

NEWSLETTER

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7 ACTIONS That IMPROVE SCHOOL DISTRICT Performance

WHOSE JOB IS IT TO *improve student achievement?* Much has been written about initiatives that can be undertaken in schools and classrooms to increase student proficiency. But increasingly, practitioners engaged in school reform are coming to understand the significant role school districts play in this important effort. As researchers Togneri and Anderson (2003) state, the efforts of heroic principals, innovative charter schools, and inspiring classroom teachers who single-handedly turn around low-performing schools or classrooms are to be zealously applauded and encouraged, but ultimately their efforts produce “isolated islands of excellence” (p. 1). Large-scale improvement requires systemic effort of the kind that can best be accomplished at the district level.

This month’s newsletter highlights seven actions school districts can take to improve their own effectiveness and better support the efforts of their schools to improve student achievement. These recommended actions are culled from recent research into school districts that took action to improve and are seeing positive results.

ACTION 1. Take a Systemwide Approach to Improving Instruction

Improving school districts know that a quality classroom experience for each child depends on the existence of a well-designed, coordinated, and implemented system at the district level. This system starts with a vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement that is reflected in concrete actions, such as support for new and struggling

teachers, the collaboration of instructional experts, strategic allocation of resources, and targeted professional development. Research indicates that a systemwide approach to improving instruction encompasses all schools and involves all parts of the district, from business operations and human resources to school board and union leadership and members of the community (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003).

Improving school districts in the San Francisco Bay Area teach their staff members to take a systemic approach to school reform. One example comes from the East Bay Unified School District, where central office administrators meet twice a week to discuss issues and problems in the schools. “Everyone is there [...],” commented one administrator, “Personnel, Special Ed, Business, sometimes even Maintenance...so everyone gets to talk” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003, p. 11).

ACTION 2. Create a District Curriculum Aligned With Standards and Assessments

School districts that improve take the lead when it comes to articulating what the community wants its students to know and be able to do when they graduate with a “centralized and coordinated approach to curriculum, which is adopted district-wide” (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004, p. 25). They understand that it is the district’s responsibility to ensure that the K–12 curriculum is aligned, “that the material taught in the school matches the standards and assessments set by the state or district for specific grade levels [...and that] the school is teaching the content that is expected” (Johnston, n.d.). In districts with aligned curricula, teachers have clear expectations about what to teach and what will be tested.

Aligning curriculum within and across schools can have a powerful effect. A 1999 study of four school districts in Texas found that in one, more than 80 percent of African-American students passed the 1999 state achievement test in mathematics, up from 42.2 percent five years earlier. In another, 90 percent of tested students passed all sections of the state achievement test (Skrla, Scheurich,

Johnson, Hogan, Koschoreck, & Smith, 2000). What did these districts have in common? All of them “had aligned their curriculum and had developed instructional practices within the curriculum and linked them with assessments” (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004, p. 25).

ACTION 3. Make Decisions Based on Data

School districts that show continued improvement base decisions on data rather than on habit or hunch. Their leaders are able to readily assess strengths and weaknesses in performance and instruction because they recognize that end-of-the-year standardized test results don’t provide all of the information a district needs. Instead, they design multiple measures to assess school and student progress. Researchers found that one improving district, the Minneapolis Public Schools, illustrated this approach with its data system by collecting and analyzing data in more than 15 different areas, including attendance and suspension rates and school climate data (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). When districts have a clear understanding of the comprehensive picture, data-driven decision making is a “powerful educational reform tool” (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004, p. 36).

ACTION 4. Redefine Leadership

For many years, two positions dominated school district definitions of leader: the superintendent and the principal. Recently, however, research has shown that leadership that effectively supports instructional improvement cannot come from one person—it must be distributed among a variety of stakeholders, including assistant principals, teacher leaders, and central office staff (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Although the leadership is distributed, there is a common expectation that leaders will stay focused, set high expectations for both students and staff, and support increased capacity for improvement.

The superintendent and the principal still play key roles in leading school districts, but those roles are significantly changed. The “new” role of

the superintendent is to ensure that the district and the community stay focused on high-quality teaching and learning; the principal's job is to help and support teachers in their efforts to succeed with students; and district office staff exist to support and assist schools (Skrla et al., 2000).

ACTION 5. Implement Strong Accountability Systems

In this era of high-stakes testing, students understand that there can be significant and personal consequences for low achievement. Districts dedicated to improving achievement hold staff members to similar standards of performance, and "all adults in the system [are] accountable for student learning" (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004, p. 22).

In Houston, Texas, the superintendent initiated district improvement when he held himself to a high level of public accountability, empowering the district staff to "pursue reform more aggressively than it otherwise would have" (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002, p. 46). Senior staff and principals were placed on performance contracts in exchange for higher pay and greater autonomy. Specific benchmarks were established and enforced, clearly reinforcing the notion that all adults were responsible for the success of students.

ACTION 6. Embed Professional Development

School districts that change to improve have an obligation to provide staff with professional development that is intensive, targeted, and ongoing. The reason is straightforward: "People can be encouraged to change, but if the structure of the system in which the individuals work does not support them or allow enough flexibility, improvement efforts will fail. Similarly, if the organization's governance, policies, structures, time frames, and resource allocation are changed but the individuals within the organization do not have opportunities to learn how to work within the new system, the improvement effort will fail" (Todnem & Warner, 1994, p. 66).

Most districts provide professional development, but districts that improve pay close attention to the quality and quantity of what is offered. It should be based on a careful assessment of needs. It should be aligned, clearly supporting the district's vision and goals. And it should be embedded, incorporated into the school day and year in a cycle that moves from initial learning to practice to additional learning until mastery is achieved. Embedded professional development allows teacher leaders to mentor and support new or struggling teachers. It also provides excellent opportunities for collaboration among school and district staff and promotes the growth of strong professional networks within the district.

ACTION 7. Commit to Sustaining Reform

Perhaps not surprisingly, districts that improve over time take a long view of reform. "Research on improved districts finds that promising results come only after reform strategies have been implemented and sustained for a long time" (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004, p. 19). Similarly, Togneri and Anderson (2003) found that improved districts "set their courses and stayed with them for years" (p. 8).

A district display of constancy during the reform effort encourages schools to stay the course of improvement and offers a model for persevering throughout the change process. In the minds of many, sustaining reform is viewed in terms of the stability of high-level leadership. And although consistency in high-level district leadership positions might help with continued improvement efforts, that stability is not essential. When a commitment to the reform effort has been built on all levels and attention has been paid to the development of school and teacher leaders, reform can evolve and grow regardless of leadership changes.

Conclusion

It is possible for districts to improve student achievement. The task might not be easy, but with coordinated and focused efforts it can be done. Taking a systemwide approach to improving

instruction, creating a district curriculum aligned with state standards and assessments, using data to guide decisions, redefining leadership, implementing a strong accountability system, embedding professional development, and making the commitment to sustain reform are clear and concrete actions that lead to improvement in district's ability to both support its schools and to improve student achievement.

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