all and end-all of what is attended to by policy makers. A consequence of prevailing accountability measures is that they pressure schools to maintain a narrow focus on more and better instruction as the only road to improving student learning.

No one, of course, should argue against better instruction. It is time, however, to acknowledge that the implicit underlying assumption of prevailing instructional approaches is that students are motivationally ready and able each day to benefit from them. The reality, of course, is that in too many schools the *majority* of youngsters are not, and thus, they are not benefitting from the instructional refinements. For many students, the fact remains that there are a host of external interfering factors.

Logically, well designed, systematic efforts should be directed at addressing such factors. However, accountability pressures override the logic and result in the marginalization of almost every initiative that is not seen as directly (and quickly) leading to academic gains.

This state of affairs produces a growing disconnect between the realities of what it takes to improve academic performance and where many policy makers and school improvement experts are leading the public. The disconnect is especially evident in schools serving low wealth families. Such families, and those who work in schools serving them, have a clear appreciation of many barriers to learning that must be addressed so students

can benefit from classroom instruction. In many schools, parents and teachers stress that long-term academic gains

are unlikely unless these barriers are addressed effectively. At the same time, it is evident to anyone familiar with the situation that there is no direct accountability for whether such barriers are addressed. So, when achievement test scores do not reflect an immediate impact for student support programs, such programs may be viewed as ineffective.

Ironically, not only does a restricted emphasis on achievement measures work against the logic of what needs to be done, it works against efforts to maintain teachers. An expanded framework for school accountability is needed – a framework that includes direct measures of achievement and much more. Without such an expanded framework, the full range of supports needed by teachers may not be developed, and the teacher pushout rate will continue unabated.

Shared Decision-Making

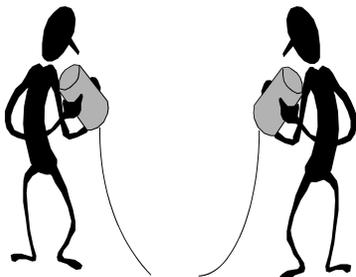
In any organization, the matter of who is empowered to make decisions can be a contentious issue. Putting aside the politics of this for the moment, we stress the motivational impact of not feeling empowered.

There is a potent, negative impact on motivation when staff (and students and all other stakeholders) are not involved in making major decisions that affect the quality of their lives. This argues for ensuring that staff are provided with a variety of meaningful opportunities to shape such decisions. Participation on planning committees and teams that end up having little or no impact can contribute to dropping out. Feelings of self-determination that should help counter this trend are more likely when governance structures share power across stakeholders and make room for their representatives at decision-making tables.

Teachers' Perceptions of What Makes the Job Hard From: Digest of Education Statistics (2005)

<p>30% say students come unprepared to learn 24% parental involvement is missing 21% say students are apathetic 39% say they don't get the support they need</p>
--

I hear they've been using a carrot and stick approach to improve your teaching.



Well, I never saw a carrot, but the stick felt like a 2X4, and I'm leaving before they hit me with it again!

Concluding Comments

From a psychological perspective, learning and teaching are experienced most positively when the learner cares about learning and the teacher cares about teaching. Moreover, the whole process can benefit greatly when all the participants care about each other. Thus, efforts to improve schools and learning need to attend to strategies that establish and maintain an atmosphere of caring, encourage mutual support, and develop a sense of community. Such an atmosphere can play a significant role in preventing learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems; it can promote social and emotional learning and well-being; it can help retain staff and students.

We suggest that caring is not something that can be created in schools and classrooms in the absence of the type of supports discussed above. A caring classroom and school climate is an emergent quality that arises from policies and practices that create a commitment to building a comprehensive system of supports.

Our society cannot afford to keep losing staff and students. It is time for everyone to review current school improvement and staff development plans. If these plans don't reflect a commitment to substantively and substantially addressing the matters we have raised, now is the time to redress the oversight.

Note: One of the special resources the Center has prepared to aid the pre- and inservice preparation of teachers and support staff is *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Classroom-Focused Enabling* which can be downloaded at no cost at – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/cfe.pdf>

The contents of this resource have been included and expanded in a book by the Center co-directors published by Corwin Press in 2006 entitled: *The Implementation Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning*.

