Systems Thinking Leadership for District and School Improvement

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Introduction
One thing we have learned from more than seven years of funded school improvement work is that a complex, multi-year process that calls for strong leadership to ensure a school’s approach is effective and efficient in improving student outcomes for all students. The underlying threads of equity and quality provide the purpose for state, district and school improvement efforts, as well as inspire commitment to persevere in the face of multiple internal and external challenges. Equity is often used interchangeably with equality, however we must be clear that equal is not necessarily equitable. Equal implies that everyone receives the same resources, opportunities and supports, whereas equitable meets individuals where they are, utilizes and builds on their strengths, and ensures everyone receives what they need to thrive. Further, we must be clear that equity and excellence must co-exist. There can be no excellence (in our system as a whole) if all children do not have the resources they need to achieve it (Zion, 2018). Equity and quality guide decision-making, ensuring a change made in one area (e.g., structure, process) that is interconnected with another does not result in a negative impact on students or adults. A focus on equity and quality as the grounding principles for school improvement assures that the needs of each leader, teacher, and student are met to ensure a quality education for all students.

This document encourages educational leaders to use systems thinking to understand and manage the complexity and interconnectedness of school improvement. We begin with an overview of the shifts occurring in school improvement work followed by a discussion of systems thinking leadership needed for improvement work. A description of the principal’s key role in building a vision, setting a strong student-focused direction, understanding and developing people, and managing the teaching and learning program is provided. The importance of addressing an organization’s performance and enhancing its ability to function and sustain improvement through capacity building (human capital, social capital, program coherence, and resource capital) is emphasized. Capacity building manifests itself through strengthened foundational elements (leadership, talent, instruction, culture), resulting in a higher quality of instruction and supports and a pervasive culture of “academic optimism” among students and adults. Finally, an improvement cycle is shared, which utilizes the foundational elements and systems thinking processes to effectively facilitate continuous improvement. Reflective questions that encourage deeper thought and reflection on current school improvement to encourage innovative ideas for approaching the work follow each section.
The Changing Tide in Federal, State, and District Roles
The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) preserves the focus on equitable opportunities and outcomes for all children and maintains the role of standards in measured accountability from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). However, the federal government’s external control and ability to incentivize leverage through waivers previously used to change state and local policy (e.g., teacher and administrator evaluation tied to student achievement) has been relinquished. Each state now has the autonomy to create its own plan for identifying and supporting districts and schools in improving student outcomes and ensuring every child is on a path for college or career readiness. In turn, ESSA requires the state hold schools and districts accountable by tracking student performance on annual state assessments, English-language proficiency, an academic factor that can be broken out by subgroup, and at least one additional indicator (e.g., student engagement, educator engagement, access to and completion of advanced coursework, postsecondary readiness, school climate/safety).

The role of district leadership has shifted from enforcing procedures to building school capacity; managing compliance to managing improvement; and rewarding schools, teachers, and staff for doing the right things well, rather than doing things right. The locus of control must be clearly established between the district and school as to which one sets priorities and controls the work. “Accountability without complementary support creates an adversarial divide between the district and the turnaround schools that will inhibit turnaround progress.” (Player, Hitt & Robinson, 2014, p. 8). A district liaison plays a key role in the school improvement process by sustaining the district’s focus, identifying challenges, aligning strategic and timely deployment of needed support, sharing successful initiatives and learned lessons from other schools, and providing notice of deserved recognition for improvement and effort. The district liaison’s work at the school is no longer limited to attending school improvement team meetings. Active engagement in supporting, coaching, and facilitating problem-solving associated with meeting milestones and the effective operation of structures and processes within the school provides an objective lens and ensures district expectations are implemented (e.g., observing and providing the principal feedback on leadership meetings, PLCs, interventions, and classroom instruction). Table 1 provides an overview of school and district roles in school improvement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensures the school leadership team has the talent and capacity to lead others in support of the improvement efforts.</td>
<td>Ensures the school has an experienced and effective leader with a skill set matched to the school’s needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designs and implements the instructional program and uses progress data to make timely adjustments (planning, delivery, and assessment) and use of effective instructional strategies. Builds teacher capacity through frequent evidence-based feedback.</td>
<td>Supports lowest-performing schools by staffing the school with the most effective teachers and retaining those teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and arranges delivery of support needed (whole faculty, targeted group, or individual).</td>
<td>Collaborates with principal in reviewing patterns from program monitoring and feedback to provide needed support (e.g., targeted professional development, assessment design).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builds leadership capacity in others through job-embedded practice (e.g., interrater reliability assessment of curriculum components, evidence-based feedback).</td>
<td>Provides job-embedded, differentiated capacity-building training to principal and establishes a pipeline for future administrators by offering job-embedded activities related to distributive leadership and instructional program coherency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishes structures (schedule) and processes (norms, agendas, reporting) for teams (instructional, data, PBIS, etc.).</td>
<td>Provides feedback on effectiveness of structures and processes with specific attention to leadership structures and processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensures a respectful learning environment free from disruption by being visible, modeling expectations, and reinforcing others in doing so. Recognizes teacher, student, and staff improvement and efforts.</td>
<td>Recognizes school leaders for their efforts in being visible, modeling expectations, and reinforcing others doing so.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
States are required to identify and support the lowest performing 5% of schools (comprehensive support schools) and those schools with achievement gaps (targeted support schools). Equity is advanced by the requirement that all students be taught to high academic standards that prepare them to succeed in college and careers. There is more emphasis on teacher effectiveness with the requirement to improve the equitable distribution of effective teachers to ensure a quality learning experience for all students. Each state is challenged to develop a plan that includes ambitious long-term goals, differentiated supports for their low-performing schools, high expectations for achievement with aligned rigorous assessments, and universal indicators of school quality and student progress. ESSA requires identification of schools in two categories as described in Table 2 and Table 3.

