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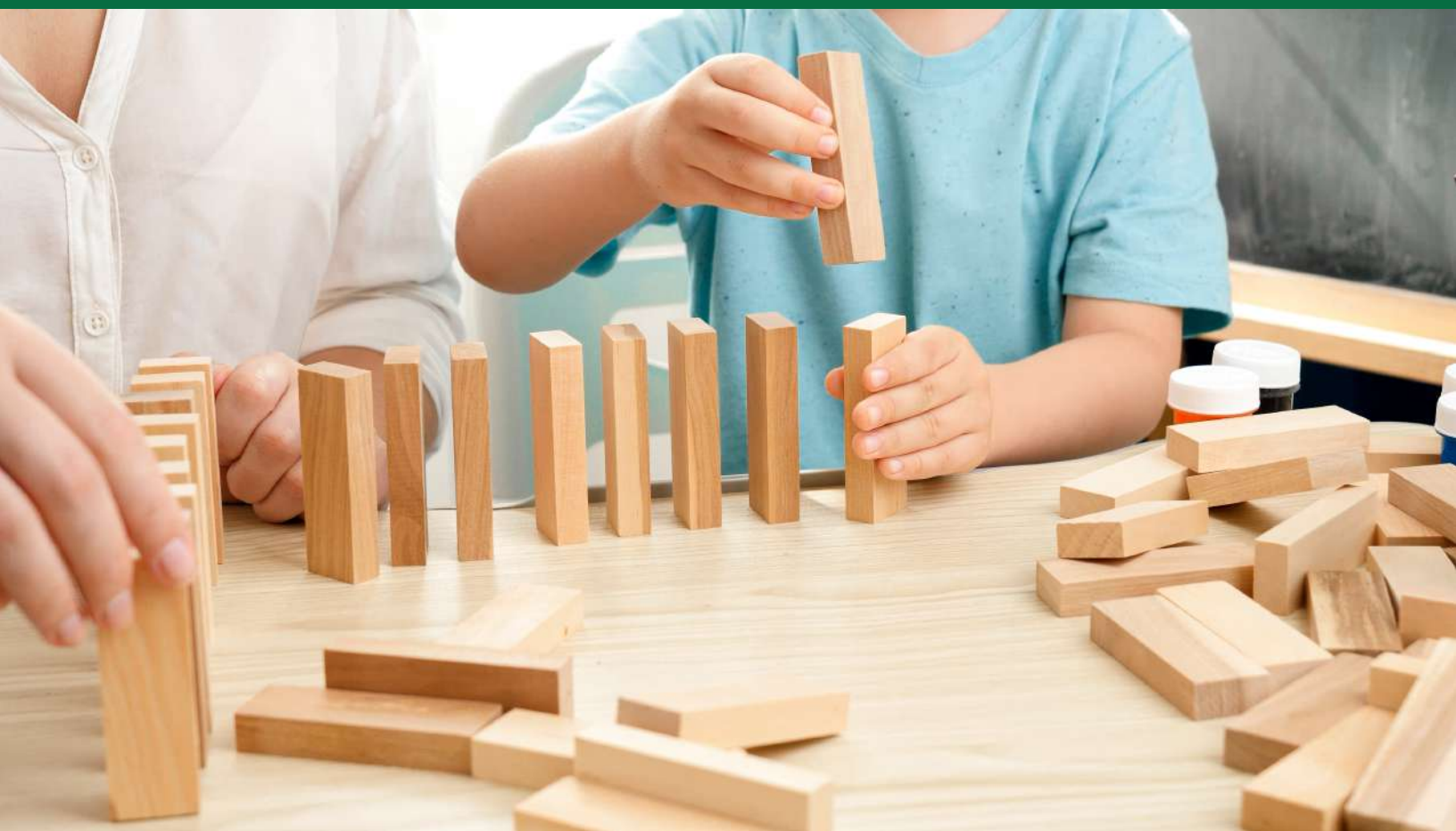
Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching



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Introduction

In the United States, despite a great deal of innovations and progress in the educational sphere, there still exist many barriers to effective teaching and learning. These may be external or internal, and it's time to acknowledge the effect of these obstacles on teachers and students alike. If we don't take time on an administrative and classroom level to address these barriers, we'll make little progress with assisting the struggling students who most need our help.

The goal is to increase the efficacy of teaching overall, so that teachers no longer have to divert instructional time to dealing with these barriers. Instead, after dealing with various impediments, teachers can hope to drive increased engagement for all students, not just those who are struggling. The strategies we'll discuss in this course will point to comprehensive systemic updates that schools and teachers can implement to address existing barriers to learning and teaching.

Section 1: The Barriers Impeding Forward Progress

As we begin to discuss effective interventions that address barriers to teaching and learning, it's key to ensure that we're all on the same page regarding what those obstacles are. The roadblocks that most directly impact learning efficacy can be extremely varied: Mental, physical, cultural, emotional, and social elements can all come together to impede students from achieving their educational goals. They can also make it very difficult for a teacher to educate effectively.

In this beginning section, we'll review some of the most common barriers that stand in the way of learning and teaching success. Then, we'll begin to break down strategies that might help us move forward.

What are some common barriers that impede teaching and learning?

There are many barriers that could interfere with a student's ability to learn effectively. We can break down the different types of barriers into a few different groups (Rice, 2021):

- **School barriers.** These are location-specific (or even classroom-specific) elements that may distract or otherwise interfere with a student's ability to focus and learn at school.

- **Emotional barriers.** These barriers may not be tangible or obvious, but they stand as very real mental impairments to effective learning. Often, these barriers take the form of fear, lack of motivation, or other significant emotions that disallow students from having the confidence to immerse themselves fully in their learning environment.

- **Environmental barriers.** These barriers may be at home or at school, but generally consist of distractions that impact a teacher's ability to teach or a student's ability to learn.

- **Psychological barriers.** These often take the form of conditions that may make learning more challenging for both impacted students and their peers (e.g., dyslexia, autism, or ADD/ADHD). It's a school's job to help a student overcome these challenges, so, reducing these barriers may require creating better support systems for students who need them.

The most common barriers that impact teaching and learning include (Rice, 2021):

- **Motivation.** Children and adults alike may run into times when they just don't feel like jumping into another project. Depending on the atmosphere in your classroom (or your students' work from home learning space), it can be challenging for both teachers and students to have the energy to make it through an intellectually stimulating weekday — let alone for the students to have the energy to complete hours of homework on their own time. If the learning community lacks interest, drive, and inspiration, or has too many distractions, these can all impact motivation adversely. As a result, the entire community will be less apt to learn as effectively or as efficiently as they otherwise might. Creative and innovative strategies can help to overcome this barrier, such as including elements of gamification in your curriculum.

- **Lack of previous knowledge.** If the bulk of your student base has had a similar learning history, you may be able to create lessons that specifically speak to and build upon the students' previous educational experiences. When new students join your classroom who have not had those previous experiences (or if a student struggled in the past), they may have a difficult time jumping in and keeping up.

As a result, they may not be motivated or able to complete current educational aims as desired.

