Why School-owned Student Support Staff are So Important

A major goal of school and community collaboration is to increase the resources available to meet the mission of schools. One arena for collaboration has been to bring community agency resources to schools. Given the sparse resources of both schools and community agencies the original intent was to increase services and enhance availability and access.

This positive intent is steadily being undermined as some policy makers have come to the mistaken view that community agency services can effectively meet the needs of schools in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. And, with budget tightening, school administrators and school boards are making the difficult decision about what to cut based on this erroneous conclusion. This set of circumstances has led to an increased trend toward reducing school-owned student support staff and contracting with community services for specific services. Unfortunately, this short-sighted budget slashing strategy not only reduces the amount of student support needed by teachers and schools, it also counters school improvement efforts designed to reframe support programs, services, and infrastructure into a potent and invaluable system of learning supports that is fully integrated with the school's educational mission.

By themselves, the type of clinical services community agencies can bring to schools are an insufficient strategy for dealing with the biggest problems confronting schools. Clinically-oriented services are only one facet of any effort to develop a comprehensive system of learning supports. These are not criticisms of the services per se. It is simply the fact that such services do too little to address the range of factors that cause poor academic performance, dropouts, gang violence, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, racial conflict, and so forth.

The trend to contract for specific support services ignores the following crucial reasons school-owned student support staff are so important:

- **Direct services for the discrete problems of a small number of students are only a small part of what a school and district need in terms of learning supports (including ways to address mental health and psychosocial concerns).** [1]

- **School-owned student support staff are meant to address the needs of all students and the school at large. To these ends, they pursue development of a full continuum of interventions and related infrastructure, using the sparse resources community agencies can offer to fill gaps in the continuum.**[2]

- **Without the full continuum of student/learning support interventions, school improvement efforts are unlikely to effectively counter behavior problems, close the achievement gap, reduce dropouts (students and teachers), and promote personal and social well being for the many.**[3]

The need is for school-community collaborations that can evolve comprehensive, integrated approaches by complementing and enhancing what each sector does best. Such approaches do more than can be accomplished by a few contracted community services. They address a wide array of the most prevalent barriers to learning – the ones that parents and teachers know are the major factors interfering with the progress of the majority of students.

[1]See – *Mental Health in Schools: Much More than Services for the Few*
   http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/news/newshtml/toc124.htm

Emphasizes that mental health in schools is about much more than a focus on mental illness and increasing clinical services. It includes promoting youth development, wellness, social and emotional learning, addressing a wide range of barriers to learning and teaching, and fostering the emergence of a caring, supportive, and nurturing climate throughout a school. This calls for a fundamental, systemic transformation in the ways schools, families, and communities address major barriers to learning and teaching.

[2]To appreciate all that school support staff are needed for, see:
   > *Who at the School Addresses Barriers to Learning and Teaching?*
      http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Newsletter/spring05.pdf
   >*Framing New Directions for School Counselors, Psychologists, & Social Workers*
      http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Report/framingnewdir.pdf
   >*Resource Oriented Teams: Key Infrastructure Mechanisms for Enhancing Education
      Supports* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Report/resource_oriented_teams.pdf
   >*Organization Facilitators: A Key Change Agent for Systemic School and Community
      Changes* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Report/orgfacrep.pdf
   >*Job descriptions for learning support component leadership at a school site*
      http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/studentsupport/toolkit/aidd.pdf

[3]See:
   >*Mental Health in School & School Improvement: Current Status, Concerns, and New
      Directions* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/mhbook/mhbooktoc.htm
   >*Call to Action: Student Support Staff: Moving in New Directions through School
      Improvement* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/calltoactionreport.pdf

For additional background documents that the UCLA Center has developed related to all this, see:
   >*Want to Work With Schools? What is Involved in Successful Linkages?*
      http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/54 want to work with schools.pdf

While informal linkages are relatively simple to acquire, a comprehensive approach requires weaving school and community resources together and doing so in ways that formalize and institutionalize connections and share major responsibilities. Toward enhancing linkages, our purpose here is to share lessons learned in recent years about connection community and school resources and outline steps for building strong connection.

   >*Impediments to Enhancing Availability of Mental Health Services in Schools:
      Fragmentation, Overspecialization, Counterproductive Competition, and
      Marginalization.*
      http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/31 Impediments to Enhancing Availability
      of Mental Health in Schools.pdf

   >*The School Leader's Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing
      Barriers to Learning.*(2006). By H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. Thousand Oaks, CA:
      Corwin Press.