School improvement and beyond:
What it takes to transform your system

Strategies for continuous improvement

Using data more effectively

The importance of leadership (and sharing it)

Message from the CEO

"Precision, not prescription"

As long as there have been schools, there has been education reform. Over the years, countless school improvement ideas, approaches, and strategies have been tried, with every degree of success and failure imaginable. That a universal solution hasn't yet been discovered is indicative of the complexity and diversity of the challenges faced in individual classrooms, schools, and districts.

What this long history has taught us is that true, lasting improvement is never made by "prescription"—but rather, as school improvement expert Wayne Craig, our new colleague in Australia says, by "precision." When schools are precise about why achievement is low, what needs to change, and how to do it, entire systems of education can change.

In this issue of *Changing Schools*, we look at the "what" and "how" of school improvement: those critical areas and strategies that, when approached systemically and systematically, help schools reach their goals.

- **Data-driven decision making:** All improvement efforts start with data, but how do we get *better* use out of data? Bryan Goodwin writes about steps for maximizing data use.

- **Leadership.** Research continues to make links between leadership and achievement. Roger Goddard and Emily Steele write about the effect of leadership on collaboration and collective efficacy.

- **Manageable change.** Heather Hein explains how educators can home in on small, manageable changes in order to get quick results and motivate larger-scale changes.

- **Shared leadership.** School leaders cannot turn around achievement single-handedly. Roger Fiedler describes shared leadership protocols that set the stage for improvement.

- **Continuous improvement.** Heather Hein looks at one struggling district in New York that is changing its culture to focus—and stay focused—on the needs of its students.

- **Focusing on students**. Bryan Goodwin wraps it up with a reminder that students, not just teachers or leaders, play an important role in your improvement efforts.

Improving schools is a daunting task, but the good news is that most schools are already doing some of these things well. So, whether you've adopted a turnaround or transformation model or you simply want to get better results, building on your strengths while attending to all the parts—and understanding how they affect each other—will get you where you want to be. ⬡

To learn more about how McREL's approach to raising student achievement and engaging schools in continuous, sustainable improvement, visit www. mcrel.org.

CONTENTS

Stay connected f 🐦 ▶ 📌 in

www.mcrel.org

Using data to create continuous improvement opportunities

By Bryan Goodwin

Using data to measure student performance is nothing new: Whether it's through formative or standardized assessments, a schoolwide analysis of math or language arts achievement, or a review of high school graduation rates across the district, it's something that educators do every day.

What is new, however, is the quality and amount of data. In recent years, largely due to federal education funding requirements, states have put into place longitudinal data systems that link data across grades and schools and track individual student growth over time. These systems provide critical information about student achievement and school progress.

But having this information is meaningless unless schools and districts know what to do with it. For grade-, school-, and state-level education data teams, the challenge remains: How do we best use the data collected to drive conversations, make decisions, and take action?

Creating a culture of data use

While data systems have grown more robust, a recent report by the Data Quality Campaign (2012) suggests the focus now needs to shift to helping schools and districts develop a culture of effective data use, one that relies upon data to guide critical decision making within an environment of trust, where data is used not to shame or blame, but rather to identify opportunities for growth and continuous improvement.

Creating a culture of data use isn't a job for one or two people but, rather, a team that meets regularly to review and analyze data, and help colleagues understand implications for taking action. Perhaps most important, school and district teams should use their data systems not as rear-view windows, evaluating the impact of their efforts well after the fact, but rather, as dashboard indicators, which in turn, allow them to engage in short-cycle research projects, collecting data to test assumptions, and make course corrections along the way.

A framework to help data teams get started

Here are five simple steps, drawn from a recent report on structuring data-informed conversations and action (Kekahio & Baker, 2013) and augmented with some of our own examples and recommendations, for how educators can use data to create continuous improvement opportunities within their school improvement initiatives.

For Kekahio & Baker's full guide on structuring data-informed conversations and action, visit:

http://www.ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/pdf/REL_2013001.pdf

Setting the Stage. First, data teams should translate an improvement initiative into a research question—for example, will our new approach to reading instruction improve student comprehension? The research question should be framed as clearly and simply as possible and aligned to long-term goals. It may start off quite broad but should be narrowed in order to make identifying and interpreting data easier.

Next, identify relevant sources of data (e.g., standardized test scores for a particular topic for a particular group). You can review sources that have already been analyzed and reported as well as raw data. This process may lead to one source that provides exactly what they need, to multiple key sources or, in some cases, to the conclusion that data are insufficient to answer the question—an important finding in itself.

