

# Focusing Reform Efforts: A Guide for School Leaders

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## How Do I Significantly Improve Student Achievement In My School?

As a school leader preparing to write a school improvement plan, you have a lot of questions: Where do I start? What is important? How do I know what my school is ready for? This road map will help focus your thinking and address these pressing concerns. Most important, it will help you lead your school to significant academic reforms.

Take a look at this research and consider its importance for the heavy decisions facing you.

**Table 1: The Impact of Teacher and School Effectiveness on Student Achievement**

Effectiveness of Student's School and Teacher	Student's Test Score Percentile	
	Upon Entering	After Two Years
Average School, Average Teacher	50th	50th
Highly Ineffective School, Highly Ineffective Teacher	50th	3rd
Highly Effective School, Highly Ineffective Teacher	50th	37th
Highly Ineffective School, Highly Effective Teacher	50th	63rd
Highly Effective School, Highly Effective Teacher	50th	96th

Source: Marzano, R.J. (2003a). *A new era of school reform: Going where the research takes us*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED454255).

These numbers may have surprised you; they may have confirmed your thinking. Perhaps they did both. Regardless, they do suggest the most important thing—and second-most important thing—to focus on to improve student achievement.

### The No. 1 Indicator of Student Achievement: Teacher Effectiveness

This is where you start.

Your teachers have massive responsibilities when it comes to the success of your students. These responsibilities fall into two areas.

One area is relationships. The relationships they build with their students will greatly impact the students' learning.

The second area is pedagogical: curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Building teachers' skills in these areas is a top priority in improving academic achievement.

Investing in the skills and capacities of your teachers will reap the biggest rewards for your school. Teachers are good people, and they care about the students they serve. In most cases, your teachers are the hardest workers in your school.

Unfortunately, so much has been thrown at them that their job feels like a constant on-ramp of merging initiatives they are supposed to blend with their practice and execute with precision. Your teachers may have great systems for managing large volumes of work, but the systems do not necessarily result in academic benefits. Instead, the systems may just enable teachers to do what they've been told to do.

It's time to slow the traffic flow. At the Institute for Excellence in Education, we call this "going slow to go fast." A deliberate development of teachers' curriculum knowledge, of their instructional strategies, and of high-quality assessments drive real change in the classrooms.

To achieve these goals without placing further burdens on your teachers, your school improvement plan should include professional development and instructional coaching. When implemented together and with fidelity, professional development and coaching improve teacher practice.

To identify professional development topics, you'll want to review your school's needs. Also remember that raising teachers' skills and knowledge takes time. Schools see greater results when they commit to a solid professional development plan and create the time to implement it effectively.

Schools providing dedicated professional development time do face challenges—not enough substitutes, student behavior, potential lost instructional time. Having a plan and a commitment to overcoming these challenges is vital. Adult learning takes time, and giving adults the interval they need to learn will allow skills and knowledge to become embedded in their practice and increase sustainability.

Another crucial step to sustainability is instructional coaching. Good, in-school coaching can help teachers apply what they've learned in their professional development sessions and thereby ensure that the goals of those sessions are realized in the classroom.

The process of investing in teachers through professional development and coaching is powerful. It can move weak teachers to strong performance levels and strong teachers to stellar performance levels.

### **Professional Development and Instructional Coaching from IEE**

At the Institute for Excellence in Education, we begin by ensuring that professional development topics are based on the needs identified by the school. Schools are asked to consider their assessment data and—with the assistance of an IEE professional—to make plans for specific training.

The professional development itself is delivered by IEE trainers who understand not only the school's needs and the content of the session they're hosting, but also the Adaptive Schools model of facilitation and presentation—an approach that engages educators in the workshop and encourages them to reflect meaningfully on the material.\* Educators who attend IEE sessions leave feeling rejuvenated and ready to conquer in their classrooms.

They don't have to do the conquering alone. IEE instructional coaches are expert practitioners. They are classroom teachers who understand the challenges teachers face on a daily and hourly basis. They know what it takes to plan, teach, and assess a strong lesson.

Just as important, they have the skills to work with adult learners to really support the teachers' work—not simply sit back and critique it. Through a model of gradual release, they help teachers apply the content from the professional development sessions to the classroom. IEE's instructional coaches use Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup> to mediate the teachers' thinking and provide instructors with a “thought partner” as they apply the new learning and change their practice.\*

\* Adaptive Schools and Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup> are programs of Thinking Collaborative.<sup>TM</sup>

### **The No. 2 Indicator of Student Achievement: School Leadership**

This brings us to the next step.