**Table 2. Category: Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Identification Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowest Performing</td>
<td>The lowest performing 5% of schools in the State participating in Title I.</td>
<td>At least once every 3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low High School Graduation Rate</td>
<td>Any public high school in the State with a 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate at or below 67%, or below a higher percentage selected by the State, over no more than 3 years.</td>
<td>At least once every 3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronically Low-Performing Subgroup</td>
<td>Any school participating in Title I that was identified for targeted support and improvement because it had a subgroup of students performing at or below the performance of all students in the lowest-performing schools and did not improve after implementing a targeted support and improvement plan over a State-determined number of years.</td>
<td>State-determined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Category: Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Timeline for Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consistently Underperforming Subgroup</td>
<td>The lowest performing 5% of schools in the State participating in Title I.</td>
<td>2019-2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Performing Subgroup</td>
<td>Any school in which one or more subgroups of students is performing at or below the performance of all students in the lowest-performing schools. These schools must receive additional targeted support under the law. If this type of school is a Title I school that does not improve after implementing a targeted support and improvement plan over a State-determined number of years, it becomes a school that has a chronically low-performing subgroup and is identified for comprehensive support and improvement.</td>
<td>2018-2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illinois provides one example of how a state has seized the opportunity to redesign their support system. The Illinois-created, statewide system-support structure, known as IL-EMPOWER, supports CSI schools and serves as a support option for all schools and districts. For those schools identified for comprehensive services and supports, IL-EMPOWER provides field-based staff to assist the district and schools in assessing needs and connects districts and schools through peer networks to build professional capital through a collective capacity model that uses state, district, and school expertise to improve districts, schools and communities. Data gleaned from state and local report cards and feedback from stakeholders inform the programmatic technical assistance deliverables. Through differentiated training, the State builds the capacity of districts to support school-level improvement in areas such as needs assessment/equity audits, maximizing available fiscal resources to support improvement strategies, access to and analysis of data, development of school improvement plans, ongoing support for plan implementation, and performance monitoring. IL-EMPOWER provides a structure that assists schools identified as CSI in selecting an Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) pre-approved IL-EMPOWER...
Provider Partner(s) based on the school’s needs assessment/equity audit results for provider services targeted in one or more of the following areas: Governance and Management, Curriculum and Instruction, and Climate and Culture. School improvement plans for CSI schools are approved and monitored quarterly by ISBE. School improvement plans for schools identified as TSI are supported and monitored by each school’s district. The criteria for identification of schools in Illinois’ tiered system is provided in Table 4. The criteria delineated for “Exemplary School” and “Commendable School” recognizes that no matter how high performing a school may be, the changing dynamic of each cohort over time compels school leaders to implement a plan for monitoring that identifies the need to make changes in school structures and processes (e.g., scheduling for English Learners, disaggregation of subgroup data for data-analysis meetings).

