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ABSTRACT

This guide outlines a school-improvement process to help schools develop an information system that improves services to students and their families. It looks at ways to build a leadership team that can orchestrate the work of families, school professionals, administrators, and students through the school-improvement process. It describes how to develop an information loop by generating a school profile that uses pictures, graphs, and text, all of which provide stakeholders with information about the school. The booklet also discusses how to decide on focus areas for change by analyzing the school profile, by gathering more information about a focus area, by developing target goals, and by scanning for potential resources. The text then details how to create an action cycle for each target goal. The action cycle prompts those in the school community to ask what they are trying to accomplish and how they can foster active involvement. It teaches how to scan for resources and how to get results. The guide demonstrates how to use quarterly checks to stay on track and how to develop new focus areas. The booklet closes with a series of questions on students and families, teaching and learning, community and culture, and systems thinking and doing. (RJM)

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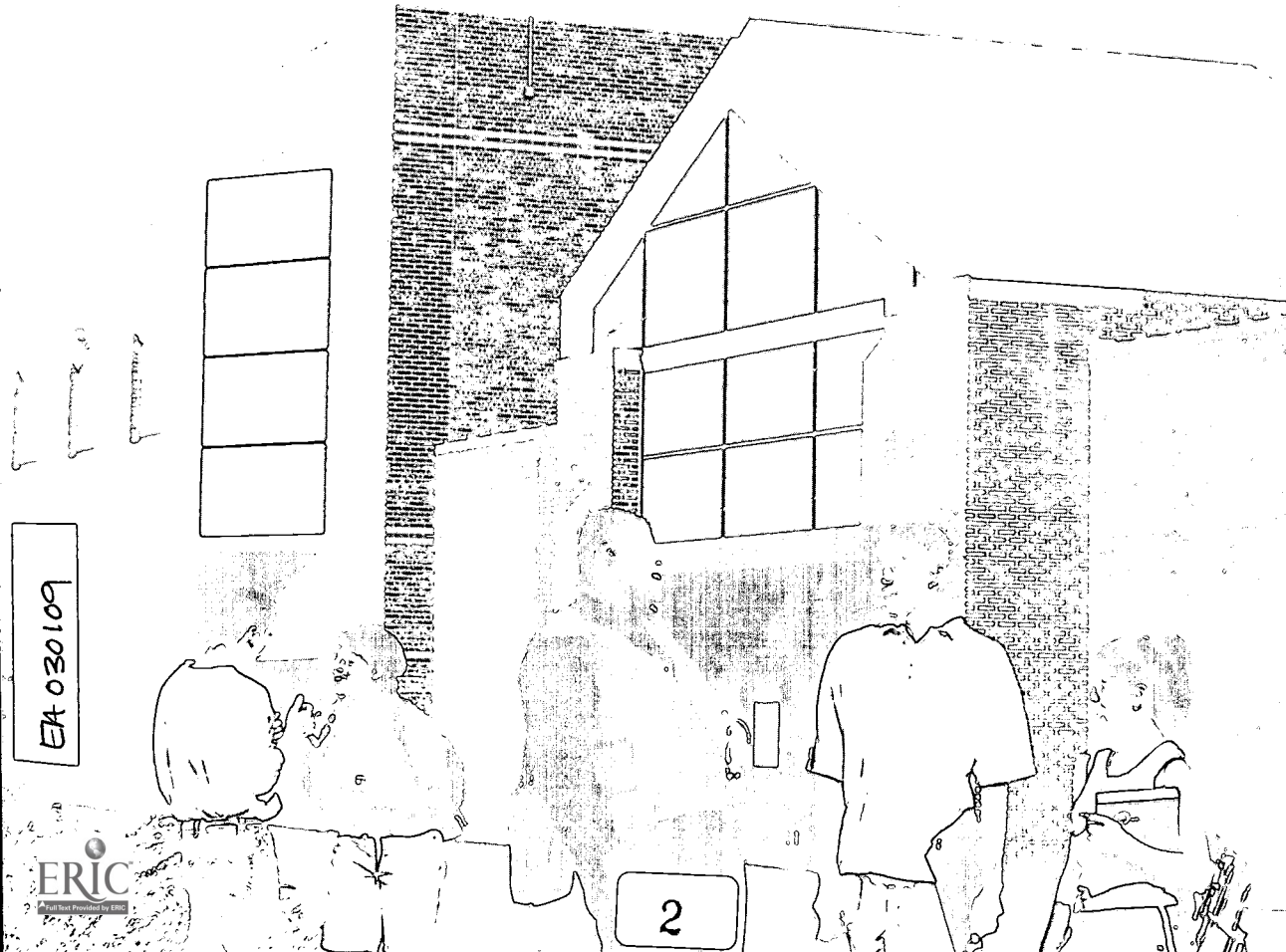
The SILC School Improvement Planning Process



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"School professionals, administrators, parents and community members need to work together with rich information sources to make the best and lasting decisions for school improvement so that all students achieve."