*What goes around comes around.
The social context for adults affects the social context for students. Teachers who feel respected, trusted, and cared about as individuals are in a much better position to offer the same support to students.*

Deborah Stipek



Ideas into Practice

Enabling School Adjustment

If a student needs more direction, try the following:

- develop and provide sets of specific prompts, multisensory cues, steps, etc. using oral, written, and perhaps pictorial and color-coded guides as organizational aids related to specific learning activities, materials, and daily schedules
- ensure someone checks with the student frequently throughout an activity to provide additional support and guidance in concrete ways (e.g., model, demonstrate, coach)
- support student's efforts related to self-monitoring and self-evaluation and provide nurturing feedback keyed to the student's progress and next steps

If the student has difficulty finishing tasks as scheduled, try the following:

- modify the length and time demands of assignments and tests
- modify the nature of the process and products (e.g., allow use of technological tools and allow for oral, audio-visual, arts and crafts, graphic, and computer generated products)

To accomplish the above: Enhance use of aides, volunteers, peer tutors/coaches, mentors, those in the home, etc. not only to help support student efforts to learn and perform, but to enhance the student's social support network. Encourage structured staff discussions and staff development about what teachers can do and what other staff (mentors, student support staff, resource teachers, etc.) can do to team with teachers in their classrooms to enable school adjustment.

Invest now or pay later!

Early in any school year, it is clear which students are experiencing difficulties adjusting to new classes, schools, teachers, and classmates. When these difficulties are not addressed, student motivation for school dwindles. Misbehavior often appears because of frustration arising from not succeeding in the classroom. Rather than waiting for major problems to emerge, this is the time for *staff development* to focus on enabling school adjustment. And, this is the time for learning support staff to work with teachers in their classrooms to intervene before problems become severe and pervasive.

Some Guidelines and Strategies

Personalize instruction. Through enhanced personal contacts, build a positive working relationship with the youngster and family. Focus first on assets (e.g. positive attributes, outside interests, hobbies, what the youngster likes at school and in class). Ask about what the youngster doesn't like at school. Explore the reasons for "dislikes" (Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Is the student embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments? Does s/he have friends at school? Is s/he picked on? rejected? alienated?) Explore other possible causal factors. Explore what the youngster and those in the home think can be done to make things better (including extra support from a volunteer, a peer, friend, etc.).

Try new strategies in the classroom – based on the best information about what is causing the problem. Enhance student engagement through (a) an emphasis on learning and enrichment options that are of current greatest interest and which the student indicates (s)he wants to and can pursue and (b) a temporary deemphasis on areas that are not of high interest.

Some Specific Practices

If a student seems easily distracted, try the following:

- identify any specific environmental factors that distract the student and make appropriate environmental changes
- have the student work with a group of others who are task-focused
- designate a volunteer to help the student whenever s/he becomes distracted and/or starts to misbehave, and if necessary, to help the student make transitions
- allow for frequent "breaks"
- interact with the student in ways that will minimize confusion and distractions (e.g., keep conversations relatively short; talk quietly and slowly; use concrete terms; express warmth and nurturance)

The above is excerpted from one of the *Hot Topics* the Center has explored over the past year. For more on addressing adjustment problems, see this *Hot Topic* discussion (and others) at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/hottopic.htm> or click on the Hot Topic icon on the homepage.



“Is it Possible to Fix America’s Schools?”

"I heard about this spiritualist who claimed that she could put me in touch with the other world, the dear departed. And I thought, who would I really like to talk to? And I decided, John Dewey. So I approached this person, and put my money down, and sure enough, she put me in touch with John Dewey. I asked him the question that is most on my mind, "Is it possible, really, to fix America's schools?" Dewey said, "Yes. Yes. There are two ways you can do it. You can do it the miraculous way, or you can do it the natural way." And I said, "What is the natural way?" He said, "Well, the natural way would be if a band of angels descended from heaven and scattered across the landscape, and went into every school in the land, and waved their hands and fixed the schools." I said, "My God, what's the miraculous way?" And Dewey said, "The miraculous way would be if the people did it themselves."

Ron Wolk (journalist/founder of Education Week)

School Mental Health Project/
Center for Mental Health in Schools
Department of Psychology, UCLA
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563
PX-88

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