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Components of School Capacity: Structures, Practices, and Perceptions

This brief defines school capacity as the presence of characteristics needed to support the development of a thriving learning community. School cultural and attitudinal factors are incorporated in this definition (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995). Structural components also are included, in response to research showing the importance of school structures and policies to successful improvement initiatives (e.g., Fullan, 1991; Fullan & Miles, 1994; Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987; Howley & Brown, 2001; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2001). Lacking these structures, practices, and perceptions, school staff may be less likely to nurture and sustain significant school improvement.

It should be noted that scant experimental or quasi-experimental research has been conducted on the characteristics, structures, or dispositions that lead some schools to be more successful at improvement efforts than others. Rather, the majority of the literature consists of case studies, survey research, and designs with pre- and posttesting. Other research involves participant observation, classroom observation, regression studies, and policy analysis. For now, these studies offer the best evidence available about what might predispose schools to improve. Readers of this brief may want to keep in mind this admittedly varied, but limited, research base.

School Structures

Massell (1998) refers to building capacity as translating high standards and incentives into effective instruction and strong student performance. Newmann, King, and Youngs (2001) contend that structural conditions, such as program coherence and alignment, coordinated curriculum, sufficient resources, and adequate time for staff to plan collaboratively and/or implement change, contribute to the likelihood that school reform will be undertaken with commitment. Moreover, school improvement efforts cannot be sustained without sufficient support from district and school policies and structures (Howley & Brown, 2001). Structural conditions, though often invisible or taken for granted, significantly shape how people behave, what they believe they (and their students) are capable of, and what they commit to do (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; deMarraias & LeCompte, 1999; Fullan, 1991; Mills, 1959; Riordan, 1997).

Program coherence. According to Newmann, King, and Youngs (2001), program coherence is a measure of the extent to which a school is programatically integrated. The presence of many unrelated and unfocused improvement programs weakens organizational efficacy. Program coherence also encompasses the alignment and coordination of curriculum and instruction within and between grade levels (Corallo & McDonald, 2002; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). Some research suggests that careful alignment of instruction with learning goals and assessments, as well as coordination within and across grade levels and subject areas, can produce improved student achievement on standardized tests (Mitchell, 1998, 1999; Schmoker & Marzano, 1999; Wishnick, 1989). One analysis of international studies reveals that
implementing and monitoring an aligned curriculum can produce a significant increase (on the order of approximately 31 percentile points) in student achievement (Marzano, 2000; Schmidt et al., 2001). Other studies indicate that curriculum coordination and alignment may diminish, if not entirely eliminate, such conventional predictors of student achievement as socioeconomic status, gender, race, and teacher effect (Elmore & Rothman, 1999; Mitchell, 1998, 1999; Wishnick, 1989). In a study of a low-performing rural school in Virginia, Nilsen (2000) noted that developing a balanced curriculum aligned with the state standards impacted the school’s environment, teaching, and learning—results that contributed to the school’s capacity for continuous improvement.

**Structural support.** One important condition for school improvement is adequate time for staff to plan, implement, experiment with, and evaluate their improvement initiatives (Howley & Brown, 2001; Howley-Rowe, 1999; Raywid, 1993). Teachers are better equipped to develop professionally if they have time during their workday to reflect, collaborate, and focus on their own learning. Such opportunities, moreover, are fundamental to the development of professional learning communities (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Lashway, 1998). Some researchers argue that time is vital to the success of a school improvement undertaking because change proceeds in developmental phases; without time, reform has no chance to develop (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987).

**Site-based change agents.** Change agents can help schools prepare for change and help the staff focus on improving student achievement (Harris, 2002). Coggins, Stoddard, and Cutler (2003) conducted a case study research project of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) to determine the value of reform coaches to helping schools build capacity. The research noted that coaches impacted teaching and learning by

- building capacity in the instructional staff to provide instructional leadership
- managing knowledge resources by connecting faculty to relevant research or organizing student data into a meaningful and useful formats
- coaching educators on topics related to instruction
- building capacity for instructional support and collaboration among teachers

The reform coaches researched practices that would support instructional improvement and helped teachers use the practices in the classroom. Additionally, they sought new instructional materials, connected with organizations that provide instructional support, and located opportunities for teacher professional development. The research concluded that the reform coaches serve as a bridge between a vision of improvement and its actual enactment.

Since 2001, Edvantia (formerly AEL) has worked with Tennessee to train and manage coaches, called Exemplary Educators (EEs), who assist low-performing schools in that state. Like the BASRC coaches, EEs help schools build capacity and perform similar tasks to those listed above. In general, analyses of student achievement gains in EE-assisted schools show increases comparable to or greater than those of typical and
high-performing Tennessee schools. In addition, schools where EEs have provided assistance for two years show greater gains than schools assisted for only one year (Craig, Butler, & Moats, 2005; Craig, Butler, Parker, et al., 2005a, 2005b).