As Douglas B. Reeves observes in his book *The Learning Leader*, “Research from the Wallace Foundation (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom 2004) suggests that

effective leadership has a profound and direct impact on student achievement.”<sup>1</sup> School leadership defines a school's culture and climate, and it is the second-most important factor in determining student academic success.

With good school leadership, students and teachers can overcome significant obstacles to achieve success. With poor school leadership, even the most privileged schools may fail. Investing in the professional growth of the school leadership is not an option.

In *The Learning Leader*, Reeves writes that “the demands of leadership almost invariably exceed the capacity of a single person to meet the needs at hand.” The school principal has to be everything to everyone—the manager, the visionary, the parent, the coach.

In high-performing schools, these roles are assumed by a leadership *team* that moves between them fluidly and builds systems for self-monitoring. The team approach shares the responsibilities of the building in a process called distributed leadership.

Placing a high value on shared leadership is vital to the success of a school. Otherwise, administrators can be overwhelmed.

Moreover, reform research tells us that top-down leadership doesn't work. People push against it. Any changes that do occur are not sustained after the initiative or threat is over.

School leaders and teacher leaders must build collaboration skills and use their multiple voices to ensure that initiatives are aligned with the school's vision, mission, and values. A good school improvement plan will focus on building the leadership capacity not just of the school principal, but of the teacher leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas B. Reeves, *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results*, (Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development: 2006), 100. The research Reeves refers to was carried out by the University of Minnesota and the University of Toronto and is available on the Web; see Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom, “How leadership influences student learning,” <http://goo.gl/eFO7Az>.

## Leadership Coaching from IEE

This work requires a parallel approach. The Adaptive Schools model holds that both *things* and *energy* matter. In building leadership capacity, IEE attends to the “things” by ensuring that processes and systems are in place to provide time and structure in which leadership can occur. The importance of “energy” translates into an intense focus on the “how.” Here, IEE trains leadership teams in the norms of collaboration, facilitation skills, and the four hats of shared leadership—the facilitator, the presenter, the coach, and the consultant. School leaders learn how to build and articulate their vision.

An IEE leadership coach is a skilled professional who has led successful schools. A solid understanding of change processes, of the Adaptive Schools model, and of Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup> provides the IEE coach with the know-how to help the school leadership team realize its vision for success. In pursuit of better student achievement, an IEE leadership coach puts a primary emphasis on securing strong relationships to facilitate change and a secondary emphasis on knowing models of leadership, instructional leadership, teacher evaluation, and school reform.

## The Other Things You Care About

At this point, you may be prepared to dedicate major portions of your school improvement plan to developing teacher and school leader effectiveness. These commitments don't mean, however, that your plan can't address other key areas of concern at your school.

Take technology. Most school leaders know their students need to be conversant with information technology. The 21st century demands thinkers and innovators who know how to access information quickly, analyze it, and create new and important insights. The integration of technology into the classroom is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity.

Schools must be purposeful as they integrate technology into the classroom. The implementation can quickly get skewed when technology is purchased without attention to why it was acquired and how it will be integrated. The focus becomes hardware and access, rather than teaching and learning.

Technology isn't the only area schools can address while investing in teacher and school leader effectiveness. Successful schools have also addressed the following areas:

- College-going culture
- Extended day
- Extended year
- Freshman academy
- Reading and math intervention programs
- ACT prep classes
- Data team development
- Project management

### Technology and IEE

IEE coaches work with educators to identify lesson objectives, review available software and hardware, and support the selection of tools that enhance learning experiences and extend learning opportunities. In this model, the technology becomes a tool for delivering content, practice, or assessment. The IEE coach supports the teacher and the students through the processes of selecting the tools and using them in the classroom.

## How Prepared Is Your School for Change?

Understanding your school's capacity for change is an important part of the school improvement process. It takes more than low test scores to make a school community ready for reform. Truly understanding your school's readiness to tackle the big issues tells you where to start and what the really tough spots will be as you move through the exhausting and invigorating process of improving student achievement.

The Adaptive Schools model identifies twelve capacities for change.<sup>2</sup> Six of the capacities are organizational, and six of them are professional. They are discussed at length below.

Schools are dynamical systems, and as such, their twelve capacities for change influence one another. Improving one capacity will ripple through to the other capacities. Understanding how these capacities will impact your school's success is

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<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Garmston and Bruce M. Wellman, *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups, 2nd Edition, Revised Printing* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 2013), 151-161.

vital to the creation of a school culture that is nimble enough to meet high-pressure demands and focused enough to maintain the vision set forth by your school.

### **IEE's Approach to the Twelve Capacities**

As an IEE coaching team enters a school, the members focus on building relationships with the school community, including students, teachers, and families. At the same time, they conduct an informal review of the twelve capacities for change in the school.