- **Learning challenges.** More people than you may think have learning differences that can impact their ability to keep up with classmates or new learning paradigms such as remote or online learning. For example, approximately 10% of the American population has autism or dyslexia. It's imperative that we set up systems that can help students and teachers who have these learning challenges. For example, making sure that your online learning platform has options to repeat lectures, read them, listen to them, turn on subtitles, as well as other strategies are all excellent ideas to consider. It's also advisable to invest in very clear, written, step-by-step instructions for any activity you'll need teaching staff or students to complete. In addition, consider establishing a few different ways that students can complete assignments: For example, on a given subject, a student might be able to have a quick oral discussion with you to demonstrate comprehension, or provide a typed-up report, or make a quick video, etc. This flexibility will help students who learn in different ways understand how best to proceed in your classroom. Implementing robust organizational systems in your classroom, whether physical or online, will also help your entire community succeed.

- **Learning environment.** Classrooms, work places, and even home environments can contain numerous distractions. Distractions can easily hinder overall productivity or learning success and create undue frustration. If we can take steps to create serene, organized, helpful environments for learning, that may help students and teachers alike enjoy an increased ability to concentrate on their work.

- **Emotional barriers to effective work.** It's incredibly important that we no longer discount or ignore emotional barriers to productivity or understanding (as might have been more common in the past). Fear of change, insecurities, trauma, fear of failing, and many other real emotional barriers exist and can make a huge impact on a learning community's environment and abilities. It's key that we realize that these obstacles are real, discuss them openly to normalize them, and create structures in our schools (and provide resources for home use) that help us build systems of support for the mental health of our entire community.

- **Disparate learning styles.** In a perfect world, every student would learn in precisely the same way, allowing a teacher to implement a singular educational

style that would impact everyone in the best way possible. This is not how learning or education works. Some students work better with written and other visual materials. Others enjoy auditory lectures, learning with their hands, or learning in a more independent, project-based fashion. And, of course, we need to take into account the ways that teachers feel most comfortable and productive teaching: While teachers need to appeal to a variety of learning styles, we need to consider a teacher's natural educational styles as well. Building out content to be versatile so it can appeal to a wide variety of learning and teaching styles (perhaps by creating shared resources, so many teachers with differing educational styles can create, share, and access educational content) will make a school more efficient.

- **External neighborhood factors.** When students spend a long time (months or years) in neighborhoods that are impoverished, economically depleted, contaminated, hostile, or dangerous, their academic environments will likely be deficient and detrimental. From communities that are simply disorganized to areas that have high levels of violence and drug use, we find that many students who live in these environments are simply too anxious and stressed to focus on investing in their academics. These young people and their family members are trying to survive day by day. The same goes for students who simply don't have access to social and medical services.

- **External family factors.** Similarly, when a student grows up in a living environment that is impoverished, neglectful, overcrowded, rejecting, overly-demanding, or even abusive, they often have a difficult time functioning in a classroom, so being able to focus on their homework is not even a consideration or reality. We as educators must have genuine empathy for these students and families, while also recognizing that such circumstances constitute significant barriers to academic success. The same effect could be said of students who undergo frequent changes of residence, face dysfunctional family dynamics, or who have limited English-speaking skills. In these cases, it is very difficult for struggling parents to support their students in their academic endeavors (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

Reasons for Educational Barriers

It's important to realize that, unfortunately, the obstacles that children and teachers need to overcome in order to teach effectively are not meted out fairly among the

educational workforce and student population. For example, in poorer areas, rural areas, and among marginalized communities, the factors and conditions that make learning much more difficult seem to occur much more frequently.

Factors that schools need to be aware of in order to provide the support needed for children living in these conditions or communities include the following (Rueckert, 2019):

- **A lack of funding for education in your area.** Why most teachers are likely impacted to some degree by funding, discrepancies in this area vary extensively by region, community, and culture. Most schools simply don't get as much funding or financial aid as they need. This is especially pervasive outside the United States; however, within America, the amount of funding for public and private schools greatly differs depending on the setting and circumstances. With low funding, schools may not have the bandwidth to create support structures for struggling students. Teachers may be overloaded, and students (if they come from a similarly strained financial background) may be anxious and lack a calm learning environment after school. All of these constitute significant barriers to education that may be difficult to overcome with creativity alone. While outside-of-the-box thinking can help alleviate some of the pressures caused by financial insecurity for both students and schools, it needs to be a priority from school administration and local, state, and federal government to send schools more money so they can operate more efficiently.
- **A lack of trained, passionate, creative, and interested teachers.** Particularly in the post-COVID area, the educational system in the United States is facing a shortage of trained, motivated and excited educational staff. Having an empathetic and interested teacher is one of the most important factors for a child's education. Apart from anything else, a teacher who cares is one of the adults most likely to recognize any barriers that a child may be facing. These teachers then become the best possible resources to help provide support for struggling children. However, teachers need adequate training and motivation to do so. We're running out of teachers who have both the skills, experience, and the mental energy to pour themselves into their students. Schools need to prioritize recruiting, training and retaining high-quality teachers by paying them adequate salaries and ensuring that they can thrive in a positive work environment. Of course, we realize that this is also highly dependent upon the

amount of funding that a school receives; this is merely to note that a teacher shortage is quite fundamentally a barrier to effective learning.

- **A lack of support for children with disabilities or learning challenges.** We mentioned this above, but it bears looking at from another angle: Students learn better when they're with their peers, and it tends to be a knee-jerk response to send children who have learning challenges or physical disabilities to special education. For example, visually impaired children might be sent to special education, even if (with a few creative support systems in place) they might be very capable of keeping up with children in the general classroom. The same might be said of newcomer students or students for whom English is a second language. Instead of deciding to send students for special education the first time that a barrier is encountered, it might be better for everyone (including for the overall resources of the school) if some time is spent brainstorming ways to keep that child in the general classroom with a few extra support structures in place.
- **Poor nutrition.** This is a factor that often goes hand in hand with low funding, but we'd be remiss not to note it here: Hunger has a huge impact on overall development, focus, and performance, which may contribute to stress and anxiety, and have a significant impact on a student's ability to learn effectively. Even if students are not hungry at a particular moment, poor overall nutrition can affect their focus, mood, energy levels, and more. In fact, these attributes of a good learner are so innately connected to good nutrition that schools should consider poor nutrition as a very real barrier to effective education. There are ways that schools can work to mitigate chronically poor nutrition, from making more options available in the cafeteria to hosting food drives, partnering with local farmers markets, and more to ensure that all of their students, families, and school staff have access to a robust array of healthy, nutritious foods.

Barriers to Effective Teaching

Obstacles in learning environments aren't limited to those that impact students. There also exist very real barriers to teaching effectively—which, of course, ultimately impact the ability of the students in those situations to learn as well as is possible.