Alison Boggs, Principal
Adams City Middle School

What is a School Improvement Process?

The Promise

The School Improvement Process can help school communities to develop an information system to guide the improvement of services to **all** students and their families. This process engages families and students in new roles as active participants and leaders in the process.

Leadership

Each school should have a **building leadership team (BLT).** This team orchestrates the work of families, school professionals, administrators, and students through the School Improvement Process. BLTs work with faculty, staff, students and families to examine current practices which work and areas which may need to be examined and plan for progress, achievement and risk.

Who's on the BLT?

The BLT is generally made up of educators, parents, administrators, and, sometimes, students. The BLT meets regularly throughout the school year to ensure that both planning for school improvement and the implementation of those plans is on course. When necessary, the BLT develops or changes building policies so that policies, procedures, and activities work together to support the work of educators and students.

Using this Guide

Each page of this guide focuses on a different part of the School Improvement Process. You'll find ideas about how to gather and use information to set your focus areas and action cycles. There's no one right place to start. If your building already has an active planning process, you may want to proceed directly to the action cycle step.

What's the Process?

DEVELOPING AN INFORMATION LOOP

- ☐ What information do we need to gather about our school community?
- ☐ What does this information mean?
- ☐ How often shall we collect and analize our data?

DECIDING ON FOCUS AREAS FOR CHANGE

- ☐ What areas of improvement do we need to focus on?
- ☐ Do we need more information to inform our problem solving?
- ☐ What specific targets will we identify?

CREATING AN ACTION CYCLE FOR EACH TARGET GOAL

- ☐ What are we really trying to accomplish?
- ☐ If this goal is met, what will be different for teachers?
- ☐ What will be different for students?
- ☐ What will parents and families see that is different?
- ☐ Develop a sequence of activities that will lead to answers the target goal.
- ☐ Draw upon people's strengths.
- ☐ Let the most eager people take the lead.
- ☐ Use the resources we have.

USING INFORMATION TO KEEP YOU ON TRACK

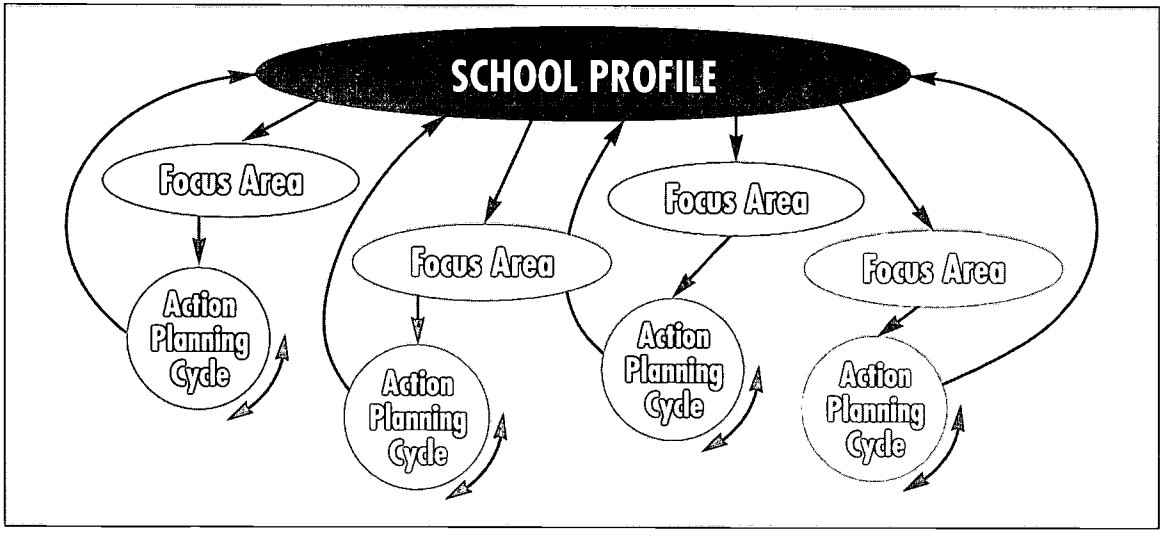
- ☐ Visit and discuss data frequently
- ☐ Assess our progress
- ☐ Adjust our strategies
- ☐ Celebrate our success
- ☐ Set new goals