**Table 4. Illinois Four-Tiered Identification System**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tier 1: Exemplary School</td>
<td>- No student demographic groups performing at or below the level of the “all students” group in the lowest 5% of all schools&lt;br&gt;- A graduation rate greater than 67% (high school)&lt;br&gt;- Performance is in the top 10% of schools statewide</td>
<td>May apply to serve in the IL-EMPOWER network of partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 2: Commendable School</td>
<td>- No student demographic groups performing at or below the level of the “all students” group in the lowest 5% of all schools&lt;br&gt;- A graduation rate greater than 67% (high school)&lt;br&gt;- Performance is not in the top 10% of schools statewide</td>
<td>May apply to serve in the IL-EMPOWER network of partners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Tier 3: Underperforming School
- One or more student demographic groups are performing at or below the level of the “all students” group in the lowest 5% of all schools
- Any school that has failed to meet the 95% assessment threshold for all students or for one or more student demographic groups for 3 years in a row
- Will receive targeted support
- Required to develop a plan that is approved by the district
- May use IL-EMPOWER support

### Tier 4: Lowest-Performing School
- Lowest-performing 5% of Title I schools in Illinois
- High schools that have a graduation rate of 67% or less
- Schools with chronically low-performing student demographic groups that have implemented targeted support and improvement plans, where, for more than 3 years, those same demographic groups remain in the bottom 5% of performance when compared to the “all students” subgroup for comprehensive schools
- Will receive “Comprehensive” supports through collaboration with ISBE and partners
- Required to have a work plan, inclusive of targets and timelines, approved by ISBE
- Required to use IL-EMPOWER network of ISBE-approved partners (school will receive funding to access services)

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NCLB’s heavy-handed mandates that focused on compliance and procedures have been replaced with ESSA’s clear expectations that state plans support the building of district and school capacity and manage improvement rather than monitor improvement. This shift requires a more active role by states, forcing them to rethink their approach for supporting school improvement and implement strategic, needs-based, differentiated support that lays to rest the cookie cutter approach of the past. Plans of support that tap the expertise of the department’s staff best suited to address the identified need will better serve districts, schools, and individual groups of students. However, most state school improvement offices lack the capacity to provide
meaningful, targeted, sustained support for the number and variety of schools (e.g., rural, urban, high poverty, high English learner populations) served. Therefore, ESSA makes a shift to support districts in providing support to the lowest performing schools. Building district capacity while also building school capacity should result in sustaining improved practices across many schools. What do we mean by capacity?

**Capacity Building**

A variety of capacity labels are found in literature; however, four components of capacity for educational performance accountability resonate: human capital, social capital, program coherence, and resources. Figure 1 shows the interconnectedness of the four components.

- **Human Capital**, the individual or collective traits of talent; knowledge; skills; experience; education; and training among leaders, teachers, and staff, includes the hiring and retention of talent.
- **Social Capital** is the interpersonal relationships that engage staff with a purpose aligned to mutual goals, which include: expectations, communication, and norms (e.g., professionalism, collaborative teamwork). The organization's cultural norms and values (e.g., academic optimism, high expectations) are also encompassed. Human and Social Capacities are often consolidated as “professional capital,” providing the means for building relationships and trust, and empowering and engaging others through shared leadership.
- **Program Coherence**, the coordinated alignment and cohesiveness of the instructional program (written, taught, and tested curriculum), includes the structures (e.g., common planning time) and processes (e.g., data-analysis teams, planned intervention) that support instruction.
• **Resource Capital** is the curriculum, associated instructional materials, assessments, and technology including organizational elements that may be leveraged from the district, such as leadership, data analysis, instructional supports, professional development, et cetera. It is important to note that “physical resources alone are inanimate objects; it is when they are deployed in support of the other forms of capacity that they allow the school to improve” (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2012, p. 4).

Organizational and structural components are also considered resource capital as they provide an overarching framework through which collective capacity (human, social, program, and resource capacity) is built. Thoughtful construction and use of governance structures and organizational processes provide the means for leaders to empower staff and students, encourage broad participation in decision making, and foster shared accountability for student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Hallinger and Heck (1999) conceptualize instructional leadership to include attention to purposes, people, structures, and social systems. Intentional capacity building enables leaders to link and guide the teachers, school, and district through the change process, moving the system forward through identification and interruption of inequities.

**Systems, Structures, and Processes**

A systems thinking approach aligns organizational structures and processes to effectively and efficiently improve performance. Identifying the different components of organizational change is helpful when thinking about the dynamics and interconnectedness of the moving and shifting components discussed above. Figure 2 provides the definitions of system, structure, and process.