Examining the Data. Carefully review your data for patterns. Look for *strengths* (results in the data that indicate success) and *challenges* (results that indicate something is hindering improvement or higher achievement). For example, you may find increases in certain abilities (e.g., basic reading skills), while other indicators (e.g., comprehension and independent reading) remain flat.

A word of caution: Be sure to identify any limitations your data sets may have. For example, some data are not designed for comparison across grades and years; other data may not be too different (e.g., SAT-10 scores and grade point averages) to be combined or analyzed together.

Understanding the Findings. Once you have identified patterns, strengths, and challenges, your job is to figure out the root causes of the challenges, which will be the focus of the action plan. One popular approach to root-cause analysis is the so-called 5 Whys technique, which consists of simply asking why five times to get to the root of a problem. Another word of caution is in order here: Because data teams often uncover more challenges than they have the time or resources to address, they should focus on challenges that are actionable and have a high priority in the school or district.

It's important that, as they brainstorm the factors underlying key challenges, they remain as objective as possible and revisit data limitations. When they have identified potential factors, they should check that the data supports those factors. If not, the team should consider other factors, repeating the process as many times as needed to arrive at a strong set of potential driving factors.

Developing an Action Plan. Now, it's time to develop a set of goals, strategies, and actions for tackling the challenges. At this point, your team should identify and bring into the process key stakeholders (e.g., principals, curriculum and instruction specialists, assessment staff, teachers, parents), whose support is essential for success.

Action plans typically includes short- and long-term goals, which can be defined more clearly by following the structure of SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely) goals. Next, the team and stakeholders brainstorm strategies and actions to

help reach their goals, taking into account the time and resources available, the relevance to the driving factors, and the availability of the necessary data.

Monitoring Progress and Measuring Success. Once the action plan is underway, the data team must monitor progress to keep the plan on track and measure success to ensure that it's working. Plans can get off track by lack of follow-through, turnover of key staff, or unforeseen challenges. Team members should check in often with each other to identify these challenges and adjust as needed.

To assess the effectiveness of the plan, the team should collect the same type of data from the same data source used to identify the challenge. This provides opportunities for the team and their colleagues to observe the results of their efforts—a strong motivator for continuing their efforts or to making the changes necessary to reach their goals.
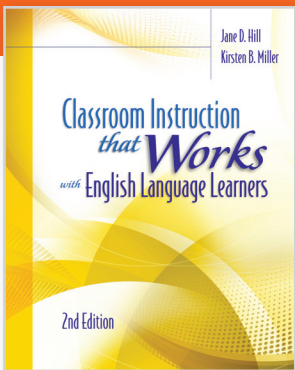
Parting thoughts

People in schools or districts often lament that "nothing ever changes around here" or, worse, they may harbor silent skepticism about their own ability or the ability of their colleagues to make a difference. A deliberate, *deliberative* approach to data use can help to document good things when they happen and erase those nagging doubts. When it comes to improving school performance, everything begins—and ends—with data. ⬢

Bryan Goodwin is McREL's chief operating officer and author of *Simply Better: Doing What Matters Most to Change the Odds for Student Success* and *The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching*. Contact him at **303.632.5602** or **bgoodwin@mcrel.org**.

References

Data Quality Campaign. (2012). *Focus on people to change data culture.* Retrieved from http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/DFA2012%20Annual%20Report.pdf

Kekahio, W., & Baker, M. (2013). *Five steps for structuring data-informed conversations and action in education* (REL 2013-001). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. Retrieved from http://www.ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/pdf/REL_2013001.pdf

Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners (2nd ed.)

Jane D. Hill
Kirsten B. Miller

Classroom Instruction that Works with English Language Learners

2nd Edition

Available now from ASCD

www.shop.ascd.org

Now, you can use the reenergized framework from the second edition of the best-selling guide *Classroom Instruction That Works* to improve the instruction of English language learners (ELLs), too.

- Make planning easier by learning when to use McREL's research-based instructional strategies with ELLs in every grade level.
- Get tips with each strategy on how to work with students more effectively, no matter what their stage of language proficiency.
- Ensure your instruction aligns to the higher-order thinking skills called for in the Common Core and the Next Generation Science Standards.
- Get help with selecting key vocabulary and grammar that will make lessons more engaging and productive.
- Learn how to develop students' oral academic language during subject-matter instruction.

Common Core Workshops

Come to McREL's Denver office in February to learn how to fine-tune your lesson plans, strategies, and assessments for teaching the Common Core State Standards. McREL's two-day workshops for teachers and professional development staff will give you the tools, templates, and information you need to help your students meet the demands of the new standards.