Teachers often face barriers that impede their ability to teach in an effective manner. From the necessity of teaching in dangerous circumstances to being overloaded with classrooms full of students who have wildly varying (and sometimes even special) needs,

it's key to shine a spotlight on the educational environment where teachers spend their days. As much as we're working to reduce student barriers to learning with excitement, energy, and meaningful comprehension, it is also very important to improve circumstances for teachers as they effectively support students and as a means to retain them. Specific barriers include (Meador, 2019):

- **The need to support a classroom featuring a wide range of student personalities, interests, and needs.** This is not a new problem, but it is a very real challenge that teachers need help managing. Public schools in the United States support a varied population of students with diverse experiences and demands. Most educators embrace this and are thrilled with the opportunity to help the students that need it most. This does not mean that educators don't need more support to do so effectively — or without overloading or over-stressing our educators. Teachers are tasked with finding efficient ways to teach the bulk of their students and meeting the needs of students who may fall outside the norm. This is a significant challenge that requires thinking outside the box and considerable patience, training, and support. Teachers need ongoing professional development to ensure that they are always fully equipped to meet the disparate learning styles, needs, and backgrounds of a diverse classroom. They also need the time, flexibility and bandwidth to do so effectively.

- **The lack of parent support for teacher initiatives.** While a creative, hard-working, and engaged teacher is one of the single most important factors in a student's learning journey, a student's family or immediate caregivers are also quite important. In an ideal situation, a student's teachers and parents could work together to ensure that a student is supported at both home and school. Teachers would provide parents with needed resources, and parents would support their student's teacher's efforts to educate. This doesn't always happen, and students are struggling as a result. We know from current studies and research that at-home support (e.g., parents who are able to make education a priority and are consistently involved in educational efforts) do better. When this is not the case, teachers have a more difficult time educating on a very practical level. The comprehension level, preparedness, and energy levels of already diverse classrooms can differ wildly, making an educator's daily task list even more necessarily multifaceted. While it's clear that not every family may be in a financial place or have the energy or emotional capacity to invest a significant amount of time in their student's education, on a basic level, parents should be able to ensure their students are healthy and prepared for school. They should

also participate in regular two-way communication between home and school. In a later section, we'll discuss how to enrich parent-school communication to support student education.

- **The lack of proper funding.** Unfortunately, in this day and age, this is a likely barrier to effective teaching that most educators feel keenly. A lack of proper funding is about far more than a classroom being unable to afford niceties: Class sizes often increase in a school that has minimal funding. As a result, a school may not be able to afford the basic educational and instructional materials that make schooling possible (such as technology and curriculum). This forces teachers to do much more of the work themselves or even pay for school supplies out of their own tight salaries. The stress and frustration that this creates may serve as a significant barrier to effective instruction.

- **An overemphasis on the importance of standardized testing.** Standardized tests are important, but preparing for them shouldn't come at the expense of deep learning across a varied slate of subjects. We're also learning more about standardized testing, and how it can be a relatively ineffective way to assess students who do not necessarily learn in standardized ways. For these and related reasons, there are some teachers who are entirely against standardized testing. Those who aren't in complete opposition to this type of testing still find it frustrating and stressful that advocates both inside and outside of their academic communities often prioritize standardized test results over meeting students' overall needs. When schools and communities require high standardized tests in order to determine teacher efficacy, teachers are often put into a difficult position—one in which they often must compromise their own strengths and passions in the effort to prioritize teaching to the test. This can result in incredibly high levels of teacher burnout, dissatisfaction, and stress.

- **Unfairly low public perception of the role teachers play in a community.** Particularly if you're in the teaching field, you've likely heard the derogatory expression: Those who can, do. Those who can't do, teach. Popularized in an infinite array of movies and other types of media, this maxim has created a stigma surrounding teachers, especially in the United States. While there have been pockets of time in the past few years (e.g., the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic) where national sentiment has been behind teachers, for the most part, the heroic sacrifice and work of the public school teacher is largely ignored. This is especially clear when the general perception of teachers in America is

compared to that in other countries, where public school teachers are revered for their services. While most teachers would decisively say that they are not teaching for public acclaim, the fact that their exemplary work is often ignored or underappreciated is disheartening. The chronically low perception of teachers in America has certainly had an effect on our lowering rates of teacher retention and has contributed to the growing teacher shortage we face.

- **The increasing trendiness of educational tactics.** The often competitive nature of the American school system has resulted in an ever-present need for schools to present the very latest and greatest educational tools and practices. Sometimes these trends are worth implementing. Other times, they may be trendy but they're largely non-substantive. Regardless of their efficacy, these ever-changing trends wear on teachers, as they are tasked by their schools to become experts in new learning tools without much notice, or are expected to be constantly on the pulse of the latest educational trends, only to have these innovations be replaced by new strategies once again.

Section 1 Key Points

- There are many barriers to effective education for students, including physiological barriers, environmental barriers, and emotional barriers such as the lack of motivation.
- Overcoming these barriers will require effort and creativity — as well as, likely, more funding.
- Some of the most important obstacles to education can be less obvious — for example, inadequate nutrition, or an overemphasis on the importance of standardized testing.
- Ensuring that the tools we use are accessible and valid will help us teach and learn more efficiently.

Section 1 Summary

In addition to having a basic understanding of the main barriers standing in the way of both effective learning and efficient teaching, it is imperative to address what is needed from schools and administrations in order to improve educational efficacy and access. In

the next section, we'll talk about the different domains of support that could help transform American education.

Section 2: The Science Behind the Barriers We Face

One important factor to consider when assessing barriers that students face in school is what research says about development and learning. How do students naturally face the trials before them? As teachers, what can we realistically expect—and how can we give our students a leg up when needed?

Here's what science has to say about young brains, learning differences, and the impact of stress (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018):

- **Our brains—particularly young brains, e.g., our students' brains—are malleable.** Our brains change throughout life to meet the barriers in front of us. Our brains are also shaped by the relationships we enjoy. Investing in warm relationships, empathetic communications, and creating productive rhythms and routines will help strengthen our brains so we're ready to meet barriers and challenges. It's also evident that children's brains develop better when they feel safe, connected, supported—and challenged. As teachers, it's our duty to give our students an educational experience that meets all of those criteria.
- **On a neurological level, variability is expected.** Gone are the days when we assumed every child learns the same way and at the same rate, yet many of the assessment structures and expectations regarding success that we have for our students rely upon that erroneous assumption. The reality is since students' brains are different, the profile of their learning and the pace of their comprehension will also differ from their peers. In other words, there are many pathways through education. No one pathway is correct, and multiple avenues can lead to success.
- **Adversity and effective learning are incompatible.** This makes a healthy and helpful school response to adversity absolutely necessary as part of a school's mission. In the United States, nearly 50 million children per annum are exposed to psychological traumas such as homelessness, abuse, food insecurity, and exposure to crime. The type of toxic stress that results from these situations completely eradicates a student's normal ability to learn well. By facilitating supportive relationships, existing as a safe place, helping students build healthy

routines, and connecting students to resources and support when needed, schools can productively work to help students overcome these stressors so they can enjoy normal health and happiness—but also an enhanced ability to learn well.

