

CREATING STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR POST-PANDEMIC TIMES: INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

Our middle and high schools are currently facing a magnitude of obstacles, including historically high rates of chronic absenteeism, widening instructional gaps, student behavior challenges, and mental health needs. At the same time, many districts and schools are making great strides in identifying and implementing innovative ways to address these challenges.

Student Support Systems Convening

To pool the collective wisdom of front-line educators, the GRAD Partnership organized a regional gathering of student support personnel from over *two dozen* districts across the east coast. The convening:

Brought together individuals invested in improving student support systems; participants represented districts, schools, support coaches, and community organizations.

Fostered meaningful and transparent dialogue, with participants sharing challenges and successes, brainstorming solutions, and surfacing collective insights.

Led to tangible results, summarized in this brief through a Success Map guided by the four core components of a student success system. The Success Map outlines challenges, strengths, and actions needed to create the student support systems needed in post-pandemic times.

We may be in **different ships** but we are sailing in the **same storm.**

—Convening Participant

STUDENT SUCCESS SYSTEMS

Student success systems are a way of organizing a school community to better support the well-being, academic progress, and career and college readiness of all students. Student success systems, defined with feedback from over 300 educators over the course of a year, are a post-pandemic approach to student support that build on prior efforts with early warning/on-track systems and MTSS. Districts and schools that adopt student success systems address school-wide achievement patterns and meet individual student needs through a focus on *four core components*: relationships, actionable data, evidence-based practices, and student-centered mindsets.

BUILDING STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS: COLLECTIVE WISDOM FROM THE FIELD

Several key considerations for success emerged from participant discussions.

- **Focus on implementation, coordination, and collective action.** School districts can benefit from examining student support systems for buy-in and shared ownership, equity, and collaboration. Acknowledge that implementation takes time; understanding the “why” behind implementation helps to build buy-in, prioritize actions and facilitate ongoing improvement. Moreover, student support efforts are sometimes located in different departments within school systems, so alignment and coordination are key for efficiency and impact.
- **Keep students at the center.** Agency, belonging, and connectedness drive student engagement. Student support efforts (and the individuals involved with them) need to be intentional about developing student-centered mindsets that reflect holistic student needs, and elevating student voice. This includes enabling students to co-create processes and interventions.
- **Relationships are key to effectively delivering student supports.** School staff, students, and their families all benefit from strong, supportive relationships that build trust and facilitate cooperation. However, schools and student support systems have not historically always focused on relationships between all parties. Intentional efforts to build relationships are therefore needed. Supportive, multi-directional relationships require effort; they start with shared expectations, depend on opportunities for ongoing communication, and require time for meaningful interaction and feedback.

- **Families and communities are important partners.** Facilitate communication (including ongoing feedback) and connection with families and community organizations. These partnerships are relationship-based; creation, power, and ownership are shared. **Family partnerships** reflect student and family needs, and foster collective ownership in learning. **Community partnerships** share ownership and investment with the community. Map resources in the community, identify gaps in meeting student needs, and collaborate to develop supports and responses that are mutually beneficial.
- **Data needs to be accessible, actionable, and integrated in systems that support data use.** School teams need access to research-based, predictive indicators of student success that are available throughout the year, in as real-time as possible. In a high quality student support system, **data leads to actions.** Develop a clear vision for how data will be used - including ways to center equity in data collection and use - and design a learning system aligned with that vision, with consideration for data collection, storage, analysis, sharing, and monitoring/growth. Integrate both quantitative and qualitative data, including measures of agency, belonging, and connectedness into leadership conversations and data-driven action decisions.
- **People make systems move.** Student support systems don't implement themselves. District and school leaders provide motivation and direction, and develop their own and others' capacity to carry out the work and support progress. District and school staff need opportunities for training and professional development, including spaces to self-reflect and collectively build shared ownership for student success.

MAPPING SUCCESS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Discussions throughout the convening were organized using a *Success Map*. The *Success Map* provides a visual organizer for moving from identifying needs to setting a vision for success based on those needs. The components of the map guided small group discussions in which participants shared their knowledge and experience, and discussed student support systems within their own context. Several themes emerged across groups for each of the map's components.

A protocol for completing the Success Map can be found in the Appendix at the end of this brief. You can also [download your own copy of a partially completed Success Map](#) to build on the results of the convening with your own team.

STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEM NEEDS

Mapping success begins by taking time to understand the current needs that districts and their communities face related to student support systems. Participants identified several common needs:

- Students’ academic, social, and mental and physical health needs (in and out of school)
- Educators’ training and development needs in many of the areas of current student needs (such as mental

health, behavioral, and trauma-informed practices). Educators also navigate their own needs, including mental health challenges.

- Stronger relationships, including between students and adults (including through mentorships), between adults in school, and between school adults and parents (including informal socializing).