For those interested in becoming certified to deliver these workshops to educators within your district or service area, an extra day of facilitator training is available.*

Workshop on Common Core Math: Moving from Understanding to Implementation

Denver, CO
February 11–12, 2014

Attend this interactive workshop to get the essential tools, templates, and information you'll need to bring the Common Core State Standards for math (CCSSM) to life in your classroom. Learn about the CCSSM instructional shifts, how to design effective lessons, and how to ensure that classroom assessments align with the rigor required in the CCSSM.

Participants will receive:

- Templates and processes for effective lesson design
- Criteria for aligning performance tasks to the rigor of CCSSM
- Strategies to connect concepts across grade levels
- Ways to introduce and engage students in learning new content, connect new content to prior knowledge, and help students reflect on and assess their own learning

*The Facilitator Training for this workshop is February 13, 2014.

Workshop on Common Core ELA: Text Complexity and Close Reading

Denver, CO
February 11–12, 2014

Participants in this workshop will increase their understanding of the central role of text complexity and how close reading of complex texts can foster student gains in reading proficiency. You will explore ways to measure text complexity and practice strategies for close reading of complex texts for teaching reading in the content areas.

Participants will receive:

- McREL's templates for measuring text complexity
- A format for measuring text complexity with teaching teams
- Strategies for close reading across grade levels
- Step-by-step guidelines for strategic teaching of close reading

*The Facilitator Training for this workshop is February 13, 2014.

Developing a culture of collaboration that promotes collective efficacy and learning: The primacy of leadership

By Roger D. Goddard & Emily Steele

Research consistently indicates that collective efficacy beliefs explain differences among schools in student outcomes above and beyond the influence of even prior achievement and socioeconomic status (e.g., Bandura, 1993; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000; Goddard, 2001; Goddard & Salloum, 2011). Research also shows that the more teachers collaborate to improve instruction, the more likely students are to learn (e.g., Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007).

What has received much less attention, however, is how the organization and leadership of schools foster the high levels of teacher collaboration and collective efficacy required for top performance. Recent research supports the important role of principal leadership in teacher collaboration, collective efficacy, and student achievement.

Goddard and colleagues (2011) found a strong, direct effect of principals' instructional leadership on the frequency of teachers' collaboration for instructional improvement and that, in turn, leadership and collaboration predicted collective efficacy beliefs and student achievement. Thus, where teachers reported their principals were strong instructional leaders (e.g., knowledgeable about curriculum, instruction and assessment; frequently monitoring instruction), teachers reported more frequent rates of working together to improve instruction. Yet the opposite was also true: Where teachers' reported weak instructional leadership from their principals, they also reported that they didn't work together very often to improve instruction. Thus, while teachers' experience collaborating to improve instruction mattered to collective efficacy and student outcomes, the collaboration itself depended largely on the strength of principals' instructional leadership (Goddard, Goddard, Kim, & Miller, 2011).

When school leaders put in place structures and processes that allow for formal, frequent, and productive teacher collaborative interactions, they indirectly influence the collective efficacy of their schools. Moreover, when teacher collaboration is centered on instructional improvement, it is more likely to build real capability and therefore enhance the sense among teachers that they possess the ability necessary to achieve student learning goals. Teacher collaboration around "live issues" within the school, which are informed by real data, is potentially the most potent form of efficacy belief-shaping information.

> **Teacher collaboration around "live issues" within the school, which are informed by real data, is potentially the most potent form of efficacy belief-shaping information.**

Collective efficacy in action: Volney Rogers Middle School

Volney Rogers Middle School in Youngstown, Ohio, is an inner-city public school with approximately 400 students, 92 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged. In the 2009–2010 school year, the school's state ranking was Academic Watch, meaning the school met only 30–50 percent of its indicators, and it did not reach Adequate Yearly Progress. These ratings left the administration, teachers, and parents feeling more concerned than proud about their teaching and learning environment.

In response to these concerns, Principal Diane Hunsbarger partnered with McREL Principal Consultant Mel Sussman to assess the instructional culture of Volney Rogers by conducting several classroom walkthroughs to collect data. The data gathered confirmed Principal Hunsbarger's informal assessment that there was wide instructional variation among teachers in the school.

Sussman then introduced several "non-negotiable" strategies for instruction, including Setting Objectives, Reinforcing Effort, Providing Recognition, and Providing Feedback to the staff during an afterschool session. The staff began to meet regularly to discuss an

action plan for implementing these four essential strategies.