During this review, the team is looking for strengths—places where the school can find a “quick win.” Building on the school's strengths and achieving victories promotes educator and student efficacy and effectiveness.

At the same time, IEE team members will identify weaknesses. They will then work collaboratively with the school's leadership team to challenge the status quo in these areas.

## **The Twelve Capacities for School Change**

These capacities, articulated by the Adaptive Schools model, are listed below.

### **Organizational Capacities**

- Vision, values, and goal focus
- Systems thinking
- Initiating and managing adaptation
- Interpreting and using data
- Developing and maintaining collaborative cultures
- Gathering and focusing resources

### **Professional Capacities**

- Collegial interaction
- Cognitive processes of instruction
- Knowledge of the structure of the discipline
- Self-knowledge, values, beliefs, and standards
- A repertoire of teaching skills
- Knowledge of students and how they learn

We will discuss each in turn.

## Vision, Values, and Goal Focus

Every organization has a vision and mission statement nicely framed and placed on the wall. Highly effective schools, however, have crafted those statements with painstaking care.

Team members at these schools can clearly articulate the vision and what it means in practice. Every decision made in the organization, whether by teams or individuals, reflects the shared beliefs expressed in the vision. The school's values are clear in the practice and actions of the school community members, and these values are articulated as expectations to be met.

Think about the vision of your school and how your vision, values, and goals play out in everyday decisions.

## Systems Thinking

The view from 36,000 feet can tell you a lot about a school, but systems thinkers do not look only at the view from a distance. Rather, they also zoom in on smaller fractions of the whole and form a solid understanding of how the small parts make up, impact, and influence the whole organization.

High-performing schools recognize that both things and energy influence a system from the smallest granular level to the biggest view of the organization. They use their understanding of these interrelationships to leverage change, manage conflict, and grow results.

Reflect on the 36,000 foot view and the firsthand view of your school. To what level does your school create systems to bring about change?

## Initiating and Managing Adaptation

The change process is a complicated series of events leading to a new reality. Change is not linear; neither is it experienced and mastered by every stakeholder at the same time.

Highly effective schools have a thorough understanding of the milestones of change. They monitor the rate of change, accelerating and decelerating at the right times based on team members' current acceptance of the changes. Team members understand the change process, their own style of adapting to change, and their role in the change happening around them.

Identify what you react strongly to in the change process. How has change impacted your school community in the past?

## Interpreting and Using Data

Data collection and analysis can be daunting. Throw in people's emotional response, and data can be explosive.

But high-performing schools understand the importance of systematically collecting and analyzing data to inform teaching practice. Their teachers will not fear that the data will be used to “catch” someone not doing their job. Rather, school team members will view the data as information that can improve their educational practice, both as individuals and as a team.

As you think about data use in your school, do so from two vantage points. First, to what extent has your building established protocols for collecting and analyzing data? Second, what environments have been cultivated to promote a collaborative use of the findings?

## Developing and Maintaining Collaborative Cultures

Over and over again in the research literature, the old adage that two heads are better than one proves true. As schools move toward a model of distributed leadership, they must focus on building trust and collaboration skills. Otherwise, distributed leadership becomes a power struggle.

Highly collaborative schools have parallel goals. They spend significant time not only on the work of running a school, but also on building their skills as group members, leaders, and decision-makers. They understand their role and how their behavior influences other group members.

Ponder your school's level of collaborative practices. Do your team members function collaboratively, or do they just go through the motions?

## Gathering and Focusing Resources

Getting everyone to row in the same direction is a challenge in most schools. It seems everyone has the next “best fix” for the problem of the day. Time, money, and energy dwindle quickly when spread thin.

High-performing schools articulate a commitment to their vision, mission, and goals through a laser focus on resource expenditures. Stakeholders keep the end in mind and stretch every minute and every penny to ensure they can follow their road map to the very end.

Reflect on the initiatives in your school. How have they burdened your resources? How have they supported your endgame?

## Collegial Interaction

Teaching has traditionally been an isolated profession. Creating opportunities for educators to learn from one another in a trusting environment is pivotal to changing the culture of a school. Conversations focused on teaching practice are professional and honest, with the ultimate goal of improving student learning. These conversations require high levels of trust. Team members must know that showing their vulnerability will lead to improved results, not personal attacks.

High-performing schools have a culture of openness and honesty. Teachers feel the safety and security required for taking cognitive risks. They bring problems to one another and school leadership in order to find the best solution. Educators crave opportunities to seek advice.

As you think about your school, how willing are the educators to discuss their practice publicly?

## Cognitive Processes of Instruction

Teachers make thousands of decisions daily—everything from what to teach first to how to group students. These judgments place high demands on the teachers' thought processes.