If we base our strategies on these principles, it becomes evident that we need to focus on specific domains of support in order to help students overcome barriers. These include the following (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018):

- **Identity-safe classrooms.** In addition to simply being safe spaces for our children, we need to proactively focus on creating an environment that is conducive to student achievement. Building an identity-safe classroom includes focusing on:
    - Teaching strategies that promote student responsibility, belonging to a community within the classroom and within the school, cooperation in all classroom tasks, and having a generally positive and understanding student voice
    - Cultivating an appreciation for diversity, by using culturally-responsive materials in class and having high expectations for the empathy and understanding of all students
    - Creating strong interpersonal relationships between all students, teachers, and adult teaching aides
    - Creating and maintaining organized, purposeful classroom environments so that all students feel physically safe and respected during the day
- **Social-emotional learning.** If students need to feel healthy, happy, and safe in order to learn, we need to invest in social-emotional learning, or SEL. Some strategies to help students invest in their emotional healthiness (and so avoid learning barriers associated with depression or anxiety) include (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018):
    - Giving your students targeted instruction in skills related to SEL competencies, such as interpersonal communications, conflict resolution, decision-making, and more. (It's key to realize that these are learned behaviors, not innate ones!)

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    - Giving your students opportunities to practice their SEL skills throughout the day—e.g., in small group scenarios, in partner situations, by role-playing and practicing kindness, and more
    - Taking a more restorative and educative approach to discipline and management in the classroom, so students learn to be responsible about their behaviors but don't associate their classroom with a trauma response
- **Investing in self-efficacy, competence, and self-directed learning.** Our goal as teachers is to guide our students and then to be able to let them work confidently and efficiently on their own. To work toward this end, teachers might (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018):
    - Focus on assigning creative, meaningful work instead of excessive busywork. One way to go about this is to focus on student-led or project-based learning
    - Interweaving explicit instruction to lower a student's stress level and make an assignment accessible with consistent, appropriate inquiries and assessments that will drive engagement levels, and will spark curiosity and confidence in a student
    - Allowing students to ask questions in class, and even asking students to explain concepts for their peers
    - Using assessments that are based on performance and expertise to help students develop confidence and competence in a specific skill (e.g., building something tactile, or doing a fun activity instead of simply checking off boxes on paper)
    - Investing in opportunities to help students develop metacognitive skills. For example, help them reflect on what they've learned or support students as they learn to break down and organize larger tasks
    - Ask community members to allow students to shadow them when their field is related to something that a student is focusing on in class. This will not only be exciting and engaging, but will also help to build a student's confidence and familiarity with a given skill
- **Focused developmental supports for the young people in our care.** Increasingly, schools need to focus on building the health and happiness of students as well as

their knowledge bases. To do this, schools can prioritize the following strategies (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018):

- Investing in an inclusive, inspiring, and safe school climate while also establishing ongoing measures to keep improving our schools, assessing our efforts, and making further investments where possible
- Hiring mental health professionals to be resources for the academic community, and ensuring that all teachers and administrators receive ongoing professional development on the importance of mental health and some best practices in that arena
- Reconsider exclusionary discipline (e.g., discipline that takes struggling students out of the community), while instead investing in restorative discipline that supports and educates instead of triggering or harming

- **School design centered around healthy development for students.** As we move forward and prioritize ways to care for and educate the whole child, we need to ensure that the entire school setting is ready for healthy development. To work toward this goal, schools can Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018):
    - Optimize school design to build strong relationships. This can be accomplished by keeping schools as small as possible or building intentional communities within larger schools, making sure that teachers stay with students for more than the traditional one year, building teaching teams, and more
    - Ensure that all students know that they have access to the school's mental and physical health resources, along with the resources associated with any of the school's community partners
    - Ensure that healthy parental outreach is part of the school's approach to education. This might include parent-teacher conferences, regular communication, and even home visits to provide assistance in ensuring that a student is enjoying a safe, productive at-home environment.

After discussing the various types of barriers that face both students and teachers, it's clear that we need to first identify and then strategically implement ways to overcome or reduce these barriers in order to see forward progress.

In a later section, we'll devise practical methods for supporting students. In this section, on a more idealistic level, we'll identify the various domains of support that students and teachers alike require in order to learn and teach as effectively as possible.

The Ways Schools Can Play a Greater Role in Providing Domains of Support for Students Who Experience Common Barriers

Student learning supports need to be more than simply interventions to protect against specific barriers, such as those mentioned in the previous section. In order to see true, long-lasting, impactful change, schools and teachers must ideate and organize interventions that are proactive, supported by all members of the academic community, and based on observations of each school's actual student populations (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

Here, we'll list out six potential domains of support that your school could decide to focus on. These are generalized options; it's crucial that you seek ways to survey your specific school's needs and the barriers your students face.

Schools can focus on embedding learning supports for students into already-existing strategies geared toward increasing the efficacy of teaching

This domain of potential support assumes that school districts are already working toward ways to make teaching more efficient. In this kind of initiative, a school administration might work collaboratively with its teaching staff and mental health professionals to enhance existing efforts with increased and focused student social-emotional or motivational support. This type of support should be catered to assist all students as they are, but certainly, make a targeted effort to provide support for students with learning disabilities or behavioral issues. Overall, the goal should be to re-engage all students, invest in learning accommodations (and reduce the ways that students who use the accommodations tend to be stigmatized), and invest renewed efforts into identifying and intervening early when it becomes clear that a student is struggling (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

Schools can focus more on supporting students who are (or whose families are) tackling difficult transitions

More and more, students who are in the elementary school years are entering this formative period in their lives when they or their family is going through a transitional period. Whether students are transitioning from in-person to remote learning, are moving to the United States for the first time, having difficulty choosing what they want to do with their studies or their lives, navigating the complexities of studying with attention deficits or other challenges, or experiencing a world of other frustrating and overwhelming hardships, schools need to consider the real-life issues their students are confronting and pivot to ensure that their support strategies are ready to help students meet those challenges (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

Schools can focus more on increasing support for the home-school connection

We know that students do better when their parents or caregivers are working with the school to provide support. Investing in practical strategies to further the teacher-parent bond, ensuring that homes have good Internet and transportation, and providing parents resources to facilitate their ability to support their students all need to be actions for schools to prioritize (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

Schools can create better systems for preventing and responding to crises on many levels

In order to help reduce the catastrophic levels of identifiable risks and to alleviate the stress levels of both students and families, school officials should take care to invest in systems that prevent the most common disasters facing schools today. They should work with local experts to identify these risks, implement prevention strategies, and create procedures to guide the immediate school response should one of these crises occur. Schools need to convey these plans to every member of the community, including parents. They should also create kid-friendly versions of these resources and communicate disaster plans to children. Finally, schools need to develop far-reaching plans detailing how a school can bounce back should one of these disasters happen. This can feel macabre, unnecessary, or redundant, but knowing that your school is well-prepared for a number of crises will help reduce student and parent anxiety. This, in turn, will free up family bandwidth to focus on investing in student learning strategies instead of more fundamental student safety (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

Schools can increase their involvement in the community

By bringing in more support via a community connection, a school can both show support for small businesses or innovative resources in the area and outsource some of its own projects (e.g., need to come up with new programs, or purchase its own materials, etc). Schools need to find ways to bring in more volunteers, create more academic programs outside their four walls, increase value-based field trips or community projects, and clearly create a symbiotic infrastructure all geared to support the students. This should increase student safety in and around your school's community, free up teacher and administrator time and energy, and increase the number of support systems available to parents and students (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

Schools can increase the systemic support they have available to families and students in need of special assistance