Reflecting a focus on high-quality instruction, the principal worked with the leadership team and McREL to create daily plans for each classroom based on the strategies in the form of posters. These posters were officially titled the "Volney Rogers Middle School Unified Setting Objective(s) Format"; the objective posters, as they came to be known, were mounted in an appropriate place in each classroom so they could be seen easily. Each poster—which teachers used as a template—included the unit objective, the associated benchmark/standard, the lesson objective, the grade-level indicator, activities, vocabulary, and the assessment.

While the posters were just one example of the instructional changes made at Volney Rogers, they show how something so seemingly simple can communicate powerful messages about expectations and help teachers focus daily on their desired outcomes. It was common, after these changes, to see teachers start each class by explaining the contents on the board and ending class by reviewing the board and asking students, "Did we accomplish this today?"

The collective focus of students and teachers was supported and monitored by Principal Hunsbarger. She continued walkthroughs to ensure that the four essential strategies were effectively implemented. Teachers began to view the classroom visits as a way to cultivate their teaching formatively, rather than evaluate it summatively. Staff meetings changed as all the teachers began using the same instructional framework, and used meetings to support and give feedback to each other on how to use the strategies in their lessons.

At the end of the 2010–2011 school year, Volney Rogers had moved from the rank of Academic Watch (2009–2010) to Continuous Improvement as its students scored higher or equal to the district's average. Their assessment results showed a 7.7 percent increase in 7th grade mathematics scores, a 12.9 percent increase in 8th grade reading, and a 4 percent increase in 8th grade science scores.

But like any school initiative, sustainable change takes the continuous focus of the principal and teachers alike. While the success of their initial efforts kept everyone motivated, the staff realized that this was just the beginning. They planned to continue their momentum by using their collective time to learn about other research-based instructional strategies. The school was committed to reaching the highest state ranking and becoming a school in which teachers, administrators, and parents could take pride (Tuzzeo, 2011).

Summing up: Leadership for instructional improvement

Setting a direction for change, creating collaborative space for teachers to discuss their work, and establishing a culture of formative instructional improvement were all critical steps taken by the principal at Volney Rogers. Although more systematic research would be necessary to support strong causal claims, it is clear that the leadership and collaboration that occurred at the school are consistent with the research in terms of principals and teachers working together to build collective efficacy and improve student learning.

Interactions around professional development sessions, staff meetings, classroom walkthroughs, and leadership team meetings can help sustain a central focus on the improvement of teaching practice and student learning. For example, when individual teachers share their success stories with others at staff meetings, this collaboration reinforces a vested interest in the success of everyone.

End-of-year test scores revealing that the school had moved from Academic Watch to Continuous Improvement bolstered the school's new initiatives and suggested the staff was capable of creating positive change in their school. While much important work remains, Volney Rogers exemplified the potential gains in learning that can grow from strong school leadership and productive teacher collaboration focused on instructional improvement. ●

Dr. Roger D. Goddard, a leader in research on the effects of collective efficacy in schools, is a senior fellow at McREL. He can be reached at **rgoddard@mcrel.org**.
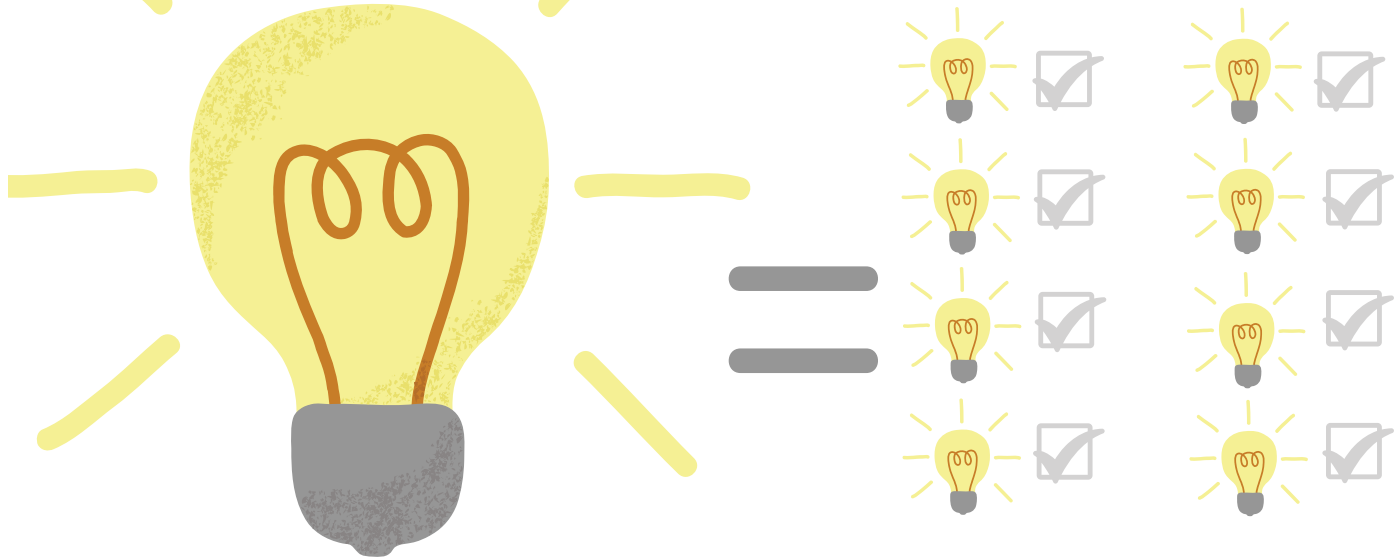
Dr. Emily Steele, a lead consultant at McREL, provides professional development and supports schools through McREL's Success in Sight® approach to comprehensive school improvement. You can reach her at **esteele@mcrel.org** or **303.632.5042**.

