

Student Supports: Introduction

Center on Instruction

Today's students are extraordinarily diverse, representing a wide range of experiences, cultures, strengths, weaknesses, abilities, disabilities, and perspectives. These students all differ in their instructional and support needs, but all are expected to be successful. Districts and schools must organize themselves to ensure that every student has a pathway to success and is supported through a wide variety of programs and instructional approaches. This chapter will focus on supports for struggling and at-risk students, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and students transitioning from middle to high school. Support can come from school-based personnel, community partners and volunteers, parents, and families and should include a wide range of research-based strategies designed with flexibility in mind.

Often the first step in serving diverse students is identifying those in need of support and intervention. Screening for deficits in academics and behavioral functions (for example, self-management and relationship skills) and monitoring progress at regular intervals are effective ways of identifying students needing support or intervention. Districts will often play a critical role in assisting schools with the selection of appropriate measures to accurately assess these needs.

After assessing needs, schools frequently need guidance on instructional methods appropriate for each student. For instance, students with disabilities must receive high-quality, research-based instruction within the least restrictive environment. English language learners require effective instruction to build academic language proficiency and guided instruction to build vocabulary. These students, along with other students identified as at risk, may also require supplemental services provided outside the general classroom.

These could take the form of one-on-one or small-group tutoring in one or more academic skill areas, specific interventions targeting social-emotional needs (such as social and emotional learning), or targeted language interventions.

Students transitioning from middle school to high school often need targeted support. This period in a student's life is sometimes characterized by disengagement and a decline in grades, motivation, and attendance. Furthermore, many students enter ninth grade unprepared to manage the increased academic and social expectations. Research supports the implementation of transition programs and suggests that these interventions are linked to positive student outcomes.

Community partners and students' families can be great resources to schools in need of improvement. Many schools have developed partnerships with various community entities (e.g., businesses, universities, and faith-based and non-profit organizations) and receive support in the form of volunteers for tutoring, donations of school supplies, assistance with after-school programs, and support for educational employment opportunities. Furthermore, engaging parents in their children's academic progress has shown to improve students' learning.

These interventions should occur in a positive school climate where students feel safe, where the academic and behavioral competencies of all students are supported, and where instruction responds to student needs. A positive school climate is associated with good achievement gains and a reduction in behavior problems, achievement gaps, and dropout rates.

Understanding and Addressing Learner Diversity

Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center

In successful districts and schools, students reach high levels of academic achievement and are fully prepared for success in a wide variety of postsecondary educational and career options, regardless of their backgrounds and starting points. To reach this common goal for today's extraordinarily diverse students, districts and schools must organize themselves to ensure that a wide variety of programs, curricular and instructional approaches, and pathways to success are made available to all students.

As described in the sections of this chapter that follow, student diversity has many dimensions, including significant individual and group differences in culture, ethnicity, gender, previous educational experiences, optimal modes of learning, and groups of students with unique sorts of challenges, including the socio-economically disadvantaged, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

All students must be taught the rigorous standards-based academic content that will enable them to be proficient. Yet, the reality of learner diversity challenges school districts and schools to provide rigorous programs that meet students where they are academically (which may be substantially below grade level), maximize their growth as learners, and accelerate their learning to close achievement gaps.

It is not surprising that diverse students have differentiated needs. In low-achieving schools with many low-achieving students, an action plan to accelerate the learning of all students will:

1. Ensure that all students have access to rigorous, standards-based instructional programs which meet their individual needs.
2. Identify the needs of individual students.
3. Provide flexibility, and choice wherever possible, in curriculum and instructional programs that meet individual needs.
4. Provide teachers with the professional development they need to address learner diversity.
5. Monitor the implementation of instructional strategies effective with diverse groups of students.
6. Measure student learning during instruction to ensure the effectiveness of instruction with all students and to alter instruction as needed (formative assessment).
7. Address student learning needs in a timely way to ensure continuous, accelerated learning.
8. Monitor individual student growth with common local assessments employing multiple measures (formative assessment).
9. Monitor the achievement of diverse groups of students through data aggregated by group to ensure the success of curriculum and instructional programs with all students.
10. Use data to provide tailored instruction based on each student's level of achievement and ongoing needs.