Whether a student or family is going through a difficult transition, the student is experiencing learning disorders that make keeping up with peers and academic standards especially difficult, or a family is going through any other type of struggle, a student's school should be a resource that connects families to the specific aid they need. Families should feel comfortable alerting a school that they don't have the financial resources to invest in high-speed internet, space to set aside for their child's projects, or even access to good nutrition or time to cook nutritious food at home. Schools, then, should find diplomatic ways to increase a family's ability to invest in these resources. This may require additional funding from donors or government sources, but creating a school fund to provide specifically required help for families in need is a very practical way to help families and students overcome specific barriers that they face (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

Schools and the Need for Implementing Substantive, Forward-Thinking, and Permanent Systemic Change

Clearly, many of these support systems are very optimistic and idealistic; however, it's entirely possible to achieve visionary change as long as we make it a priority. As our schools target creating ways to overcome barriers for students, families, and teachers alike, we need to make sure that we aren't accidentally eliminating or replicating current strategies that are already enhancing our academic communities. This requires a

fundamental change in the way we think about addressing barriers: We need to assess already-existing systems, ask people what they really need, and take slow, methodical steps to ensure that we're constantly improving educational access (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

This is easier said than done. One Californian school district sought to define the essential elements of implementing a more comprehensive and equitable system of support for their academic community. Here's an outline of the elements they identified (Adelman and Taylor, 2020).

- **Schools need to follow up policy presentations with adequate documentation and full integration.** In order to make sure that we not only identify, present, and initiate learning supports to help community members overcome barriers, we need to make sure that our ideas are translated into design and implementation documents, as well as a unified and agreed-upon strategic plan. These supporting documents will serve as critical guides for actually following through on our plans to increase support systems. This will also help us come up with better ideas for support later, and troubleshoot these systems more effectively should issues arise. These strategic plans and design documents should be easily accessible and fully integrated into a school's more general standard operating procedures.
- **Schools need to pull together an effective and repeatable framework for addressing clear barriers to effective education.** The Californian school district further identified that the type of accessible, implementable, equitable framework needed combines two distinct types of interventions: A continuum of school and community interventions, that encompasses both immediate ideas for action and long-ranging, permanent initiatives, as well as wide-reaching organization. This point was crucial: Nothing will get done without impressive levels of organization. Moreover, the frameworks schools develop should be so thoroughly put together that they are easy to repeat and implement swiftly whenever a new obstacle threatening student or teacher success is identified.
- **Schools need to create committees and infrastructure components specifically dedicated to implementing needed learning and teaching supports.** Simply throwing these initiatives on the to-do lists of already-overworked committees, administrators, and educators is a recipe for failing to make progress in the implementation process. It cannot be overstated how overworked and understaffed schools and educators generally are, and as a result, even well-intentioned initiatives may be overlooked. If a school is serious about identifying

and implementing strategies to help its community overcome barriers, it needs to bring together a specific and mindful group of people to do this; and each member of that group needs to have the immediate availability to focus on this need. Why? Implementing these solutions successfully will require far more than simply establishing a quick plan and setting it in motion. This committee will need to oversee the aggregation of data across the entire academic community (surveying teachers, students, and families alike) to see what real-time needs the community has. The committee will need to map and analyze already-existing resources, create a prioritization system to address the most pressing needs first, coordinate efforts across every level of their community, and establish ways to evaluate progress over time. All of these efforts will take a considerable amount of time and work. This is not something that can be put on someone's back burner. It may be necessary for schools to bring in community volunteers or hire additional staff to tackle these problems.

- **Schools need to continuously invest in capacity-building strategies.** In short, a school system needs to be ready to meet the needs of more students and more families in the future, not less. To do this, schools must be able to hire more capable and interested teachers, provide those teachers with meaningful teaching experiences to improve retention and provide on-the-job professional development and other similar opportunities to enhance the capabilities of existing teachers and volunteers. This training can include specific educational offerings for teachers and volunteers that will help them address barriers for their students.

- **Finally, schools need to invest in ways to keep themselves accountable, assess their own ongoing progress, and pivot when necessary.** Without monitoring our initiatives to see whether they are having the intended effect, we may find that we're not actually moving forward as desired. Any plan that we have to help our community overcome barriers must include feasible plans for continuously monitoring the efficacy of the way that we are rolling out our plans as well as the effect these strategies are having on struggling students and families. For example, it may be helpful to send out a recurring survey to impacted families over the course of a year after you have put your plan into action.

Section 2 Key Points

- On a neurological level, our brains are equipped to overcome the barriers we face. Often, we just need a little help.
- Educators can help students rise to the occasion by providing a careful balance of explicit instruction (to alleviate stress) and inquiry-based instruction (to foster a sense of creative curiosity).
- Schools need to focus on supporting the family-school connection, providing resources to struggling families, and making their own procedures for crises both clear and accessible. These are practical methods for reducing stress, which can help with many different barriers to effective education.
- Schools need to follow up policies geared toward reducing these barriers with effective project management techniques.

Section 2 Summary

With a greater understanding of the neuroscience underlying barriers to education and the domains of support needed, the next step is to evaluate practical ways to increase our needed levels of support.

Section 3: Practical Strategies for Addressing Barriers in Learning

In order for any student to be able to learn well, we need to first realize that learning is work. It's hard work. And it's work that requires different strategies and supports for every child. Part of being a good teacher is guiding your students as they figure out how to learn and progress in their own way. In doing so, you're going to have to teach them that they are capable of overcoming barriers and difficulties in their lives. While this is not meant to take the place of very real, very needed support from schools for struggling families in any way, it is an individual set of skills that all students need to learn.

Here are six practical and efficient ways you can work toward helping your students adopt a barrier-busting mentality (Crockett, 2021).

1. **Believe in your students.** Not only must your students believe they are capable of overcoming barriers, but you must sincerely believe in them as well. All too often, even relatively innocuous obstacles can be incredibly overwhelming for young people. As an influential mentor in their lives, it's up to you to teach students a growth mindset. You need to help them realize that they're stronger and smarter than they may think. In addition, it helps to model and practice ways to think creatively and to teach students to be advocates for themselves so they can overcome the struggles in their lives, or know how to ask for help when it is needed. This starts with you behaving in ways that make it clear you strongly believe in your students' potential.

2. **Infuse your educational strategies with relevance and context.** Children are relentlessly practical people. They will naturally concentrate more on content that seems like it has a connection to who they are and where they live. If your students are repeatedly facing barriers related to focus and motivation, see if you can find ways to connect the dots for them. Where would your students come across this concept in their daily lives? How will they interact with this information in the future? If nothing immediately comes to mind, consider whether there's a way to add some fun pop culture reference in the lesson, or use an example coming from the music you know your students are listening to. This will make your lessons more naturally compelling, and likely help your students be more interested in doing the work as a result.

3. **Constantly debrief and assess how you and your students are doing.** Not only will constant assessments give you useful information about how your teaching methods are working and your students are comprehending your information, but interesting assessments provide intrinsic motivation. Whether you offer some kind of accessible and appropriate reward after a relatively routine pop quiz or you find a fun way (such as class jeopardy) to quiz your students, many students will have a natural inclination toward performing well throughout testing scenarios. However, it's important to remember that administering frequent tests is not the endgame; honing our teaching strategies to ensure that we're serving our students well should be the goal. After you've completed and graded an assessment, it's time to do a debrief. Look at the results of your class as a whole: Is there anything you can tweak in your teaching strategy to improve outcomes? Are there any telling trends in your students' performance that might let you know that your students are encountering an obstacle? When you look at individual students' results, is it clear that any one of your students is struggling?