As you can see from this diagram, the SILC School Improvement Planning Process is full of cyclical movement. **The planning process begins with a comprehensive school profile.** The school profile should tell a great deal about what's happening that is successful in a building. It should also help the building leadership team identify the areas in the school that need improvement. Sometimes, these areas are about how students are grouped for instruction; other times they're about how instruction is provided. Sometimes a school profile suggests that families aren't linked very effectively with what's happening in school. Other times, it might reveal that students lack the skills they need to make and keep friends.

There are about as many areas of success and improvement as there are schools. Our examples come from the work of other schools. What the school profile reveals about your school will be specific to your community, your students, your school professionals, and the resources of your school's district.

In any event, you'll need to decide to focus on a few areas of growth. These focus areas will lead to action cycles. Depending on the complexity of the focus areas that your leadership team selects, your action planning cycles may last for a few months, a school year, or maybe into the next school year. Each action planning cycle will have its own life cycle. As small groups of people work on specific target areas, the school profile data will continue to be collected. In the last quarter of each year, your building should have enough school profile information to decide whether to target new focus areas or to keep working on focus areas that have already been selected.

The School Improvement Planning Process



Developing an Information Loop

The School Profile

The school profile gives an overall picture of the school. Using pictures, graphs, and some text, the profile report is bound and shared with the whole school community. Everyone should understand that decisions are to be driven by the information from the profile. Then, each year the same data are collected so that the school community can see its progress over time.

When Do You Get a School Profile?

In the fall, the State requires that each school report information such as the number of students attending your school, their ages, their ethnicities, and the average income level of families whose students attend your school. Schools collect information about absenteeism, and drop-outs. These data are the beginning of your information system. Additionally, you'll have data regarding achievement test scores or performance on school standards. These should be used to review student progress on a grade by grade basis.

How Do You Gather the Information?

Surveys, interviews, observations, and focus groups are all ways of collecting information. Developing good tools that can answer the questions you want to ask is something that takes a bit of time searching to accomplish. Resources include the web professional organizations, local universities and state departments offers. Also, you'll want to have people collect the information who know how to keep individual participant information confidential. You want to count on having accurate information. This information will drive the major decisions about work the school will undertake.

What's in a School Profile?

- ☐ Do students feel comfortable to take learning risks in our classrooms?
- ☐ Is the community involved and aware of the school's targets for learning?
- ☐ What are our students learning?
- ☐ Are classrooms organized to maximize learning for every student?
- ☐ Does the curriculum provide the kind of content and activities that result in high quality learning and student accomplishments?

What Do You Do With It?

The BLT should be able to identify areas in the school organization and the instructional environment that need improvement. We like to think about school from four perspectives or action arenas:

- ☐ Students and families
- ☐ Teaching and learning
- ☐ Communities and culture
- ☐ Systems thinking and doing

We challenge you to answer the questions at the end of this booklet with these actions or arenas in mind.

What Your Information Might Tell You

- Are our students making the kind of progress that we expect?
- Do students feel as if they are safe in their classrooms?
- Do students feel as if it's easy to make new friends?
- Do teachers feel as if they spend most of their time helping students learn?
- Do families feel as if they get enough information to know how their children are doing in school?
- Are families satisfied with the content of the curriculum?
- Does the school have enough resources to keep their learning materials current?
- Is the school keeping up with changes in technology?

"We have learned to grapple with the hard questions in education. For example, how do you merge the roles of special and general educators so that all learners are supported in the community?"

Pat Roberts
Steamboat Springs Middle School

Deciding on Focus Areas for Change

Analyzing Your School Profile

A small number of areas will emerge after you profile your school. For example, you might notice that a group of teachers are working on literacy. You might decide that supporting this work is critical to improve literacy outcomes. Another thing you might have noticed is that little groups of two or three teachers have been developing some parts of their curriculum together. While the teachers plan together, they haven't been able to spend the time they need to figure out how to teach together. So, another focus area might be for the whole faculty to learn more about how to teach together in teams.

Other focus areas that could emerge might be improving student assessment so that assessment is more sensitive to student growth, or improving student problem solving skills, or helping students to conduct parent conferences.

Focus Areas Answer Yes to These Questions

(1) Does it address elements of the school's profile?