The central challenge in a district and school action plan addressing learner diversity is to ensure that the programs and learning opportunities offered have sufficient academic rigor to maximize student growth while having sufficient flexibility to meet the diverse needs of all students and to ensure that the differentiated needs of each student are successfully addressed.

Action Principles

For District

1. Recognize the diversity of students as learners and offer powerful programs that provide the differentiated learning opportunities that will accelerate the achievement of all students.
2. Develop district policies focused on meeting the learning needs of all students.
3. Develop community partnerships to support students at home, in the community, and at school.

4. Identify and implement the variety of programs and curricula that will accelerate the learning of diverse students.
5. Provide district-wide professional development about learner diversity and the differentiated instruction necessary to maximize the learning of all students.
6. Provide timely and robust data analysis directly relevant to making improvements in instruction and achievement for diverse learners.
7. Monitor individual student growth throughout the school year and analyze aggregated data by school and subgroup.
8. Identify mid-course corrections to address newly-identified student needs and overcome achievement gaps.
9. Partner with school staff, student families, and students to ensure a common commitment to intensive efforts to increase student achievement.

For School

1. Recognize the diversity of students as learners and offer powerful programs that provide the differentiated learning opportunities that will accelerate the achievement of all students.
2. Commit to time for faculty to:
 - engage in discussions of the needs of diverse learners and how those needs can be identified in the classroom;
 - identify and use school-wide strategies for addressing those needs; and,
 - identify the methods and criteria for monitoring the success of these strategies.
3. Implement the shared strategies and monitor them to make mid-course corrections as needed.
4. Develop community support for the school and its work among parents and the surrounding community; provide them with meaningful action opportunities.
5. Communicate clearly within the school and the school community about the achievement of diverse groups of students, analyzing ongoing school successes and challenges, and committing to continuous improvement in the achievement of all students.

References and Resources

The following resources describe systemic reforms intended to serve all learners in their full diversity.

Buck Institute for Education: Project-Based Learning: Resources. Retrieved from http://www.bie.org/index.php/site/PBL/resources/PBL_&_School_Reform/

ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career. *Resources and Report: Expanding Pathways*. Retrieved from <http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/pathways/resources.php>

National Implementation Research Network, <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~nirn/resources/default.cfm>

Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (n.d.). *MILE Guide: Milestones for improving learning & education*. Retrieved from http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=800&Itemid=52

Identifying Students in Need of Support or Intervention

Center on Instruction

Students differ in their instructional and support needs, and successful instruction and effective support acknowledges these differences. Screening for skill deficits and monitoring progress at regular intervals are effective ways of identifying students needing support (Elliott & Fuchs, 1997) or intervention beyond the typical instructional program to the extent that selected measures or indicators (1) are aligned with the content being taught, (2) provide reliable and valid information on student status at a point in time or student progress from one point in time (Wanzek et al., in press), and (3) yield timely and useable data that are accessible by SEA, LEA, school, and classroom educators. Screening and progress monitoring measures are well established in reading for early grades (Deno, 2003a, 2003b) and, increasingly, in early mathematics (Clark & Shinn, 2004; Foegen & Deno, 2001; Vanderheyden et al., 2004). Similar measures for higher grade levels (Espin & Deno, 1994; Espin & Tindal, 1994), for content areas other than reading and mathematics, and for non-content areas (school drop-out, behavior) are also emerging.

Action Principles

For State

1. Assist LEAs with the selection or adoption of high-quality screening and progress monitoring measures and systems for managing, aggregating, and reporting data.
2. Build LEA capacity related to screening and monitoring by providing targeted and ongoing technical assistance and, when appropriate, large-scale professional development to pre-service and in-service teachers and other school and district personnel on the administration of screening and progress monitoring measures, on efficient and reliable data management, and on the strategic use of data to make decisions about student instructional and support needs.

For District

1. Support and participate in the identification of reliable and valid screening and progress monitoring measures in cases where measures are not adopted at the SEA level.
2. Provide important ongoing and targeted professional development on these measures and on using resulting data.
3. Consider the use of electronic databases for housing and managing screening and progress monitoring data. They increase accuracy, real-time accessibility, and facilitate the multi-purpose use of data (e.g., identifying effective programs, areas needing additional professional development, etc.).