Taking the time to absorb this information and rethink your teaching strategy as necessary will lead to greater educational efficiency all around.

4. **Prioritize the use of enabling language.** This point is closely related to the first. In short, the language we use matters. Often, when adults and young people realize that they will have some difficulty completing a task, the initial, instinctive response is to say "I can't do this!" While it may seem inconsequential, it's important to realize that saying this leads us to believe that we cannot, in fact, complete the task. Rather, it's key to use language and teach our students to use language that reflects our ability to grow to meet the tasks and obstacles in front of us. Researcher Carol Dweck shed some light on a simple switch we can make in our verbiage to adopt this strategy: "By asking learners to add 'yet' to the end of their 'I can't do this' comments, possibilities are opened up for success in future attempts and iterations. It changes their fixed or failure mindsets to growth and possibility ones." This philosophy should extend to the way we leave feedback for our students. As we provide constructive feedback on papers, presentations, or a student's participation level, we need to remember to choose language that doesn't shut down a student's ability to rise to the occasion.

5. **Provide opportunities for your students, and model the behavior you wish to see.** As you teach your students, you need to remember that you're an educator in more ways than one. Your students look up to you! Make sure that you're modeling a growth mindset to remind you of what's possible throughout your day. Be curious, be energetic, and be empathetic; you'll find your students will be much more likely to adopt these behaviors and match your energy if you set this type of tone. Your levels of empathy and understanding should extend into very practical ways in which you meet your students where they are. If it's evident that specific students are struggling, give them the opportunities they need to regroup and find success. For example, extend deadlines. or allow students to take a makeup test. Try to find ways to allow them to rest if they seem overextended. If you hear that they're dealing with personal struggles—from relationship issues to serious stress at home—see if you can connect them with a mental health professional at school, or speak with your administrators to see if there's any way you can direct resources their way. Teaching with this level of practical, proactive empathy and problem-solving will go a long way for your students.

6. **Guide your students—and then step aside.** Part of believing in your students is realizing that you won't be there to guide them forever! While stepping aside

takes courage for everyone involved, sometimes letting them find their own path around an obstacle or challenge can give them the confidence they need to tackle bigger problems in their lives. We can help them by giving them problem-solving frameworks, teaching them to think creatively, and helping them believe in their ability to succeed. Then, however, we need to realize that our job is done and that it may be time to let our students do their own thing. We can do this in a gentle way by asking questions of our students that help them form their own questions, connections, and conclusions. Examples of questions that may go a long way here include:

1. Now that we've solved this problem, where would you go from here?
2. What do you think about this problem (or topic, or story)?
3. Where else have you seen this type of problem?
4. What does this problem remind you of?
5. We'll talk about how to solve this problem in a minute, but, for now—how would you solve it?

Practical Strategies for Removing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

In this section, we'll provide first a brief recap of the primary barriers facing children as they learn. As we do so, we'll provide a high-level suggestion for a strategy that schools can use to overcome that specific obstacle. Finally, we'll go a little more in-depth into the solutions that can effectively match with each identified barrier.

The main barriers students face and constructive suggestions for meeting them (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020)

1. Teachers struggle to keep all of their students engaged and focused.

   Strategies to help overcome this barrier include: Emphasizing the need for practical, explicit instructions in classroom activities and for homework. Teachers can also prioritize teaching both cognitive and metacognitive strategies to help students as they work to gain their own sense of independence in their learning journey

2. Students often have a hard time feeling connected at school. It's difficult for them to learn if their emotional and social needs are not met.

   Strategies to help overcome this barrier include: Establishing an organized, consistent, and respectful environment in your classroom that can help your students feel comfortable. Helping students learn and practice healthy social behaviors can also be of assistance.

3. Students may not have familiarity with managing a stressful workload. Overwhelmed students have difficulty learning effectively.

   Strategies to help overcome this barrier include: Working to adapt your curricula to avoid unnecessary student overwhelm. In addition, it's key to teach children to prioritize, help them with coping skills, and provide support for them when they get confused or overwhelmed by what they need to get done. Additionally you can encourage them to focus on one task at a time whenever possible.

4. Students require lots of support as they learn new content, figure out ways to process it, and eventually are able to manipulate and work with new content.

   Strategies to help overcome this barrier include: Providing both constructive and positive feedback as children learn and process a great deal of new information, and helping them learn behaviors that will make effective learning easier. In addition, teachers should focus on teaching children how to learn, in addition to teaching them new content

5. Often, students with many different types of needs and varied personalities are all required to learn in one way. This can be most often seen in the sudden widespread use of distance or remote learning.

   Strategies to help overcome this barrier include: Finding creative, outside-of-the-box ways to disseminate information and provide interactive learning strategies within required learning frameworks. Teachers can also try to provide multiple redundant forms of information—e.g., a video, podcast, and text passage that all cover the same material—so students can select their own learning experiences whenever possible.

6. Students do better when their families are engaged, but that can be difficult to achieve.

Strategies to help overcome this barrier include: Working with professionals to establish academic goals, projects, and routines that the entire family can work on together. Communicating empathetically and efficiently with families is also critical. Reminding parents that they are partners in their child's learning journey, and ensuring that parents have support systems in place and the tools they need to be resources for their children.

Now that we've laid out this framework of common barriers and initial strategies, let's dive into each category in a little more detail.

Barrier One: Keeping students engaged and focused.

Working to overcome this barrier is important because, in order to help our students own their learning journeys, they need to have an internal level of focus, discipline, and motivation. This can be difficult when students are faced with challenging content, external distractions, inaccessible content, or emotional or personal struggles.

In addition, higher levels of student engagement tend to lead to higher levels of academic achievement, satisfaction, and even graduation rates. In other words, this can be a long-reaching win-win, as long as it's a barrier that's prioritized and overcome in a strategic way (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020).

Teachers need to focus on establishing the right conditions for students to become and remain engaged in their studies. For example, as mentioned above, giving them very practical, accessible, and explicit instructions regarding their work can make it easier for students to feel confident moving forward on their own. Whenever students are learning more material or new ways to think about the material, there needs to be very comprehensive resources available for students to take advantage of. For example, there should be examples included in all resources to help students picture a successful way to move forward (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020).

Teachers can also focus on helping students learn cognition and metacognition, or ways to learn new things and commit them to memory. Focus on giving your students not only new materials but tools to understand what you're talking about, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and ways to realize when they're not focusing or not paying attention (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020).

Specific strategies to include in this effort might involve (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020):

- Investing in step-by-step instructions to give your students, at least for the most commonly-used processes in your classroom. Also consider adding pictures and other visuals.
- Using the technology features at your disposal (e.g., discussion boards, chat boxes) to drive student engagement during learning sessions.
- Offering resources for your students that span different types of media, such as recorded videos and podcasts, and passages to read
- Teaching your students learning strategies as well as new content
- Building check-ins into your teaching process and your students' learning processes (e.g., asking students to stop at the end of a chapter and ask themselves if they've understood what they've read, or what the most important takeaways were).