A “systems thinking” approach for school improvement assists district and school leaders from becoming overwhelmed and the process from becoming chaotic for all. Systems are characterized by synergy—the whole (system) is greater than the sum of its parts (elements), because the relationship among the different elements adds value to the system (Betts, 1992). For example, professional development enhances the quality of leadership which advances the quality of feedback to teachers that in turn improves the quality of instruction and results in increased student learning. The process of managing such a system requires a knowledge of the interrelationships between all the sub-processes within the system and of everybody that works in it (Deming, 1990). Leaders at the school and district level need to be in touch with the synergy as it ebbs
and flows, making sure the elements are performing effectively. In successful improvement efforts the energy constantly shifts amongst the different elements while the system continues to flex and bend moving forward. This mode of thinking also supports leaders in visualizing the interconnectedness of the moving parts and facilitates identification of patterns that indicate a disconnect in the system (e.g., lack of timely data access in a user-friendly format to efficiently address identified student needs, leading to less targeted intervention and a decrease in student achievement).

**Figure 2. Definitions retrieved from Merriam-Webster Online**

**System:** a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole - a number system: such as a:
- a group of interacting bodies under the influence of related forces - a gravitation system

**Structure:** organization of parts as dominated by the general character of the whole - coherent form or organization
- the aggregate of elements of an entity in their relationships to each other

**Process:** series of actions or operations conducing to an end: especially: a continuous operation or treatment.

Using a lens for equity and quality in the decision-making process ensures a change made in the interconnected system, structure, or process does not negatively impact individual students, student groups, or adults. For example, the district’s guidance and support (system) on the intervention team’s (structure) processes results in more targeted, timely, and effective support for each student (process), culminating in improved school academic outcomes. The Equity Lens is applied to decision making to ensure needs-based support for each student, teacher, leader, and school are attended to and a quality learning environment with high standards and expectations is provided for all. Structures and processes are critical resources, as they provide a framework to support change across the system. Systems thinking work is not for the faint of heart. This work is challenging; however, it results in deep and meaningful
individual and organizational learning. As Fullan (2008) notes, “learning is the work,” and for school leaders the learning is job-embedded.

Reflection Questions
1. Create a list for each capacity (human, resource, social, and program coherence) that includes a minimum of four examples for each. Choose one example for each type of capacity and describe how it is interconnected with one or more of the other types of capacity.
2. Which capacity do you feel is a strength in your school? Why? Which capacity is most lacking in your school? What are two next steps to build capacity in this area? Which other type(s) of capacity building will this involve or impact?
3. How are equity and quality lenses currently used in decision making?
4. Review the systems, structure, and process currently in place to support school improvement. How interconnected are these elements? What strengths, opportunities and challenges exist?

Leading School Improvement
While NCLB (2001) brought about a clear, evidenced-based focus on existing achievement gaps, the federal overreach in leveraged policy, accountability, and sanctions began to overshadow the moral imperative for many schools and districts. Strong leadership at all levels of the education system applying a systems thinking approach that utilizes equity and quality lenses when making data-informed decisions ensures that structures and processes are in place so all students have access to rigorous instruction, advanced courses, and effective programs (equity), not a watered-down version of disconnected content (quality) and ineffective practices. Prior to leading and guiding collective action(s) toward a culture of change, principals, as well as district leaders, must first examine their own values and beliefs surrounding equity and quality to be clear about their moral purpose in undertaking this work. This underlying moral imperative will emanate in the words and actions of the leader throughout the improvement process, thereby providing others with an understanding for the change and coherence for decision-making. Mintzberg (2005, p. 239) describes an effective leader as one who “inspires more than empowers; connects more than controls; demonstrates more than decides.”
School leadership has emerged as a significant driver of school improvement as evidenced by the following research:

- Leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis-Seashore, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004) and plays a central role in initiating internal changes in schools and providing direction and support (Fullan, 2001; Public Impact, 2008).
- The average effect size between leadership and student achievement of 0.25 equates to a 10% increase in student test scores (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003, p.3).
- As noted by Louis et al., (2010, p. 9), “we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership.”
- Effects of leadership are considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5).

A common set of leadership practices have been found to be important determinants of improved student performance outcomes. Effective principal practices include shaping and sharing a vision of academic success for all students; cultivating leadership in and distributing leadership among others; improving the instructional program (written, delivered, assessed); providing a learning climate of high expectations, respect, and safety; maintaining a relationship between the school and community as well as the district; and ensuring structures, processes, and data that support school improvement efforts are in place and operational (Wallace Foundation, 2012, 2013; Murphy and Meyer, 2008).