For School

1. Implement screening and progress monitoring vertically and horizontally (across grades and within grades).
2. Use screening and progress monitoring data to identify students in need of assistance and to make instructional decisions (e.g., identify skill deficits, differentiate instruction, establish intervention/tutoring groups, etc.). Monitor student progress to ensure that interventions provided to students are effective.

References and Resources

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Support for Students with Disabilities

Center on Instruction

Support for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment involves using high-quality, research-based instructional strategies designed to enable progress in the general curriculum and preparation for adult life (IDEA, 2004). Supporting students with disabilities can include collaboration between general and special education teachers (Hollingsworth, 2001; Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, & Liebert, 2006), application of universal design for learning principles and practices (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002), and the creation of a climate of inclusion and multicultural responsiveness (Montgomery, 2001; Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Smith, 2004).

Action Principles

For State

1. Provide technical assistance and professional development for both pre-service and in-service educators and related professionals in research-based instructional strategies across academic and functional skills areas.
2. Facilitate collaborative relationships, stakeholder consensus, and funding opportunities (Sopko, 2009).

For District

1. Identify and address the instructional needs of individual schools.
2. Build consensus among stakeholders and administrators regarding the importance of high-quality, research-based instruction, collaboration between general and special educators, student access to the general curriculum, and multicultural responsiveness.
3. Offer administrative supports through district coordination of specialized services for students with disabilities (e.g. transition support, disability specific services, preschool services, 18+ programs).
4. Provide professional development and technical assistance to schools regarding high-quality, research-based instruction, collaboration between general and special educators, student access to the general curriculum, and multicultural responsiveness (Sopko, 2009).

For School

1. Require high-quality, research-based instruction in academic and functional skills areas. These skills areas may include: (a) reading (Rivera, Moughamian, Lesaux, & Francis, 2008; Scammacca, Vaughn, Roberts, Wanzek, & Torgesen, 2007); (b) writing (Center on Instruction, 2007); (c) mathematics (Gersten, Chard, Jayanthi, Baker, Morphy, & Flojo, 2008; Jayanthi, Gersten, & Baker, 2008); (d) social/emotional skills (Denning, 2007; Maag, 2006); (e) vocational skills (Chadsey, 2007); and (f) functional life skills (Davis & Rehfeldt 2007).
2. Provide time and professional development to promote collaboration between general and special education teachers (Hollingsworth, 2001), apply universal design for learning principles and practices (Hitchcock et al. 2002; Sindelar et al., 2006), and create a climate of inclusion and multicultural responsiveness (Montgomery, 2001; Turnbull et al. 2004).

References and Resources

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Support for English Language Learners

Center on Instruction

English language learners (ELLs) face a unique set of educational challenges due to the central role played by academic language proficiency in the acquisition and assessment of content-area knowledge. Proficiency in academic language improves ELLs' ability to comprehend and analyze texts, write and express themselves effectively, and acquire and demonstrate academic content knowledge across all areas (Dressler, 2006). Therefore, effective instruction of ELLs must attend to their need to develop proficient academic language skills in English (Francis et al., 2006).

Action Principles

For State

1. Provide technical assistance and professional development to school districts and school personnel as they select and implement curricula as well as instructional models and programs that best fit the needs of their ELL population.

For District

1. Provide technical assistance to schools on a) how to capitalize on ELLs' proficiency in first-language literacy to help them acquire a second language and content knowledge, b) how to make data-based decisions that would facilitate the alignment between instructional needs and the learning environment, and c) how to implement effective use of linguistic accommodations as they acquire English language proficiency.

For School

1. Provide instruction of academic language that is direct, explicit, and systematic.
2. Curricula must include guided instruction in vocabulary (including the multiple meanings of many English words), sentence structure, and syntax as well as the organization of expository paragraphs, the function of transition words and phrases, and the range of words that appear more often in text than in oral conversation (Gersten et. al., 2007; Rivera et. al., 2008; Torgesen et. al., 2007).