Barrier Two: Ensuring that students' emotional needs are met.

As you're likely already aware, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs dictates that a student needs to feel safe and fed in order to be able to learn properly. A similar strategy could be applied to a students' ability to learn in light of their social-emotional health.

Whether your students are transitioning to a new type of learning environment or they're simply undergoing the normal stress that accompanies being a young student, it's key for educators to remain aware of a young student's needs (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020).

One of the difficulties in implementing this strategy is that the types of symptoms that anxious, terrified, or depressed students will show can vary widely. They may shut down; they may act out. They may be rude or unresponsive. Two students in the same circumstances may have opposite reactions, and one student may behave differently over time (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020).

An important component in the art of teaching lies in reading your students and coming to them where they are. As their teacher (e.g., a stable adult in their lives), you have the opportunity to teach your students clear expectations, healthy routines, self-regulation strategies, and how to create an environment in which they will thrive (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020).

To help manage and meet these needs, educators might focus on (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020):

- Helping students come up with their own healthy ways to manage their stressors
- Working hard to create a calming, respectful atmosphere and environment
- Facilitating connections for each student to the entire school community
- Making sure that all students are aware of the expectations the school has of them
- Making the daily procedures and expectations that your classroom goes through very clear
- Modeling good interpersonal behaviors for students
- Teaching good communication skills
- Becoming an adult in their lives that students can fully trust

Barrier Three: Helping students avoid being overwhelmed by their workload.

Whether your students are in pre-K or twelfth grade, they're capable of being overwhelmed by to-do lists. (This isn't limited to kids, obviously—this is a human experience.) As their teacher, you can truly impact your students' lives in a very practical way just by teaching them how to manage their task lists. Often, it's been assumed that good students pick up organizational skills innately, or figure out how to keep themselves pulled together along the way. These types of skills—-now referred to as 'executive functioning' skills, or perhaps 'self-regulation' strategies—can be taught. Students who don't know this may rightly feel hopeless about their potential. Fortunately, there are ways that you can help them realize they can learn how to be less overwhelmed, and practical measures you can put in place to facilitate better processing, comprehension, and organization (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020).

Some specific strategies for helping students avoid overwhelm might include (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020):

- Creating easy and memorable procedures for students to ask questions, request support, and clarify any concerns surrounding homework assignments

- Having clear, communicated systems in place for students to play catchup on any missed work, or to qualify for extra credit
- Providing tiered content, assessment, or project structures for students that they can tackle as they feel able to
- Teaching students how to take good notes, how to manage their homework time, and how to solve problems or complete assignments efficiently. For example, you might consider teaching them time management strategies like the Pomodoro technique, a method of working for 25 minutes, taking a quick break, and diving back in.
- Defining and communicating the learning goals for each semester up front, so students have context for each of their assignments
- Using easy-to-master tech tools (and preferably a relatively small number of these tools) to facilitate project completion and communication in the classroom
- Providing scaffolded support options, or methods of temporary assistance for students to lean on. This gives students the confidence that they need to tackle tasks that may be, in some way, just outside of their reach. Once the student gains familiarity with the task, the scaffolds and support systems can fade away as necessary.
- Making the grading rubrics and expectations extremely clear for students. Students should be able to tell exactly how they will be graded, so that very little about your assessment procedures comes as a shock or surprise.
- Allowing students to reflect upon and demonstrate their learning in many different ways. For example, if writing lengthy reports causes undue stress, you might consider allowing students to tell a story, create a poster, record a video, or otherwise find a creative medium to demonstrate that they've learned new content.
- Facilitating engagement in your classroom in varied ways. When you're having a class discussion, make sure to offer small breakout sessions, question-and-answer sessions, and more to help avoid spiking the stress levels of students who might be overstimulated by speaking on the spot.

Barrier Four: Helping students process and retain new information efficiently.

The school years are, at their core, about taking in and processing an incredible amount of information. The likelihood of saturating our student's brains is quite high. As teachers, we need to seek a way to balance the number of things we're asking students to do and recognize the ability of our students to meet all required state standards while managing their own stress levels. It's a delicate balancing act to say the least. The name of the game has to be learning smart, as it were—and increasing our students' abilities to be extremely efficient with their comprehension, practice, research, and creative work (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020).

This is also a lot to assess, particularly when we as teachers are tasked with overseeing the academic development of a full classroom of energetic students. We need to find effective and efficient ways, ourselves, to monitor student understanding, progress, and engagement (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020).

Strategies in this arena may include (Herberger, Holdheide, and Sacco, 2020):

- Scheduling frequent check-in times with our students. Students can find one-on-one discussions with their teachers to be stressful in themselves, but in order to be a good resource for our students, we need to find a way to normalize our presence in their lives. Taking time to have frequent meetings can make each individual meeting less worrisome (as students will learn to stop assuming that a one-on-one meeting automatically means bad news). This will give you the chance to help students reflect on their own learning needs and strengths in a healthy, fair, and objective way. (Of course, this assumes that teachers have the time and bandwidth to give each student recurring pockets of individualized attention, which is not always the case.)

- Finding ways to mix positive and constructive feedback in such a way that students learn not to feel attacked, but appreciative of the specialized information they're receiving and hopeful about their chances to do better in the future. In order for feedback to feel helpful, even when it's calling out practices that may need to be modified, it needs to be goal-directed, impersonal, and strategically delivered. Although the student may see this as a setback, he or she must be given the room and time in which to apply constructive feedback and grow.

- Teaching students ways to remember and incorporate new content and principles into their worldviews. In order to help students actually learn and retain

something (instead of hearing something and immediately forgetting it), they need strategies for maintaining newly-acquired skills and knowledge. One way to help do this is to use many different types of examples for new knowledge points acquired. This helps students see a new piece of knowledge in several different lights (e.g., situations, places, and environments) and so helps them understand and remember the new knowledge more. As an additional bonus, providing varied examples may help students with differing learning modalities and preferences "get" a concept better, too.

- Prioritize leaving your students feedback in very accessible and varied ways. For example, instead of just leaving notes in red pen in the margins of an essay, leave your student an audio note in a friendly tone of voice. This can make criticisms feel much less harsh.

Strategies for schools to enhance home involvement and engagement in schooling

Many schools that have been able to overcome a significant number of learning barriers have noted that they've been able to boost parental/family involvement and engagement for their students. Researchers have even looked into the relationship between home involvement and success and theorized that boosting parent involvement can go a long way toward closing the achievement gap (Larson, 2019).

Most parents agree with this notion (one study found that some 85% of parents agreed with this general thesis). Yet the same study found that there's a great deal of room for us to improve in this area: Almost 50% of parents found that they wanted to do more to support their child's education, but either did not know how or did not feel that they had the resources to be more involved (Larson, 2019).

One of the best strategies for a school system to boost home involvement is to communicate with families consistently and well. Every member of the school community - administrators, teachers, club leaders, coaches, parents, and students themselves - should be equipped with tools and methods to communicate consistently and effectively (Larson, 2019).