Although these practices may seem intuitive and straightforward, implementing them thoughtfully and consistently is the real work. While most leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices (building vision, setting directions, understanding and developing people and managing the teaching and learning program), it is the way in which leaders apply these practices - not the practices themselves - that determines their success (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). An example of successful implementation of this theoretical underpinning is reflected in North Carolina’s most improved turnaround schools. Tompson, Brown, Townsend, Henry & Fortner (2011) found that the most improved schools (an increase of 20 percentage points or more in achievement) had a new principal appointed that “sparked a series of changes in key areas of school operation, including (1) the
commitment, climate, and culture affecting student learning, (2) the knowledge and skills that school leaders, teachers, and other staff bring to their jobs, (3) the structures and processes that support instruction within the school, and (4) the strength of linkages between the school and both the district central office and the community served by the school” (p. 79). The sense of trust, framing of measurable goals, focus on instruction, and high expectations resulted in a systemic reform effort of capacity building and culture change that spilled over to students. Leading school improvement requires a sharp focus on four core areas that underlie and bind together the steps of continuous school improvement (Figure 3).

**Leadership**

A focus on leadership means making certain that each school is led by a principal with the capacity and skill set best suited to the school's context and challenges. Talent entails ensuring administrators, teachers, and other staff in the organization are in the right positions to effectively support the work. Leadership’s focus on talent and the instructional program results in effective teachers providing quality instruction. Leaders ensure that there is a strong overall vision, created by staff and other stakeholders that is student focused, and a mission aligned to its vision.

The organization’s values are defined and agreed upon by all. The leader then identifies value conflicts embedded within the core elements (leadership, talent, instruction, and culture) to determine who is being well-served and who is being harmed by the continuation of current policies and practices. Next, the political environment is assessed to understand the potential support for change. A strong direction is needed to buttress the constantly shifting and interconnected systems, structures, and processes to effectively implement and sustain change.
Talent

Strong improvers of educational systems not only hire the most talented teachers, they also develop these teachers so that the best instruction is consistently delivered to each and every student (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). A comprehensive approach to recruitment and retention of effective leaders and teachers is fundamental to ensuring continuous and sustained school improvement. Evidence of the importance of talented leaders and teachers in improving student outcomes is evidenced by research:

- Highly effective principals have been found to raise the achievement of a typical student in their school by between 2 and 7 months of learning in a single school year, while ineffective principals can lower achievement by the same amount (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2013).
- “[I]f teacher effects are normally distributed, the difference in achievement gains between having a 25th percentile teacher (a not so effective teacher) and a 75th percentile teacher (an effective teacher) is over one third of a standard deviation in reading and almost half a standard deviation in mathematics” (Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004, p. 253). Additionally, low SES students benefit the most from an effective teacher (Nye et al., 2004, p 254).

Multiple measures and trend data (e.g., student achievement, climate surveys, teacher effectiveness, school processes) inform the crafting of job descriptions for school leaders and teachers that guide selection of candidates who have the knowledge, skills, and experience to lead in schools facing specific challenges (e.g., low student achievement, unconnected stakeholders, disengaged staff, lack of community partnerships). Effective professional development used to enhance the capacity of the current leaders and teachers is differentiated based on whole, group, and individual needs and gaps, not episodic or detached from the context in which it will be implemented. A professional development plan is informed by multiple measures, such as disaggregated teacher effectiveness measures (e.g., observational feedback) and student learning measures (e.g., disaggregated standards performance), as well as the implementation of school or district initiatives (e.g., schoolwide positive behavior system implementation). Once gaps in capacity are identified, school leaders can leverage district resources for job-embedded coaching/learning assisted by the district staff. Thoughtfully planned, meaningful professional development builds capacity across the previously described capacity areas: human capacity (reading across the content-area training), social capacity (norms and set agendas for content-area meetings), program coherence (training of lead teachers to support instructional
coaching), and resource capacity (district support for content-area data meetings). Implementation of these practices provides for equity (opportunities for all teachers to grow based on their identified needs) and a quality learning environment for all.