References and Resources

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Addressing Social-Emotional Learning

Center on Innovation & Improvement

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a powerful strategy for helping all students achieve well-being and school success (Payton et al., 2008; Zins et al., 2004). SEL refers to the acquisition of skills that allow students to calm themselves when angry or anxious, focus their attention, persist toward goals, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices. SEL is based on research demonstrating that our emotions and relationships affect how and what we learn. SEL focuses on five core groups of social and emotional competencies:

- Self-awareness—accurately assessing one’s feelings, interests, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.
- Self-management—regulating one’s emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; achieving personal and academic goals; expressing emotions appropriately.
- Social awareness—being able to empathize with others; appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; effectively using family, school, and community resources.
- Relationship skills—interacting cooperatively with others; resisting inappropriate social pressure; dealing effectively with interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed.
- Responsible decision-making—making decisions based on factors such as ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences; applying decision-making skills to daily situations.

In collaboration with university-based research teams, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has conducted a rigorous quantitative review (meta-analysis) of more than 200 school-based studies on SEL involving approximately 270,000 children and youth in the general classroom (Durlak et al., in press). The study found that SEL programs demonstrated the following positive outcomes:

- Academic performance, including substantial increases in achievement test scores.
- SEL skills, including empathy, self-awareness, and self-management skills.
- Attitudes about self, others, and school—students showed greater motivation to learn and deeper commitment to school.
- Pro-social behavior—examples include increased time devoted to schoolwork, better classroom behavior, and improved attendance and graduation rates.
- Decreased problem behavior—studies found reductions in disruptive class behavior, aggression, delinquent acts, and disciplinary referrals.

The same research showed that SEL skills can be taught, and they can be taught by regular classroom teachers in schools of every type (rural, urban, and suburban) and to students of every background.

Action Principles

For State

1. Create a statewide SEL leadership team involving key stakeholders.
2. Develop policies, plans, and guidelines promoting integration of SEL into school improvement plans.
3. Disseminate information to educators and the public about advances in research, practices, and policies that foster the social, emotional, and academic growth of students.
4. Establish demonstration sites for SEL implementation.
5. Provide resources to support SEL in schools (training, coaching, funding for evidence-based curricula, assessment).

For District

1. Develop an implementation and phase-in plan for SEL based on an assessment of district resources and needs.
2. Pick high-quality, evidence-based SEL programs that have effective implementation support systems.
3. Provide professional development that fosters a deep understanding of SEL at both the district and school level.
4. Provide coaching to support the quality of teachers' SEL practice.
5. Utilize assessment tools developed specifically to monitor and improve SEL processes and outcomes for ongoing improvement.
6. Integrate SEL strategies and practices with academic areas and student support.
7. Identify principals who will make a commitment to school-wide SEL implementation and integration.

For School

1. Develop a cadre of leaders within the school who understand and support SEL and who will function as the school's SEL leadership team.
2. Provide time and resources for intensive professional development and coaching, including peer coaching, so that SEL is integrated at every grade and across the curriculum.
3. Communicate regularly with families and the school-community about SEL progress and successes.

References and Resources

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning website: www.CASEL.org. See in particular the section on program and implementation guides: <http://www.casel.org/pub/sel.php>

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (In press). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*.

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Providing Community Supports and Resources

Center on Innovation & Improvement

The community can be a great resource for school improvement. By enlisting municipal offices in support of its improvement efforts, a district can create a broad base of community support for, and understanding of, dramatic measures such as restructuring when they become necessary. Case studies and other research provide evidence of myriad types of community supports and resources being utilized by schools and districts.

Partners can include large corporations and small businesses, law enforcement, health departments, universities, faith-based and other non-profit organizations, senior citizens, and parents, among others. Some schools have formed beneficial alliances with municipal officials and the media (Brooks, 2009). Benefits provided range from providing extra adults who listen to children read (Doiron & Lees, 2009) to donated funds or goods. One example of community support connects chronically absent students with community mentors and has measurably reduced students' chronic absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). In other examples, grants provided funds to hire a school nurse and social worker to attend to students' physical, social, and emotional needs and to help involve parents; church volunteers organized a mentoring program (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009); and rural schools benefited from working with community-based and faith-based organizations who provided tutoring and other after-school programs. Connecting with the community can help high school students engage and see the relevance of their coursework (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007), and evidence shows that students with disabilities benefit greatly from community employment experience during the high school years (e.g., work-study jobs, paid work experiences, and high school vocational education experiences; Stodden et al., 2001).