High-performing teachers use planning and reflecting strategies to chart their course and contemplate lesson design and implementation. High-performing teachers spend significant time planning their lessons, so that each time they teach a lesson, they improve it as a result of their observations and reflections on their previous process and its outcomes.

Consider your teachers' level of engagement when it comes to lesson planning. Do they have laminated lesson plans impervious to change? Do they have a shared language for planning? Do they reflect regularly and revise their plans to better meet the needs of students?

## Knowledge of the Structure of the Discipline

Teachers must carry high levels of content expertise to improve student learning. They must understand the content and the discipline's organizational principles and concepts. They must think like a practitioner of that discipline.

Only then will they be able to help students find different ways of learning and making connections, so the students ultimately master the content. Teachers in high-performing schools maintain links with their specific field of study outside of the school environment. Teachers of writing write, and they participate in professional writing communities.

Teachers of science engage in research and the work and study of scientific principles on a regular basis.

If you had to quantify your staff's engagement in their professional content area, how high would you say it is?

### Self-Knowledge, Values, Beliefs, and Standards

The ultimate curriculum in the classroom is a teacher's personal belief about what should be taught and how to teach it. This belief is expressed in the relationships, instructional practice, and culture in the classroom; it is also expressed in relationships with other colleagues. High-performing schools and teachers are constantly evaluating their processes and adjusting their personal understanding to align it with the school's vision, values, and goals.

When you think about the professional staff, in what ways do they demonstrate their values and beliefs? How do those actions align with the school's vision, mission, and values?

### Repertoire of Teaching Skills

The magician has a bag of tricks. The plumber has a bag of tools. The doctor has his medicine bag.

Every profession has its own resources. For teachers, these are teaching strategies, a deep knowledge of the brain and of learning, and an understanding of the different ways children grasp and retain content.

Students are unique individuals who learn at different paces. Highly effective teachers know which strategies to utilize at exactly the right time. They understand when to push for rigor and when to scaffold a lesson with just enough support so that students do not give up and feel helpless.

Take an inventory of your staff. Do you find teachers who are following traditional lesson plans with all students doing the same work at the same time? Or do you see multiple modes of knowing and learning occurring at the same time in the same classroom, with kids working in groups, pairs, or alone, depending on the thinking required?

### Knowledge of Students and How They Learn

Students learn and grow at different rates. Each milestone brings new challenges and new developmental needs. Mindful educators have a deep understanding of the unique needs of their students on a developmental and individual level. In addition, they understand brain development and how it impacts learning for students in a particular age range.

This knowledge is manifested in the school's climate and culture as teachers pay attention to the social and emotional needs of students. It appears in the classroom when teachers ensure that the academic challenges are "just right" for students.

When you think about your classrooms, do your teachers have their students' personal developmental needs clearly in mind?

## A Final Cornerstone

IEE's practical experience tells us there is another important factor that schools should emphasize as they create a plan to improve student achievement. That crucial element is collaboration.

Schools must should plan for collaboration. Creating *professional learning communities* or *common planning time* on a regular basis provides educators with the opportunities to examine their practice, process new learning, and reflect on their experiences. As John Dewey has written: "We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflection on experience."

Without time to ponder, any new initiatives brought to the table will feel like—and be treated like—more congestion on the on-ramp of merging initiatives. Focused improvement efforts, in contrast, will bring a sea of changes to the school building. Providing regular collaboration time will solidify the processes and systems of adult learning and ensure that teachers feel empowered and invigorated.

Schools serious about reform will consider systematic collaboration to be a "non-negotiable" part of their school improvement plan—as fundamental as a commitment to professional development for teachers and shared leadership for school leaders.

## The Feeling of Real Success

In this paper, we set out to provide a road map for your school improvement plan. The route we traced includes several principal paths: teacher effectiveness, school leadership, your school's particular needs, your school's capacity for change, and professional collaboration.

These are not shortcuts. They are the broad, open highways traveled by all successful schools. In that sense, they are in plain view, visible for all to see. The challenge is plotting your course on them and then pushing hard as a team to come up to speed.

In fact, as your school undertakes significant reform and improvement efforts, you will notice an acceleration — in your attitudes, in your energy, in your teachers' interactions, and in your relationships with students. Before you know it, you will feel as if you are driving a Porsche on the Autobahn.

We can tell you from experience that it's exhilarating. Just as there is nothing like the feeling of driving 160 miles per hour in a car built for speed and precision, there is nothing like the feeling of seeing your students excel in a school designed for improvement and collaboration.

There is one important difference between the two, however. When your students succeed as never before, it won't feel like thrill-seeking. Instead, it will feel like the most rewarding work you've ever done.

Let's get started.

