

NEWSLETTER

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When the **PLAN** Becomes Part of the **PROBLEM**

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM SAYS *that a person can never plan enough or be too prepared. Conventional wisdom is often correct. Many successful schools—those that ensure that all students achieve at high levels—follow a detailed and comprehensive school improvement plan like a blueprint. But if this is so, why is it that many other schools that produce equally detailed and comprehensive plans do not achieve these same results? In trying to deal with the complexities of school improvement, schools sometimes find that school plans at best don't help and, at worst, actually become a part of their problem. This month's newsletter explores four mistakes common to the school planning process and improvement plans and offers solutions to correct them.*

MISTAKE #1: *An improvement planning team with the wrong members (and usually too many of them).*

When deciding on the composition of a school improvement planning team, many district leaders and principals err on the side of too much inclusion. They invite everyone and anyone with decision-making authority or with a connection to key stakeholder groups to participate. Their motive is good: If all groups are represented and have the opportunity to shape the improvement plan, everyone will support the plan when it's time to implement it. But including everyone and anyone is a mistake.

SOLUTION: *Strategically select a school improvement planning team.*

Building a quality team is an important first step in drafting a quality school improvement plan. Filibert (2003) asserts that "careful

consideration is needed to determine who should be a part of the team and who is willing to look at the present and project into the future.” Leaders need to carefully consider the characteristics of an effective school improvement team when selecting members. Effective teams do include representatives of a variety of school community constituencies, but they are also of a manageable size (six to eight members); able and willing to work collaboratively with the building administration to ensure progress; and committed to the sometimes lengthy task of developing a meaningful school improvement plan (Barnes, 2004). Careful thought also should be given to clarifying the role of planning team members. Are they there to actively represent a stakeholder group and reflect the group’s opinions (e.g., teachers representing a grade level)? Or are they expected to represent the perspective of a particular stakeholder group but not speak for anyone else? Either role is appropriate and can serve the team well. However, the more clearly the expectation of participants is defined, the more effectively they will be able to contribute to the work of the planning team.

MISTAKE #2: *An incomplete and unfocused needs assessment.*

Sometimes school improvement planning teams go through the motions of conducting a needs assessment because “that’s what you’re supposed to do.” The team collects data haphazardly—the more numbers the better—with little thought given to why they are being collected and how they will be analyzed and even less thought to clarifying the connection between raw data and real improvement. A school improvement plan based on an unfocused needs assessment is a mistake.

SOLUTION: *Use the four W’s and the H to ensure a purposeful and comprehensive needs assessment.*

Data-driven school improvement planning is crucial, and conducting a comprehensive needs assessment is the first step in that process. But before one set of test scores is copied or one

interview is conducted, the team must agree on what data will be collected and why. In simple terms, a needs assessment defines and analyzes the gap between where a school is and where it wants to be. For example, many schools want to focus on better teaching, more purposeful parent involvement, and raising student achievement. Their first step should be to collect data to get an accurate picture of the school’s current status in those areas. Once the “what” and “why” have been established, the team should move on to address the “who,” “how,” and “when” before it begins data collection:

- *Who* will be responsible for conducting the assessment? Who will gather the data, and who will ensure that the needs assessment is conducted with fidelity?
- *How* will data be collected? Will only existing data be reviewed? Will new data be collected through interviews or classroom observations? How will the team ensure that data collection tools are valid and reliable? How will the data be analyzed and by whom?
- *When* will data collection and analysis take place, and how long will it take to complete? (adapted from Beadle de Palomo & Luna, 2000).

Many states have developed templates and planning tools designed to help school planning teams work through these steps. For example, the Illinois and the Florida Departments of Education have developed templates that guide districts and schools through the data collection and analysis processes (see Resources listing).

MISTAKE #3: *The “Everything but the Kitchen Sink” school improvement plan.*

Look out for a school improvement plan that promises to be everything to everyone and declares that all goals and objectives will be accomplished within one academic year. One survivor of the school improvement planning process recounts his experience by lamenting, “we wound up setting an impossible number of goals” and “committing to far more activities and initiatives than anyone could possibly monitor,

much less successfully implement” (Schmoker, 2004). More is not necessarily better when it comes to planning, and creating an “everything but the kitchen sink” school improvement plan is a mistake.

SOLUTION: *A school improvement plan focused on a finite set of goals and strategies that are linked to improved student outcomes.*

Keep it simple! Goals should be bold and audacious, but at the same time strategic and limited in number. For example, is it really necessary to have separate curriculum implementation goals for each student subpopulation or each grade level? Probably not. Instead, schools are advised to develop strategic goals that address common themes that emerge from their data analysis. Written goals and corresponding objectives should be SMART; that is, *specific* (clear and explicit), *measurable* (so that anyone can determine if the goal has been accomplished), *attainable* (realistic and within the school’s span of control), *relevant* (directly related to identified need), and *time-bound* (with a beginning, interim benchmarks, and an end) (adapted from Meyer, n.d.). SMART goals can be written for many purposes, but in schools they should be focused specifically on improved student outcomes since the purpose of the school improvement plan is to outline the conditions necessary to ensure that all students achieve at the highest levels.

MISTAKE #4: *Creating a plan that is celebrated at the beginning, reviewed at the end—and left in a drawer in between.*

Sometimes a school improvement team develops a plan that perfectly delineates a path to results. It is based on relevant data. Its goals are clear and specific and focused on student achievement. The team and key school stakeholders are committed to a rigorous timeline for implementation and even an end-of-year evaluation. But they make a mistake in making no provision for monitoring progress throughout the school year.

SOLUTION: *Build in ongoing evaluation to facilitate continuous planning.*

“How are we doing?” is a question that every school improvement planner should learn how to ask and answer. Schmoker (2004), citing the work of Kouzes and Posner, contends that successful strategic plans “promote smart, *short-term* cycles of action, assessment, and adjustment.” In school improvement plans, the completion of each of these short-term evaluation cycles offers an opportunity to revisit goals, adjust strategies, and check for student progress. Effective planners build in these cycles as the plan is being written, defining what will be evaluated, when and how it will be evaluated, what the process will be for amending the plan if necessary, and perhaps most importantly, how the changes will be communicated to ensure that all key stakeholders continue to work toward the same goals. Engaging in a process of continuous evaluation “will take you back to the beginning of a new cycle—revisiting your original student-achievement goals, establishing new student-achievement goals, and developing new essential questions, based on learning from the previous cycle” (Barnes, 2004, p. 21).

Resources

Florida Department of Education Division of Public Schools, Bureau of School Improvement. (2005). *A technical assistance document for: Planning and evaluating your school improvement process* (8th ed.). Tallahassee, FL: Author. Retrieved March 24, 2006, from <http://www.bsi.fsu.edu/pdf/2005TA.pdf>

Illinois State Board of Education, Federal Grants and Programs Division. (2004). *Template for a K–8 school improvement plan (SIP) aligned to the ISBE SIP rubric*. Springfield, IL: Author. Retrieved March 24, 2006, from <http://www.isbe.net/sos/word/SIPtemplateK-8.doc>

Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (1999). *SALT guides: Writing a school improvement plan*. Providence, RI: Author. Retrieved March 24, 2006, from http://www.ridoe.net/schoolimprove/salt/guides/sip_writ.htm

Conclusion

Worthwhile improvement planning is not simple. To be done right, it requires thought and, ironically, planning. While many components of a school improvement plan merit attention, focusing on building an effective improvement planning team, conducting a thorough needs assessment, creating goals that are meaningful and attainable, and committing to a cycle of continuous evaluation create a school improvement plan that is just that—a plan that will guide a school to improvement.

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