Cultural, linguistic, and social gaps often exist between schools and the students and families they serve; community groups or individuals, such as paraprofessionals or teachers from the school's neighborhood, may serve as bridging intermediaries to foster more productive relationships (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Reed, 2009; Warren, 2007). During a restructuring effort, Chicago worked to engage the community productively by initiating partnerships with grassroots organizations that helped parents understand why reform was necessary in their children's schools.

Educators desiring effective partnerships are advised to prioritize the process, permit time for development, and promote community ownership (Sanders & Lewis, 2005). One study indicated that the majority of the partnerships in studied schools were teacher-initiated, with articulated needs based on a determination of students' and programs' needs. Processes used to develop the partnerships, such as networking, meetings in person, and the negotiation of partnership activities themselves created "win-win" relationships for the school and the community partner (Hands, 2005).

Action Principles

For District

1. Include municipal and civic leaders, community and faith-based organizations, and parent groups in school reform and restructuring planning; maintain regular communication with them.
2. Assist school leaders in networking with potential partners and in developing partnerships.
3. Provide professional development for school leaders regarding effective collaboration.
4. Direct extra resources to support innovative partnerships between community partners and schools and allow the kind of flexibility in policies that partnerships may require.

For School

1. Assess areas of need and identify potential community partners who might address needs.
2. Allow time for school leaders to meet partners in person and develop "win-win" relationships.

3. Negotiate partnership activities, communicate regularly with partners, publicly recognize partners, and continuously evaluate partnerships for continuous improvement and sustained relationships.
4. Recognize and support the bridging role that local teachers and staff members may play.

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Providing Effective Tutoring

Center on Instruction

Tutoring is generally understood as instruction beyond what is provided in a normal school day. Tutoring may occur during non-instructional periods of the school day, before or after school, or during weekends. It often occurs in small group settings and may focus on remediating missing skills, assisting with homework, or, for students not at risk or struggling, on extending learning (e.g., SAT preparation). For struggling students, tutoring often addresses the first two of these three purposes. In terms of purpose one (remediating missing skills), and particularly for older struggling students, tutoring “fills in” skills students need to perform at or above grade-level expectations. For younger students, tutoring may also be effective in *preventing* later skill gaps, if at-risk students are identified early in their school careers and provided with effective early intervention (see “Identifying Students in Need of Support or Intervention,” elsewhere in this *Handbook*). Whatever its context or purpose, tutoring represents a means of increasing intensity, including instructional time and instructional focus (e.g., smaller groups, homogenous grouping, and direct instruction of skills). Peer tutoring models (Fuchs et al., 2001) and the use of well-trained paraprofessionals and volunteers (Foorman & Al Otaiba, 2009; Morris, 2006) represent promising, cost-efficient models for increasing intensity.

Action Principles

For State

1. Establish “validated curricula” and specify professional development requirements for paraprofessionals. LEAs and schools may benefit from professional development on the effective use and management of paraprofessionals and volunteers for tutoring (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 2000).
2. Review policies regulating the use of non-instructional time (e.g., recess time and special areas time). LEAs and schools may need guidance on providing small-group tutoring opportunities during the regular school day.

For District

1. Peer tutoring as a validated intervention requires considerable teacher skill to be effective; provide intensive and ongoing professional development on peer tutoring. (Fuchs et al., 2001).
2. Provide guidance to building administrators and instructional leaders on how to identify effective tutoring, whether delivered by volunteers, paraprofessionals, or peers.
3. Provide support and guidance to building administrators and instructional leaders on correcting poorly conceived tutoring strategies, remedying ineffective application of tutoring strategies, and modeling effective tutoring practices.

For School

1. Support the hiring and monitoring of paraprofessional tutors, recruiting and screening volunteer tutors, and supporting teachers who implement peer tutoring. All three groups need guidance on procedures for managing these functions.
2. Align tutoring content with student needs and with classroom-provided instruction to yield the best results (Elbaum et al., 2000).