Reflection Questions
1. School and district leaders walk a fine line between support and accountability with teachers and leaders. Describe teacher accountability at the school level. What supports are provided by the district and school to support teachers in meeting this level of accountability? Describe principal accountability in the district and identify district supports for meeting this level of accountability.
2. Describe the current process the school (or district) uses to identify professional development needs, deliver training, monitor implementation, and measure the impact of adult learning (e.g., turnaround leadership, teacher leader development, data analysis). What role does the district (or state) play? Are there gaps in the process?

Instruction
A principal’s direct involvement in the oversight of curriculum through planning and guiding the curriculum, coupled with evaluation, has a significant effect on student achievement (Robinson et al., 2008). Alignment of the written, taught, and tested curriculum with the standards is key to providing each student the opportunity (equity) to engage with content at the appropriate level of rigor (quality) (Glatthorn, Carr & Harris, 2001). The impact of curriculum alignment on student achievement was found to outweigh the effects of student gender, socio-economic status, and teacher effect, as well as having a greater effect on low achievers than high achievers (Squires, 2012). Supplemental resources must also be aligned with the curriculum.

Leithwood & Jantzi (2006) note, “the potency of leadership for increasing student learning hinges on the specific classroom practices that leaders stimulate, encourage and promote.” (p. 223). Establishing a structure that provides teachers with job-embedded time to collaborate in planning, analyzing data, designing interventions, and reflecting on the impact of

The potency of leadership for increasing student learning hinges on the specific classroom practices that leaders stimulate, encourage and promote.
- Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006
their instruction is a non-negotiable. Job-embedded instructional coaching is an effective means of providing differentiated and ongoing support for teachers. Tiered interventions must be differentiated by identified student needs and designed to scaffold students towards mastery of the content at the appropriate level of rigor. Intervening includes meeting the needs of those students who have mastered the content (e.g., enrichment). The administrative team and the district support designee should conduct observations followed by immediate debriefs as a group during the first 30 days of school to ensure all are in agreement on standards alignment, expectations for implementation fidelity, and feedback. District- and school-level professional development and support are informed by patterns in the evidenced-based feedback.

Reflection Questions
1. Describe the ongoing process that ensures that lesson plans, lesson delivery, and assessment are aligned to the standards. What is the process for aligning instructional resources? What role does the district play?
2. How is evidence-based feedback provided to instructional coaches, teachers, etc.?
3. What is the district’s role in supporting school-level instructional transformation?
4. Describe the current structures that support teachers with time and support to plan, analyze data, and identify interventions. Are there additional supports that the school or district can provide to ensure the effectiveness of this job-embedded work?

Culture
Changing climate leads to improved culture. Changing school climate is a piece of building a healthy, student-focused culture that honors diversity through equity. Culture is built by the adults in the building, resulting in an ‘unwritten’ overarching set of values and beliefs (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017). For example, leaders and other adults in the building serve as role models in the ways in which they interact with the district, building administrators, peers, and parents. Whereas climate represents the attitude of the organization, culture can be thought of as “the way we do things around here,” or the common set of expectations that evolve into the unwritten rules to which group members conform to remain in good standing with their colleagues (Gruenert, 2008). Discerning the difference between culture and climate is important. The two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably; however, one influences the other (see
Table 5). As the actions taken to change the climate become routine and ingrained in the school (through routines and traditions, etc.), the culture is changed. Therefore, changing culture begins with strategic changes made to an organization’s climate based on multiple points of data, including perceptual data. The use of climate survey data to take actions that target aspects of the climate linked to the desired changes in culture brings about change over time. For example, the challenge is not to simply change the way a principal leads or a teacher teaches, but to change why they lead and teach like they do. This calls for a change in their belief system.

### Table 5. Contrasting Climate with Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Climate</th>
<th>Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday versus Friday</td>
<td>Gives Mondays permission to be miserable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude or mood of the group</td>
<td>Personality of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides a state of mind</td>
<td>Provides a (limited) way of thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible, easy to change</td>
<td>Takes many years to evolve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on perceptions</td>
<td>Based on values and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel it when you come in the door</td>
<td>Members cannot feel it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is all around us</td>
<td>It is part of us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way we feel around here</td>
<td>The way we do things around here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First step to improvement</td>
<td>Determines if improvement is possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s in your head</td>
<td>It’s in your heart</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Grudenert, S., 2008)