SOLUTIONS TO MOVE FORWARD

The four student success system core components provided a lens for considering solutions to recognized needs. Participants identified several conditions needed for success in each of the four components.

Strong and Supportive Relationships	Real-time, Actionable, Holistic data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leadership and staff have a vision for relationships. • District and school systems enable relationships and develop individual capacity to build strong, supportive, relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data systems are in place. • There is a clear vision and design for comprehensive data systems (collection, storage, analysis, sharing, benchmarking/monitoring progress) with a focus on equity. • District and school leader conversations integrate data and model data-based decision-making. • Districts and schools measure agency, belonging, and connectedness across schools; districts assist schools with the measurement process.
Strategic Improvement Actions	Student-centered Mindsets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Districts have unified structures for understanding data and managing improvement actions. • Equity is central to the development of strategies and actions, and there is space to reflect on biases. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems include formal structures that reflect shared mindsets, foster discussion, feedback and student input; schedules and supports reflect student needs. • Definitions for student-centered, agency, and belonging integrate student perspectives to build agency and buy-in. • Adults and students who “champion” efforts toward mindset shifts are visible.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Current systems include both strengths and challenges for acting on the solutions presented by the core components. Progress towards the vision for future success requires an understanding of these strengths and challenges.

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are opportunities to creatively address student needs.• Systems allow leaders and educators to impact student success on a large scale.• Existing partnerships with educators, students, families, and community members can be deepened, and new partnerships developed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engaging in systems change takes vision, time, and common language to achieve cohesion and alignment—systems change is hard.• Equity is often missing from existing systems.• Relationships with families and capacity with community partners often fall short of what's needed.

ACTIONS

Districts and schools can engage in strategies and actions that respond to the current needs to make progress toward the vision of success. These actions address the strengths and challenges of implementing the core components within current systems. Districts and schools can:

- Focus on students
- Have a systems approach to improvement

- Improve intra- and inter-communication
- Develop data systems and effectively use data within those systems
- Collaborate authentically with partners (within districts and schools, and including families and communities)
- Emphasize well-being, learning, and relationships for students and staff

STUDENT SUCCESS SYSTEMS IN THE FUTURE

The journey of effectively supporting student success never truly ends. However, districts and schools need a vision for what systems will look like and do when they are designed to address current post-pandemic needs and achieve student success. Participants surfaced the following themes in a vision for a high-quality system that ensures student success:

- There is alignment across systems, with a shared purpose and clear communication.
- Students are at the center of all work. Student well-being comes first, with space for student voice and celebrating success within the system.

- Leadership supports district and school efforts, and is equipped to provide ongoing teacher training and capacity building.
- District and school staff have professional learning opportunities, resources to support their own learning, and space to reflect on their mindsets and practices.
- Both quantitative and qualitative data are used to understand what is happening, why, how to respond, and when progress is being made.
- Districts and schools develop and deepen strong and supportive relationships with families and communities to form a partnership in education.

CONTINUING THE WORK OF STUDENT SUCCESS SYSTEMS

The GRAD Partnership will continue working with districts, schools, and their community partners to realize the vision of success described by the convening participants.

Progress toward this vision relies on inclusively building and improving student success systems that integrate the four core components.

THANK YOU!

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And the biggest thanks to the participants for their wisdom, engagement, and ongoing commitment to student success.

APPENDIX: MAPPING SUCCESS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS PROTOCOL AND TEMPLATE

The Success Map is a graphic organizer to help teams conceptualize how to move forward from their current state. This process begins by defining the current need you are trying to address, and then articulating what it will look like to successfully address these needs. You can think of this like setting out the starting point and finish line first, before deciding on the course to reach the finish line. In this context, the defined needs and articulated success are related to implementing support systems that meet current challenges and lead to student success.

There are **five** steps to completing the Success Map, which are **organized into six sections**. This template comes pre-populated with results from the collaborative work of the Student Support Systems Convening to get you started. To complete your own Success Map follow the steps below.

- 1. Define the current need.** Begin with defining the current needs of (1) students who are not fully achieving success, and (2) the system in place to support those students.
- 2. Articulate success.** Once you have defined the current need, articulate what it looks like to develop and adopt systems that address those needs. Consider (1) what success looks like for students and (2) what successful

student support systems look like. *Success appears at the end of the map visual - because this is the finish line you are working toward. However, you describe that success earlier in the process so that you know where you are going.*

- 3. Consider solutions.** Reflect on how each of the core components of a student success system provides a lens to organize solutions to the defined needs.
- 4. Elevate strengths and acknowledge challenges.** The current system presents strengths and challenges to incorporating the core components. Consider the strengths of the current system to build on and the challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed to move forward.
- 5. Identify actions.** Reflect on the gap that exists between the strengths and challenges you have identified, and the vision of success you want to achieve. Identify specific strategies and actions that will contribute to progress in closing that gap.

Download the partially completed template [here](#).

**BEGIN
WITH THE END
IN MIND**