**Leadership.** As Chirichello (1999) points out, the principal is key to establishing the climate of the school. Chirichello notes that collegial relationships between teachers and administrator need to be characterized by openness, cooperation, respect, and sincerity. Linda Lambert (1998) asserts that building capacity in schools embodies a new understanding of leadership. She uses the term constructivist leadership to talk about “leadership as the reciprocal learning process that enables participants in a community to construct meaning toward a shared purpose” (p. 18). The processes of collaboration and collective responsibility must be institutionalized. Leadership becomes an action verb involving a redistribution of power within the learning community. Beliefs need to be translated into practice (Reitzug, 1994). As more staff assume responsibilities, the base of instructional leadership broadens, thus increasing the school’s capacity to improve instruction. Sharing responsibility encourages undertaking and implementing an improvement plan that is based on identified goals and needs (Coggins et al., 2003).

**Practices**

**Deprivatized practice.** Louis and colleagues (1996) contend that deprivatized practice is pivotal to developing a school professional community. When faculty members observe one another, provide feedback, and serve as mentors or coaches, they tend to view teaching as a collaborative undertaking (Sarason & Lorentz, 1998). As a result, faculty experience less professional isolation and greater opportunity for learning from colleagues (Education Commission of the States, 1996). In terms of school capacity, this means serious change is more likely to take hold if faculty members are aided by norms or mechanisms that support collegial learning, critique, and cross-fertilization.

**Equitable practice.** Darling-Hammond says, “Successful education can occur only if teachers are prepared to meet rigorous learning demands and the different needs of students” (1997, p. 334). Schools are increasingly diverse organizations, with larger percentages of African American and Latino students. In addition, national attention is focused on increasing the academic achievement of racially/ethnically-defined youth and students of low socioeconomic status (Fortune, 2002; Schwartz, 2001). Schools equipped to teach their students equitably, fairly, and with understanding are equipped to make improvement equitably.

**Differentiated instruction.** Students in a classroom may hail from various communities, bring disparate skills and strengths, and have differing academic needs. Differentiating instruction involves varying content, processes, products, and learning environments to meet students’ various needs (Tomlinson, 2000). Instruction that honors the linguistic and literacy styles of young children augments their reading skills (Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2001) and, by extension, their learning of any
subject that requires literacy skills. Moreover, differentiated instruction has been shown
to improve student achievement (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogan, 1999; although see
Rowan & Miracle, 1983, for an alternative view). Differentiated instruction
accommodates students of various cognitive abilities (Tomlinson, 1999a) and accounts
for the myriad ways in which we all learn (Tomlinson, 1999b). “A one-size-fits-all
approach to classroom teaching is ineffective for most students and harmful to some,”
suggest Tomlinson and Kalbfleisch (1998, p. 1) in their analysis of brain research,
because “to learn, students must experience appropriate levels of challenge” (p. 3).

Perceptions

Teacher efficacy. A school’s ability to undertake significant school improvement
work is closely bound to its teachers’ attitudes, perceptions, expectations, and
assessments. Teachers’ shared beliefs about their collective ability to teach students
effectively is, according to Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000), a strong gauge of school
capacity. Collective teacher efficacy is “an emergent group-level attribute, the product of
the interactive dynamics of the group members. As such, this emergent property is more
than the sum of the individual attributes” (p. 482). Teacher efficacy is linked to faculty
behavior and is hypothesized (Goddard, 1998, 2002; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000) and
tentatively confirmed (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2002) to have an impact on student
achievement.

Expectations. Expectations for student performance also constitute an important
gauge of school capacity. These expectations are often shaped by stereotypical
assessments based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, family structure,
language, immigrant status, religion, transience, sexual orientation, and other
contextually significant social characteristics (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; deMarrais &
LeCompte, 1999; McLeod, 1987; Ogbu, 1983; Paley, 1979; Riordan, 1997; Willis, 1981).
For example, teachers who hold low expectations for certain students may treat them
differently than students perceived to be more capable. Such differential treatment, which
is very different from differentiated instruction, results in some students having fewer
opportunities to learn challenging material, less time to answer questions or complete
assignments, and less encouragement and praise (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999;
Lumsden, 1997; McLeod, 1987; Willis, 1981).

Summary

The literature on school improvement suggests that a school’s capacity for
improvement can be supported by coherent structures, constructive teacher and
leadership practices, and positive staff perceptions of their own efficacy and that of their
students. Sufficient planning time and resources, a coordinated instructional program,
teacher commitment to educating diverse students, and collective professional efficacy
are among those characteristics the literature proposes to be linked with the likelihood
that schools may be able to pursue improvement strategies effectively. Together, these
characteristics suggest four areas or dimensions that contribute to building capacity: (1) bringing focus, (2) leading change, (3) developing accountability, and (4) creating community.

This research brief is based on the literature review “A Review of the Literature About School Capacity,” which is included in Measure of School Capacity for Improvement (MSCI) User Manual and Technical Report, by Georgia K. Hughes, Lisa D. Copley, Caitlin W. Howley, and Merrill L. Meehan; and on literature reviews conducted for Edvantia by Joy Runyan and Michael T. Carter.

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presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.