Changing the school’s culture requires leaders to engage staff in collaborative teamwork to implement collective, purposeful actions to effectively change climate. Visually mapping out the system of actions needed to make changes in the climate assists school leaders in identifying the structures and processes for distributing leadership in support of the collaborative work. Identification of influential people within that system to advance the work will enhance the process. Leadership’s focus on the following actions, whether to strengthen a school culture or generate actionable
steps to change climate, are found to have a significant link with improved student learning:

- Ensuring an orderly, supportive environment (Robinson et al., 2008) and providing and enforcing clear structures, rules, and procedures for student and staff (Waters et al., 2003) supports a safe learning environment for all students (equity).
- Protecting instructional time from interruptions and protecting teachers from distractions (Waters, et al., 2003) supports quality instruction for all students.
- Principals are visible (Hallinger, 2011b) and provide systemic and fair recognition and celebration of accomplishments for teachers and students (Waters et al., 2003). These actions support relationship building and a committed, caring, and celebratory environment that values the work and efforts of all teachers and students.
- Principals promoting and directly participating in informal and formal teacher professional learning (Robinson et al., 2008) demonstrates to teachers that principals are interested in their work and aware of the challenges, thereby strengthening relationships.

Reflection Questions

1. Describe how students can be empowered to play a role that contributes to a culture of academic optimism. Do students presently have opportunities to be involved in analysis of their student data, goal setting, and meaningful progress monitoring?

2. Describe the current policies and procedures associated with inventorying student interests, goal-setting, tracking progress, and engaging parents in the process. Identify the gaps and two next steps.

Continuous Improvement Cycle

The continuous improvement cycle contains a series of specific steps that build a reiterative process (plan - do - study - act) to improve student outcomes: setting the direction, assessing needs, creating a plan, implementing the plan, monitoring the work, and adjusting the course (see Figure 4).
The leader, in conjunction with the leadership team (structure), guides the school through the improvement cycle (process) with the support of the district (system). Approaching the improvement cycle through a systems thinking perspective provides a way to think about the complexity of school improvement as a whole while still being attentive to the interconnectedness and interrelationships of the parts. Awareness of this dynamic synergy informs decisions and ensures that the underlying core values of equity and quality and student-focused goals are not jeopardized by problem-solutions in one area (e.g., change in schedule) that result in an unintended negative impact on another (e.g., split intervention period). Undertaking change with an equity and quality lens assists the leader in the identification of any shortcomings in foundational elements (talent, instruction, and culture) and capacity (human, social, program coherence, and culture) that are critical to successfully implementing and sustaining improvement efforts. Additionally, operating within a systems thinking mindset promotes consideration and use of multiple perspectives, openmindedness, creative thinking, deeper questioning, and good communication skills (Behl & Ferreria, 2014).

Using a Theory of Action [If we (effective practice to be implemented), then (the impact of the practice on the district, school or constituents of the school), and (impact on student performance expressed as one of the student-focused goals)] as a structure for developing goals and strategies promotes systems thinking by focusing on both the effective practice and the intended impact on changing adult practice to improve student results. Implementation data (did
we do what we said we were going to do and did we get the intended impact?) and results data (student results) are used together to make timely adjustments to ensure success (Layland & Redding, 2016). Consideration of the whole system and its parts, including capacity and foundational elements, are critical in the alignment of actions, realized impact, and intended outcomes. The interaction of capacity and the foundational elements in relation to the six steps in the improvement cycle are described below:

1. **Set the Direction**: The leader utilizes systems thinking to guide staff and stakeholders in setting the direction (vision, mission, values, student-focused goals). Stakeholders are unified by a common purpose and mutual goals. A Theory of Action guides the development of strong, student-focused goals.

2. **Assess Needs**: The leadership team, with district support, assesses the system’s strengths and weaknesses by examining the systems, structures, and processes; key areas of capacity; and foundational elements through a lens of equity and quality as provided through the examples in Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6. Assessing Needs of Capacity and Foundational Elements</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Capacity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Human Capacity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Capacity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Program Coherence</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Resource Capacity</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Foundational Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Talent</th>
<th>Effectiveness of leaders and teachers, professional development needs (whole, group, or individual)</th>
<th>Each leader and teacher receives training and support to meet needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Alignment, interventions, and impact (student learning and teacher effectiveness data)</td>
<td>Each student receives individualized support to succeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Protection of instructional time, routines, and rituals; recognition of adult and student improvement and efforts</td>
<td>All teachers and students are ensured a supportive and orderly learning environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. *Create Plan:* A Theory of Action guides the development of strategies aligned to address shortcomings in capacity, foundational elements, and the structures and processes that assist the organization in meeting the student-focused goals. The leadership team identifies the resources required for successful implementation.