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Addressing Middle to High School Transitions

National High School Center

The transition from middle to high school is a critical point in a student's academic career. Research indicates that this time is often characterized by increased disengagement and a decline in grades, motivation, and attendance. Furthermore, many students enter ninth grade lacking the preparation to successfully navigate the new academic and social demands of high school. Failure to meet these challenges is linked to school failure and highlights the fact that students' experiences during their first year of high school have significant implications for their success throughout high school. Specifically, unsuccessful transition to high school is associated with higher dropout rates, delayed graduation rates, and low achievement (Herlihy, 2007). It is also important to note that these challenges are more prevalent in urban, high-poverty schools and among African American and Latino students and students with disabilities (NHSC, 2007a; 2007b). To help address this issue, educators need to provide students with the necessary academic and socio-emotional supports to make a smooth transition from middle school to high school. Research supports the implementation of transition programs and suggests that these interventions are linked to positive student outcomes such as higher student engagement and lower dropout rates (NHSC, 2007a; 2007b).

Efforts to help ease students' transition to high school can begin during the summer months before the start of ninth grade. Summer programs provide opportunities to prepare at-risk students by offering academic and social supports. Educators can also continue to support students' transition to high school by the following actions (more information on these actions can be found in other sections of this *Handbook*):

- Establishing a data and monitoring system that will both diagnose why students are struggling and serve as an accountability measure for districts and schools;
- Addressing the instructional needs of struggling students who enter high school unprepared for rigorous, college-preparatory coursework by providing targeted instruction that gives them the opportunity to catch up while also ensuring that they are challenged and engaged in learning;
- Creating personalized learning environments to decrease students' sense of anonymity and address individual needs;
- Building instructional and leadership capacity in low-achieving schools to address the diverse student needs and ensure that struggling students are taught by highly-qualified teachers; and
- Helping students to see the relevance of their coursework by engaging families and creating connections with the community, employers, and institutes of higher education.

Action Principles

For State

1. Create a longitudinal data monitoring system to gather and track information on the number of incoming ninth grade students who are and are not prepared to take college-preparatory English and mathematics courses.
2. Require districts to report the outcomes of their transition program and use this information as an accountability measure of student outcomes related to the transition to high school.
3. Identify and disseminate research-based readiness indicators and benchmarking guidelines and tools to help districts and schools identify students who need extra support in the ninth grade.
4. Provide guidelines on how to offer accelerated curricula to help boost the mathematics and reading skills of struggling students during the first semester of high school.

5. Provide guidelines on how middle and high schools can work together to prepare more students for high school.

For District

1. Integrate “on-track” indicators into accountability systems. Include other indicators based on local context, as appropriate.
2. Provide guidelines on how schools can intervene to assist students with the transition.
3. Engage with community agencies to plan and coordinate appropriate social supports.
4. Provide professional development to train teachers on working with struggling students.
5. Provide adequate resources and support for schools that choose to implement structural changes (e.g., creating smaller learning communities), specialized curricula, and summer transition programs.
6. Develop strategies to attract, retain, and assign highly-qualified teachers.
7. Provide state with report of progress and challenges of transition programs as well as plans to improve program effectiveness.

For School

1. Use data from early warning systems to identify students in need of extra assistance and to inform instructional approaches and interventions.
2. Implement a curriculum or intervention designed to support students who enter high school unprepared to succeed in rigorous coursework (e.g., accelerated instruction—see more information on this topic elsewhere in this *Handbook*).
3. Engage and create partnerships with the community, employers, institutes of higher education, and families in support of student academic and social needs.
4. Communicate to families what ninth graders are expected to know and be able to do to succeed in high school.
5. Increase opportunities for positive adult and student interactions.
6. Align instruction with career and other postsecondary opportunities.