In order to adequately implement specific strategies for successful communication and top-tier home engagement, it's imperative to understand the specific challenges that can often lead to difficulties with parent involvement. The factors that might adversely

affect good communication between a students' homes and their school include (Larson, 2019):

- **Increasingly diverse family living arrangements.** This is not necessarily an adverse situation for families, but it does mean that educators can no longer assume that each child is living in one home with two parents. This can make it more difficult for educators to create plans for students to do work at home, or it can help educators create support systems that involve adult assistance for students in the home, provided there is someone able to help the student.
- **More and more frequent familial relocations.** The United States has one of the most mobile school-age populations in the entire world. Since, often, it can be hard to rely on a student remaining in one place for a long time, teachers may struggle to create a consistent learning environment without necessary disruptions.
- **Increasing newcomer populations.** Although being bilingual or multilingual can be an asset for a student, if an educator's student community includes several students for whom English is a second language, the educator may struggle to communicate adequately with parents or family members or to create reliable translation systems for those who might require that assistance.
- **More and more student support teams.** With modern educational strategies, we often see that many educators may be working to support the success of each child. This is also a good thing—but it simply means there are more people to coordinate and communicate with, which may increase the level of difficulty associated with high-quality communication.

There are also practical reasons that communication between home and school is difficult. Some reasons that a specific mode of communication might fail to land effectively with parents and guardians include the following (Larson, 2019):

- **Reduced accessibility.** If a teacher or other school officials send out communication that is only accessible digitally, or only available in one language, then parents may be far more likely to dismiss the message as unimportant or, at least, requiring too much effort to access.
- **Too many required tools.** Consider a student's parent who receives a variety of different communications from their student's many teachers, the attendance office, the principal, and so on. If each of these uses a different type of

communication, from the way a message is written to the tool used to send that message, then a parent can easily become frustrated and overwhelmed.

- **Confusing buzzwords.** In the educational community, teachers can rely on current jargon in order to quickly and effectively get their points across to administrators and other educators. Non-educators likely won't understand jargon — or, at the very least, high levels of confusing buzzwords could reduce easy comprehension. This will, over time, lead to few opened emails and even fewer responses.
- **Too much communication.** We know, this can seem a little counterintuitive, as we've been talking about the importance of frequent communication. However, fractured communication, an overabundance of messages, or confusing check-ups can overwhelm parents and incentivize ignoring messages. As a result, the needed information may still fail to land with the targeted recipient.

Along with acknowledging the main issues that can cause poor communication, it's critical to have specific methods in place to boost the quality of home and school communication. This will in turn help to reduce barriers to learning for our students.

First, an overarching strategy: Instead of equipping educators with more ways to communicate effectively, we need entire schools to create new and innovative ways to focus on communication. If the whole school has a focus on high-quality, simple, and consistent communication, it'll become an aspect that the community counts on. As such, it'll be far easier to get individual parents to be more excited about school communication and participation in the academic community (Larson, 2019).

Practical ways to pivot an entire school's focus toward productive and positive communications may include (Larson, 2019):

1. **Picking one tool to manage the bulk of your school's communication needs.** Have your school conduct an audit of its communication needs and preferences. This should include a survey sent out to all the teachers and parents in your community, to learn more about the types of emails or messages they'd like to receive and therefore would actually open. After you learn about what modes of communication your community prefers, see if you can find one platform for all educators to use. Include specific reasons why you've chosen that platform, as well as support systems for the educators who may need time to onboard themselves effectively to a brand-new platform. This will, overall, make things much simpler for everyone and reduce overwhelm for all concerned.

2. **Sending more frequent communications—but making them incredibly simple and digestible.** Try not to send start-of-semester emails that require intense scrolling. Instead, make your messages as short and succinct as the average Tweet. If parents know that they'll be able to open an email (or a message from another platform) from your school and be able to understand its contents in a minute or less, they'll be more likely to pay attention. They'll also understand that each email is more important than a lengthy digest. This is a win-win strategy since short, to-the-point messages will be much easier for your staff to manage and send as well.

3. **Personalize your communications and make it possible for parents to personalize their communication streams.** Parents are much more likely to open a communication that is catered to their interests. However, this doesn't mean that every communication needs to be centered around a specific student. One way to personalize a parents' communication streams is to allow them to do it themselves: Use an education communication platform that allows parents to subscribe to channels that give them the updates they want. Allowing parents to opt-in, in this way, to the information they want in the way that they want makes it much more likely that they'll stay connected via the updates you send.

4. **Set a warm, sharing, and open tone: Ask your teachers to share some information about themselves at the beginning of the year.** This will make them seem more like real people to your students' parents, and set the stage well for open communication between your school's administrators and the at-home caregivers. Humanizing your staff in this way will make it much more likely that parents will actually open the emails you send them.

5. **Share positive information and events that will actually be of interest to parents.** School communication will by nature require sending sometimes-unwanted or banal information. However, it's very important to ensure that parents don't dread school messages as a matter of course. Taking time to share the good news about students, funny stories about things that happen in class, photos of school events, and more will make it far less likely that the parents simply associate your school's communication with unpleasant feelings.

6. **When you feel ready, make at-home resources available to the parents.** This has to be a bit of a balancing act: Loading the parents up with homework of their own at the beginning of the year can seem incredibly overwhelming. Waiting until too late in the year can make it very difficult to change habits and routines that can

already be set in stone. Your school will have to gauge the right time and method based on your knowledge of your unique community, but one example could be sending out resources paired with one of the first big exams of the fall season. Helping your families with clear guidance to support students as they prepare for those exams at that time will infuse the recommended activity with stakes, and help make it clear that the students are facing an obstacle they need family help to clear. Once the student has made it to the other side of the exam, you can send out more positive messaging to help reinforce good at-home support for beneficial academic habits.

Ultimately, it's key to remember that your students' parents are partners in the learning journey. However, they are busy people, living full lives of their own. Even the most dedicated parents need very simple, easy, and clear ways to support their children at home, or they may fumble when it's time to act. Working on clear messaging and providing resources when the time is right can go a long way toward removing at-home barriers to effective education (Larson, 2019).

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Section 3 Key Points

- To help students overcome learning barriers, schools and teachers need to focus on practical strategies for meeting children where they are. These strategies may vary widely, from ways to gamify lessons to providing financial aid or food resources to families in need.
- Helping our students invest in growth mindsets and forward-focused, hopeful mental patterns will serve them well for their entire lives.
- In order to strengthen the teacher-student-family team, schools and educators need to focus on effective communication strategies as well as getting families the resources they need.

Section 3 Summary and Course Conclusion

As we have discussed, external and internal barriers to learning and teaching have continued to pose some of the most pervasive and entrenched challenges to educators. Although students will continue to face obstacles as they grow and develop, it is imperative that we address such barriers to ensure that young people thrive in school. In addition, as strategies are developed and implemented in this arena, teachers will

benefit by being able to focus on classroom learning and engagement for all students rather than having to resolve issues on a constant basis. Furthermore, educators will benefit from helping students meet these struggles with perseverance and optimism. This will both empower our students to rise above their struggles and will help focus on reducing consistent issues wherever possible. As a result, we'll be able to make meaningful education more accessible for the next generation—and ultimately make teaching easier and more effective for educators as well.

Resources

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