4. *Implement Plan:* Priorities include ensuring a strong foundation exists to support successful implementation and sustainability. Tapping its collective influence, the leadership team mobilizes the organization by ensuring structures and processes are operating effectively and a climate supportive of change exists.

5. *Monitor Work:* The leader stays in touch with all aspects of the process, monitoring progress on milestones and actions and strengthening relationships.

6. *Adjust Course:* Utilizing systems thinking, the leader looks for patterns and inequities created by actions. The leadership team, or grade-level/content-area teams, problem-solve solutions and identify needed resources for course correction.
The district and school collaborate to define roles of responsibility and accountability in the school improvement process. Some districts assume the lead in the process while others provide more autonomy to the individual schools. Clarity of the school and district roles in the school improvement process ensures collective responsibility and alignment of resources and policy to support coherency in the improvement efforts. An overview of school and district roles in capacity building and the school improvement cycle is provided in Table 7.

**Table 7. Capacity Building within the School Improvement Cycle**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>District</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clearly defined school and district roles in the improvement process</td>
<td>Ensures school and district’s vision for equity and quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>(includes a process for monitoring/accountability and building a common language and understanding).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets the direction for the school with stakeholders that embodies the</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>vision for equity and quality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative goal setting (aligning goals, goal measures and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>terminology)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies CNA team members and schedules training.</td>
<td>Provides training and support in data collection and analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examines available data sets, requests district support in</td>
<td>Provides available district level data sets and supports in acquisition of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attaining others and in analysis.</td>
<td>of other data.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5. Overview of the CNA Planning Process Structures (Layland & Corbett, 2017)**

- **Mission** (vision of equity for all)
- **Goals** (student-focused outcomes for all students - tracked through goal performance measures)
- **Priorities** [areas for improvement identified through a Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA) and root cause analysis that address goals]
- **Strategies** (effective practices to address priorities that are driven by a Theory of Action statement - If we ... then ... and ... - and include implementation measures realized in the milestones and underlying actions)
- **Milestone** (indicator of implementation of the strategy and completion of related actions)
Identifies priorities, strategies and develops milestones and actions that address the priorities. Identifies need for support.

Supports plan development and reviews plan for coherency and manageability; provides targeted guidance. Determines district support required to assist school in meeting milestones and addressing priorities. Creates a plan for support. (Allows district to group and target support across schools).

Consistently monitors and reports progress in meeting milestones with leadership team. (Identifies adjustments needed for keeping plan on track and supports).

Supports school in meeting milestones and course adjustments through provision of resources (coaching, positions, materials, refinement of processes). Involved in school-based monitoring of milestone completion (NOT from afar).

Reports progress on goal measures annually to stakeholders, shares key course adjustments and seeks input on a regular basis.

Holds school accountable for quarterly reporting (at minimum) and provides format. (District format should be consistent across schools for identifying patterns and trends that inform targeted and differentiated professional development topics or coaching support).

**In Conclusion**

Leading school improvement is difficult work; however, the load can be lightened by taking the time to build quality systems, structures, and processes on the front end. Thoughtful design eliminates the need for massive amounts of time being spent on the inspection of each implementation component. The visual summary of the components of leadership, foundational elements, capacity building, and school improvement cycle discussed in this report is provided in Figure 6. Underlying the school improvement process are the foundational elements (equity, talent, instruction, and culture) which are intertwined throughout the plan. Development of capacity in the areas of human capacity, social capacity, program coherence, and resource capacity is necessary to carry the organization forward in its mission.
The school improvement cycle uses data to set goals, develop strategies, and prioritize needs; and employs effective strategies, milestones, and actions to move the process toward attaining the goals. Knowledge of the interconnections and interrelationships among the systems, structures, and processes related to capacity building (human, social, program coherence, resource) and foundational elements (talent, instruction, and culture) will inform key decisions. School improvement is not restricted to compliance for leaders who seize the opportunity to explore the possibilities for flexibility, deep dives into root cause, and stakeholder involvement that inspire innovation. Consider piloting different structures, processes, and more at grade levels or in content areas that are the most concerning for which the capacity exists or can be supported. Check in on the different structures and processes at the school level frequently - attend PLCs and planning meetings, review minutes, sit in on an intervention. Inspect what you expect - visibility shows you are invested in the school, teaching, and learning.
References