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Engaging Families in Student Learning

Center on Innovation & Improvement

The “curriculum of the home”—the bundle of attitudes, habits, knowledge, and skills that children acquire through their relationship with their family and that facilitates their school learning—is more predictive of academic learning than the family’s socioeconomic status (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Redding, 2000). In his meta-analysis, Jeynes (2002) found the nuances of parent-child communication regarding expectations to be a particularly powerful source of motivation for minority children and children living in poverty. These children especially benefit from visions of what is possible for them beyond the circumstances in which they find themselves at the time, and their parents contribute both to that vision and to the children’s confidence that they can reach out and attain it (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

Research shows that schools can improve their students’ learning by engaging parents in ways that directly relate to their children’s academic progress, maintaining a consistent message of what is expected of parents, and reaching parents directly, personally, and with a trusting approach (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005; Redding, 2000). These echo the conclusions of Swap (1993) that effective parent engagement must be comprehensive in nature, with the school consistently interfacing with parents at many points, in many venues, over the course of the schooling years. This is vital for all students at all grade levels, in all settings (urban to rural), and even more so for those with disabilities and English language learners. Epstein’s (1995) typology of family involvement in education has become the standard of the field and appears in various adaptations, including the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships from the national PTA (n.d.). A comprehensive family-school partnership (which Epstein defines as an ongoing relationship rather than a program or event) addresses all six types of family involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community.

Action Principles

For States

1. Provide training opportunities for districts and schools on how to include parents in the improvement process and track evidence that strategies are being implemented.
2. Ensure that district and school improvement plans include specific plans for parent engagement and structured communication with parents and a way to evaluate the implementation of these planned strategies.
3. Provide sample documents and templates to assist schools in communicating with parents.

For Districts

1. Adopt formal district-level policies that address issues related to outreach to and engagement of families from diverse populations.
2. Assist schools in building capacity to engage all families in their children’s learning.

For Schools

1. Establish a site-based council (e.g., School Community Council) comprised of the principal, parent facilitator, social worker or counselor, and parents of current students (non-school employees) that meets regularly and includes family-school relationships as a major element of its work.
2. Expect and monitor sound homework practices and two-way communication with parents.
3. Give parents practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors.
4. Provide culturally and linguistically appropriate opportunities for parents to meet with one another to encourage the sharing of norms, standards, and parenting concerns and successes.

5. Provide teachers and staff with professional development and consistent policies to build their capacity to work with all families and to reinforce the school's clear expectations of parents. This includes promoting a strengths-based (rather than deficit-based) view of families.

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Establishing a Supportive School Climate and an Effective Approach to Discipline

Center on Innovation & Improvement

A safe, orderly school climate is one of several characteristics of schools that consistently show good achievement gains (Redding, 2006). Individuals' experiences of school climate are shaped by perceptions of safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships (including among students, among adults, and between students and adults), and the institutional environment (Center for Social and Emotional Education, n.d.). When considering climate, the evidence of the close relationship between academic and behavioral difficulties calls for integrating intervention efforts through a single system that can monitor progress in both areas and respond accordingly with intervention as needed (Center on Instruction, 2008). Positive relationships and effective classroom management strategies are necessary to establish contexts that support the academic and behavioral competence of all students at all grade levels, including students with disabilities, and they can also promote student connectedness and reduce behavior problems, achievement gaps, dropout rates, and teacher attrition (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; National High School Center, 2008; Oliver, 2007). Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) and other similar frameworks or programs may provide a more consistent school climate by helping educators structure the environment and provide positive reinforcement (see <http://www.pbis.org/>). Schools using a social and emotional learning (SEL) framework explicitly teach SEL skills and foster an overall climate of inclusion, warmth, and respect, which can prevent bullying and promote educational success (Ragozzino & Utne O'Brien, 2009).

Several cited examples of “quick win” turnaround catalysts used by leaders as levers for change are related to improving school climate: significantly reduce discipline referrals by altering class transition schedules; reduce truancy by locking superfluous entrances and communicating to parents that the school day is protected instructional time; and improve the physical plant by cleaning up debris and painting walls (Public Impact, 2007). Case study schools have improved school climate with a number of methods, including: administrators increasing their visibility in the community and building trust relationships; adopting a college-bound focus; implementing approaches such as a proactive behavioral program, support for healthy lifestyles, and an emphasis on local historical culture; increasing communication via partnerships with faith organizations; requiring teachers to meet with families; improving the physical plant; targeting students known for making the school feel unsafe and implementing a consistently enforced discipline policy; implementing positive behavior supports; switching middle school students to self-contained classrooms (citing stronger teacher-student relationships, increased safety, and decreased time in transition); and requiring staff to emulate the actions and behavior they expect from their students (Brinson, Kowal, & Hassel, 2008; Brinson & Rhim, 2009).