(2) Does it support the school's mission statement?

(3) Does it target improvements in curriculum and instruction?

(4) Can we collect data that will help us document progress in this focus area?

(5) Does it support learning for all students?

Gathering More Information About a Focus Area

This is a critical step! Don't leave it out. Information can tell both what is occurring as well as identify what is missing. For instance, remember the literacy focus area? First, you'll want to find out in more detail what all your teachers are doing to teach literacy. This will help you understand the resources that you already have in your school. By knowing what you already have, it will help you to target goals. But second, you will also find out what you're not doing.

Developing Your Target Goals

Once you have more information about resources and needs, take the time, either as a whole faculty or as a BLT, to develop a big list of target goals. Think about target goals in areas like specific teaching approaches for our literacy focus. For example, reciprocal teaching models, read alouds and writer's workshop could be specific target goals. You direct attention toward staff development, offering practice and experience in three types of approaches to literature.

Or, you may decide to increase opportunities for students to practice their reading skills using families, older students or community volunteers.

Scanning for Potential Resources

What resources are available from other schools? Have other schools addressed literacy in creative ways? What about your community businesses? Scanning for possible resources might be done by a small work group that includes community members.

"Teacher teams and individuals use their data to improve practice in their classrooms."

Linda Rice, Assistant Principal
Deer Creek Middle School

Creating an Action Cycle

What Are You Trying to Accomplish?

By creating an action cycle for each target goal, small work groups have to define what they're really trying to accomplish. Asking questions like, " If this goal is met, what will be different for teachers?" Or, "If we work on this, what will be different for students?" Depending on the focus, work groups might ask themselves, "What will parents and families see that is different?"

Learning and Growing

Once your group has identified the resources that are available to help it accomplish its goal, the group gets to work. The group sets a calendar for its work efforts. It assigns responsibilities to its members and sets accomplishment milestones.The group might invite in outside experts, read research, visit other schools, hold focus groups to listen carefully to what people need, and talk and discuss among themselves.

Getting Active Involvement

- Draw on people's strengths.
- Let the most eager people take the lead.
- Use the resources that you have.
- Involve the whole school community.

Ideas for Learning and Growing

- Practice-based inquiry
- School professional work groups
- Visiting other sites
- Bringing in other teachers to help you reflect
- Bringing in parents to participate in formulating questions and critiquing ideas

