

THE COMPLEXITY OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: GETTING THE CONDITIONS RIGHT

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Student achievement is at an all-time high in Ohio. An emerging consensus is that standards-based education is the foundation for this improvement. This standards-based movement provides the operational detail for Ohio's vision for education - higher achievement for *all* students through a system of rigorous academic content standards, aligned curriculum and instruction, and testing and accountability measures that inform teaching and learning.

There are practical limits on how much the standards-based reforms can impact student academic success. For

many of Ohio's students, the conditions for teaching and learning also must be right. If the conditions aren't right, students may not be able to learn what they need to know to succeed and graduate.

For instance, if students are hungry, being bullied, or using alcohol or drugs, they are less likely to be engaged in the classroom and make the most out of their academic learning time. These "conditions" or non-academic barriers present real impediments to optimal student success, not only academically but socially and developmentally.

The Ohio Community Collaboration Model for School Improvement (OCCMSI) helps schools gain more control over these conditions that often impede learning. Pilot work has found the OCCMSI to be useful as an expanded school improvement process, one that complements traditional school improvement efforts by also addressing the non-academic barriers to learning that often impede student achievement, healthy development, and success in school.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT NON-ACADEMIC BARRIERS?

The research on non-academic barriers is clear. Without proper attention to the student experiences and needs that impact learning, there often is a ceiling effect on what some students will achieve. The key to success for those students is the development of strategies and processes that are available to address these factors in support of academic progress and achievement.

A number of frameworks have been developed that organize thinking about

non-academic barriers. Early research focused on risk and protective factors for youth. Asset development, social and emotional learning, and resiliency are more recent theories of positive youth development, all of which strive to get the conditions right for learning and promote positive youth functioning and development.

While each of these frameworks organizes concepts a little differently, there are substantial similarities

in how these circumstances and experiences are defined. Non-academic barriers exist on a number of levels, including within the individual, family, school, and community systems. Research shows these multiple factors directly link to academic achievement outcomes. The table shown below highlights a few of the many factors that are important to address as schools strive to foster conditions conducive to learning.

The OCCMSI is a collaborative endeavor sponsored by the Ohio Department of Education and implemented by the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University and the Department of Psychology and Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs at Miami University. For more information, please contact Dawn Anderson-Butcher (614-292-8596; anderson-butcher.1@osu.edu) and/or Amber Kwiatkowski (614-466-9540; amber.kwiatkowski@ode.state.oh.us).

Examples of Conditions Conducive to Learning

- Students have positive relationships with caring adult role models
- Students have effective social and life skills
- Schools and their classrooms have positive learning climates
- Schools offer students opportunities for pro-social involvement
- Parents/caregivers have adequate income to meet their families' needs
- Families are supportive of children's academic and social development
- Communities are stable and foster a sense of connection among their members
- Communities have accessible quality services available for residents who need them

GETTING THE CONDITIONS RIGHT THROUGH THE OCCMSI

Within the OCCMSI pilot project, school leaders with the help of various community partners and parents, began their implementation process by determining the unmet conditions to learning impeding student success in their school. In addition to examining academic data and needs, OCCMSI pilot sites examined data related to non-academic barriers such as lack of social skills, inadequate family support for education, and poor school climate. They also participated in a nominal group process designed to gain consensus about the top five “show-stopping barriers” getting in the way of student achievement in their school. The establishment of these focused priorities allowed the schools and their partners to align community- and school-based resources further with the most pressing needs identified within their local school community.

Schools and their partners also spent time operationally defining each of their identified unmet conditions and needs. These definitions fostered a better understanding of the complexity of the issues at hand within the local context at each OCCMSI pilot. For instance, a common barrier, lack of parent involvement, was further teased apart to reflect underlying issues such as poverty, the lack of the relevance of education among families, and the lack of skills and abilities to support children’s learning. Strategies to address lack of parent involvement would need to address each of these multiple needs. In other words, each issue alone would need its own targeted intervention and response strategy, one that is locally-driven based on each underlying concern.

These expanded definitions also point to the complexity behind school improvement efforts and getting to good outcomes for students. Strategies addressing academics alone will be insufficient, as students bring with them to school many unmet needs that often impede student success. Single, linear strategies addressing only one condition alone may not be sufficient at addressing the multiple needs among students and families. Collaborative leadership structures that serve to integrate and maximize school- and community-based resources and services simultaneously are needed.

Common “Show-Stopping Barriers” in OCCMSI Pilots

Parent/Family Engagement and Support

- Meaningful family/parent involvement activities
- Parent family support for learning
- Conflicting values/lack of relevance of education
- Caregivers lack tools/skills to help with school work

Family Context

- Families in crisis/poverty
- Family mental health
- Children’s lack of readiness when entering schools
- Lack of access to health and social services

School Environment

- Cultural competence concerns
- School climate issues
- Stress related to academic standards
- Circumstances around teaching to the test
- Attendance, truancy, and transition issues

Community Context

- Lack of health care and adequate insurance
- Community economics/poverty
- Lack of awareness and/or availability of services
- Student mobility

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Several lessons have been learned in relation to the OCCMSI work on getting the conditions right for learning in the pilot sites:

- Common themes emerge readily when talking about non-academic barriers to student achievement. These unmet conditions provide focus for school-family-community partnerships as they drive the better alignment of resources with high priority needs.
- Although many sites are dealing with the needs and issues (such as lack of parent and family engagement) when pulled apart, each

school context lends itself to a different operational definition of the barrier. It is critical for the local context to drive the definition of the need, as well as the appropriate resultant response strategy and intervention.

- School improvement efforts are complex, especially as schools and their partners strive to gain control of the other factors influencing student achievement. Collaborative, focused efforts that allow schools and their community partners to implement multiple strategies simultaneously are necessary for getting to good outcomes in schools.