Action Principles

For District

1. Provide professional development and/or peer coaching to support teachers and administrators as they manage school and classroom climate and promote positive behaviors.
2. Communicate and teach social and emotional learning standards for all students (required in some areas, examples available at <http://www.casel.org/standards/learning.php>).
3. Implement strategies or programs in large schools (such as smaller learning communities) to encourage the development of supportive relationships.
4. Address physical plant needs to ensure schools are clean, attractive, and safe.

For School

1. Link individual classroom management strategies to the schoolwide behavioral support system.

2. Utilize effective universal classroom management practices for all students and then determine which students need additional support and more individualized interventions.
3. Ensure that the relationships between and among students and adults in the school are grounded in respect and trust by providing high expectations, fair and consistent discipline, and by modeling and teaching good social, emotional, and academic skills.
4. Collect and use data regarding discipline and school climate to guide decision making.
5. Provide opportunities for celebration and association—face-to-face connection among members of the school community.

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Strategies that Build Relationships

National High School Center

Common features of the American comprehensive high school are depersonalization and a lack of a sense of community (Lee & Smith, 2001). Yet research strongly suggests that establishing a climate of social, emotional, and academic supports for students is central to improving conditions for learning and thriving in high school. Two practices generally associated with successful reform in low-performing high schools are personalized learning environments and establishing mechanisms that assist students in developing social networks and instrumental relationships (Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Quint, 2006). Strategies for building relationships between students as well as between students and school faculty include:

- Smaller learning communities (SLC) which structure larger school populations into smaller groups of students and teachers. These structures are designed to foster school environments in which healthy, trusting, interpersonal relationships between students and faculty can thrive (Cohen, 2001; Jerald, 2006). Academies are a popular form of smaller learning communities that are typically organized by career aspiration such as a program designed to prepare students for engineering coursework in college. Academies are also commonly organized by grade-level, such as ninth-grade academies designed to ease the transition from middle to high school (Herlihy, 2007a). (For more information, see Chapter 4 in this *Handbook*.)
- Guidance and mentoring programs, such as student advisories which reserve time for students to meet one-on-one and/or in small groups with trained faculty advisors to create a sense of community (Herlihy, 2007b).
- A system of tiered interventions designed to prevent and remediate documented concerns led by teams of teachers, specialists, and administrators that offer targeted support and monitoring for the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students school-wide, specific student groups (e.g., ninth graders, learning disabled, English language learners) and individual students according to their risk factors (e.g., failing grades, poor attendance, suspensions) (National High School Center, 2007). (For more information, see Chapter 7 on “Using Response to Intervention” in this *Handbook*.)
- Student leadership development programs designed to engage and enlist students in needs assessment exercises and the school improvement planning process.

Action Principles

For State

1. Develop student-level and school environment assessment tools to be used by schools that can guide decision-making about what interventions to put into place in response to students at risk for school failure due to academic, social, and/or behavioral issues.
2. Gather and report indicators on key student risk factors such as readiness for high school-level coursework in the form of reports, guidelines, and checklists that districts and schools can use to determine which students need extra support.

For District

1. Determine district-wide strategies for increasing personalization (e.g., smaller learning communities, academies, etc.).
2. Refine and provide technical support for school data collection and retrieval systems to provide the infrastructure to identify and implement targeted interventions for students who are disengaged from school.

For School

1. Partner with parents and community stakeholders to foster awareness of and support for building and sustaining effective relationships.

2. Consider ninth grade academies and summer transition programs to facilitate student transition into high school.
3. Offer programming such as student advisories to set a foundation for positive discipline school-wide and to connect all students to the school environment.
4. Use a data-driven process to prevent problem behavior. One example is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a data-driven decision-making framework that directs the selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices and systems for improving important outcomes for all students.
5. Institutionalize opportunities for students to participate in the process of improving the school climate, safety, and learning.
6. Identify and train teachers, specialists, and administrators to serve on tiered intervention teams that develop and lead school-wide, targeted, and individual student support programs.

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