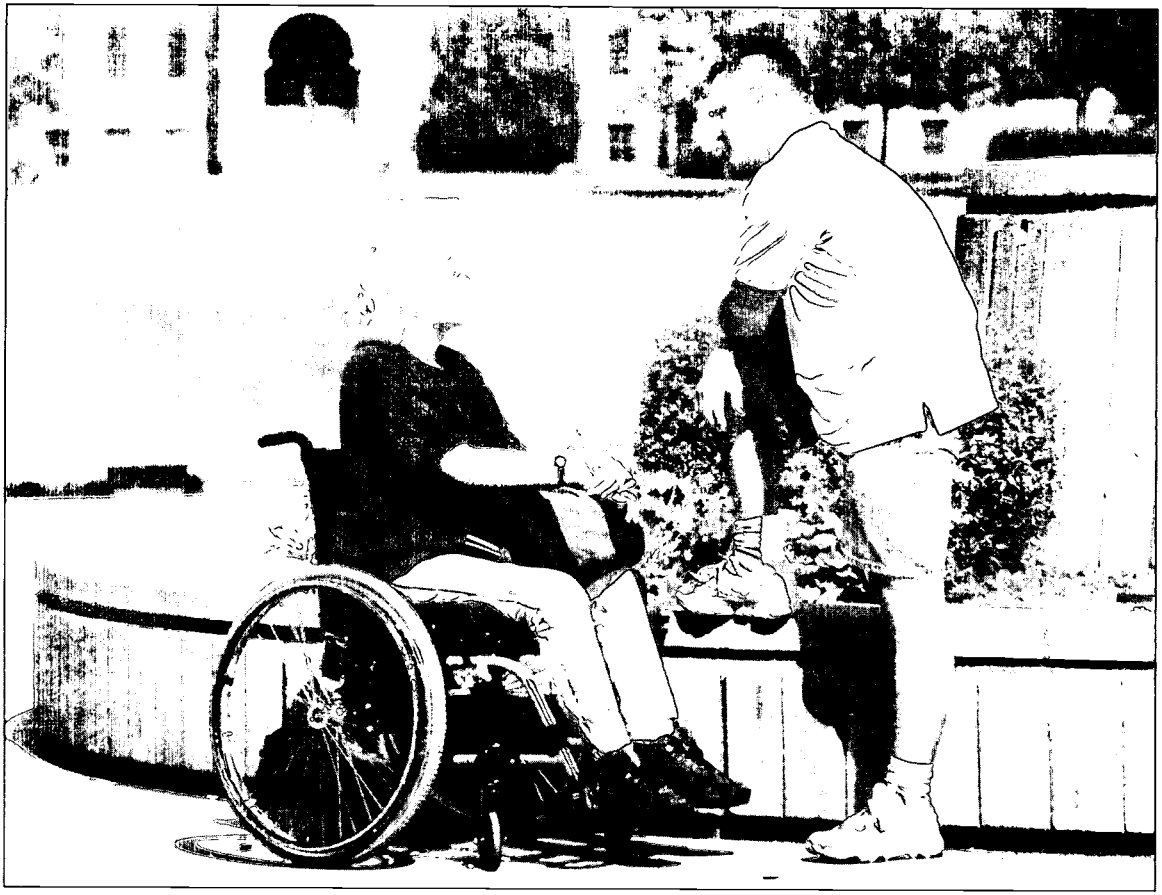
Scanning for Resources

Select a small group of individuals to work on a specific target for your action cycle. After you've selected a target goal, look around for resources that might help you to work on your goal. Scan your group, the school, and any resources that exist outside of the school. Use resources like the Internet to make sure that you're tapping into all possible sources of information and support.

Producing and Reporting

After collecting more information and learning about ways of reaching the target, the work group develops some solutions or ideas for improvements. A representative from the work group visits with the building leadership team to present the group's progress but also to make sure that the work group's thinking is in alignment with the work of other action cycles. Then, some sort of product is developed. This might take the form of a staff development day, or an action plan for how to plan student/parent feedback conferences.

Whatever the product, the group's work is not finished until they've shared their work with others and collected information about what happened as a result of their intervention. The group makes a report to the building leadership team. They tell about what their target was, what they did, what they produced and what its effect was on the building—either on the work of school professionals or on the learning outcomes for students.



"I have learned to let go of my sacred curriculum and focus on what has meaning to the student."

John McKinney, Science Teacher
Castle Rock Middle School

Using Information to Keep on Track

Quarterly Checks

Building leadership teams might use a few key sets of data to help them understand how their improvement process is progressing. For instance, once every quarter (every 9 weeks), they might look at their attendance rates, their grade distributions, the number of discipline incidents, and some of the units of study that were completed during the last 9 weeks.

Route Corrections

Depending on the data being used, the leadership team can continue to support the work of the action cycle groups or decide to address a newly emerging area of focus. Generally, it's a good idea to monitor what's happening and to provide those data to work groups.

An Example of a Good Focus Area, Target Goals, and Action Planning

Focus Area

Improving the writing skills of all students

Baseline Information

- ☐ Writing samples from all students
- ☐ Language section on a standardized test

Learning and Growing

After looking at the results of the writing samples, a work group who had volunteered to work on writing skills began to analyze what might be possible reasons for the kinds of results students were achieving. They discovered that writing was only targeted during language arts. After doing some research, the work group discovered that students who had a lot of opportunities to practice writing across the content areas tended to have better writing skills. The work group visited another school that had targeted writing skills. They brought a series of recommendations back to their faculty about how to improve writing skills. The building leadership team adopted the work group's recommendations and instituted the following set of target goals.

- ☐ Students will be asked to complete regular writing assignments in all subjects
- ☐ Students will work in small groups to proofread the writing of other students critiquing clarity, organization, spelling, and grammar.
- ☐ Students will develop portfolios of their writing samples. They will self-evaluate their work, selecting the best samples for inclusion in their portfolio.

The work group met with small groups of teachers who needed support and new skills for integrating writing into their own curriculum. By the end of the year, the work group was able to gather examples of writing samples across the curriculum into its own portfolio.

"Whenever a solution is found, there are four new problems to solve. The trick is to remember that we're not solving problems to stop solving problems but to get better and better at responding to the needs of our students and their families."

Cherie Howell, Teacher
Adams City Middle School

Developing New Focus Areas

How Do We Know How to Move On?

When assessment of a particular target goal shows growth in students, and there's a shared process for continuing to work in the area, it's time to think about refocusing on other areas for change and improvement.

When Do We Stop?

Improvement and change never stops. The important thing to work at, over time, is to get better and better at measuring what we do. When our measurement systems are competent and timely, and we remember to use them, then deciding on what new targets we have should come from the people who are closest to the work - students, teachers, and families.

Being Successful

Being successful in meeting your target goals and improving your school profile is really based on some fundamental principles. Targets should be realistic and should include plans for professional development. Targets should stretch the faculty and the community. The results that are achieved should be important enough that they're worth a total organizational effort. Finally, target goals and strategies should be powerful enough to improve learning outcomes.

How Often Do We Shift Our Focus?

Some focus areas stay with a building over time. Other focus areas move to the background and new focus areas emerge. There's no set timeline for this to happen but some cues to the BLT might be steady improvement in a particular area. Or, the community may have an influx of new residential building. The school profile will help to guide this decision making process.

Using Your Human Resources Effectively

The process of collecting, analyzing, and making decisions based on information loops should empower your school community, not burn people out. This means that most target goals should focus on student learning. They should be school-wide and carry clear expectations that the whole school will commit to change and improvement. There should be adequate time to analyze and think about the school profile before focus areas and target goals are established.

Questions to Guide Your Progress

- ☐ Does the profile provide a complete picture of the learning community?
- ☐ Has the school sufficiently analyzed its data in order to identify its strengths and weaknesses?
- ☐ Do students feel as if it's easy to make new friends?
- ☐ Has the school identified target goals that are supported by school profile data?
- ☐ Have professional development needs been identified?
- ☐ Will progress measurement assess all students' progress toward the goal?

Questions That You Might Want To Answer

Students and Families

- □ What do we know about student achievement and learning?
- □ How are our students doing on the standards?
- □ How many students attend this school?
- □ On the average, how many students are absent each day?
- □ How many students are held back at the end of each year?
- □ How many students are suspended or expelled each year?
- □ Is there a disproportionate number of students with a particular characteristic such as disability, income level, or race, who are singled out for disciplinary action?
- □ How many students move out of our school each year?
- □ How do we welcome new students and families into our communities?
- □ How comfortable are students and families in our culture?
- □ How are students supported in setting and achieving their learning goals?

Teaching and Learning

- □ What kinds of subjects are taught in this building?
- □ To what extent standards used to guide the content coverage in each grade?
- □ How are students grouped into classes?
- □ What kinds of instructional practices are used in this school?
- □ What kinds of supports are available to students?
- □ Are students more or less successful in particular grades?
- □ How do students feel about the instructional environment?
- □ Are students given different options to demonstrate their learning accomplishments?
- □ How often are students exposed to fine arts?
- □ How often are students involved in organized physical education?
- □ Do students feel psychologically safe in this school?
- □ Do teachers feel prepared to teach the current curriculum?
- □ Do teachers feel as if they have the resources and support they need to do their best possible job as teachers?
- □ To what extent are teachers able to meet the learning needs of a broad variety of students?

Once you have analyzed the data that were collected to answer the questions listed under **Students and Families**, **Teaching and Learning**, **Community and Culture**, and **Systems Thinking and Doing**, you'll need to engage the whole community in a dialogue based on the data. The dialogue can be shaped by grappling with the following five questions, designed to help you realize your vision and mission:

1. What are your curent accomplishments?
2. Whose interests are being served by the way things are?
3. Is this the way we want to be?
4. What would we like to say about students and learning in our school in three years?
5. What are we going to do?

Community and Culture

- ☐ What's the relationship between the school board and the school district administration?
- ☐ How does the central administration support the work of each school?
- ☐ How does the weather and the geography of the community affect its viability?
- ☐ How involved are churches and other religious influences in the life of the community and the schools?
- ☐ How satisfied is the community with the schools?
- ☐ What percentage of the community has school-aged children?
- ☐ What's the ethnic, income, and cultural mix of the community?
- ☐ To what extent does the school reflect the cultural heritage of the community?
- ☐ To what extent are school staff seen as part of the community?

Systems Thinking and Doing

- ☐ To what extent does our staff development result in changes in teacher practice?
- ☐ To what extent do the daily systems in the building like attendance, announcements, meetings, lunch run smoothly?
- ☐ To what extent does the use of time in the building promote teacher reflection, co-teaching and practice based-inquiry?
- ☐ To what extent are students grouped so that they have the opportunity to learn with a wide variety of peers?
- ☐ How are teachers, support staff and families involved in setting goals, prioritizing strategies, and reviewing progress?
- ☐ To what extent are changes made after considering impact on all parts of a building?

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