References

Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist, 28*(2), 117–148.

Goddard, R. D. (2001). Collective efficacy: A neglected construct in the study of schools and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 93*(3), 467–476.

Goddard, R. D., Goddard, Y. L., Kim, E. S., & Miller, R. J. (2011). A social cognitive perspective on collective efficacy and goal attainment in schools: The roles of principals' instructional leadership and teacher collaboration. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Education Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Goddard, Y., Goddard, M., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2007). A theoretical and empirical investigation of teacher collaboration for school improvement and student achievement in public elementary schools. *Teachers College Record Volume 109* (4). Retrieved from http://www.tcrecord.org (ID Number: 12871)

Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2000). Collective teacher efficacy: Its meaning, measure, and effect on student achievement. *American Education Research Journal, 37*(2), 479–507.

Goddard, R. D., & Salloum, S. J. (2011). Collective Efficacy Beliefs, Organizational Excellence, and Leadership. In K.S. Cameron Oxford and G.M. Spreitzer (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook for positive organizational scholarship*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tuzzeo, J. Instructional strategies link classrooms in Youngstown. *Changing Schools* (Fall 2011), 64, 6–7. Denver, CO: McREL.

Think big, act small: How to make change manageable

By Heather Hein

Leading change is no small task for anyone, but it's perhaps most challenging for principals of failing schools. Where do you start? What if your teachers don't want to change? What if they don't believe the students can succeed? What if you try to improve, but it doesn't work?

It may sound counterintuitive, but the best way to make large-scale, long-lasting change that improves outcomes for students is by starting *small*. Small, manageable change initiatives provide quick, positive results that motivate teachers and students to continue on to larger, broader changes.

Starting with small initiatives takes a change of mindset for many principals. Especially when schools are required to report their progress to the state, principals often think they have to work on everything at once and worry that focusing on one thing will come at the expense of the other, equally important things.

However, Catherine Johnson, a lead consultant at McREL who specializes in school improvement, says, "Teachers and principals become overwhelmed by taking on too much at once and, without focus, positive results are unlikely." Rather, the key is to be systematic and systemic in your approach to change. In other words, focus on smaller-scale change in the context of overall continuous improvement.

Getting to the root cause

The first step for a struggling school is to analyze its school achievement data in order to determine exactly *where* students are facing challenges—but that's only half of it. The other half is to determine *why* it's happening. Many schools identify a problem and

go straight to a solution, explains Johnson, without analyzing the root cause of the problem. Simply put, "If the actions and strategies used to address the problem don't target the true root cause, a school may not meet its goal."

Once you know what your weak areas are and why they're weak, the next step is to prioritize. Any initiative you undertake should be tied to your school's improvement plan, and your first change initiative should also be quite specific and continue for approximately 6–8 weeks.

The duration is short, says Johnson, for two important reasons: in order for schools to become familiar with the improvement process (see next page) and to get results fast. When an initiative is short, the staff can repeat the process a couple of times until it becomes "engrained." She also recommends that schools carefully consider their yearly calendar when scheduling to avoid feeling rushed. Later, in their second year of work, school teams may lengthen or expand initiatives to maximize improvement.

A language arts-related initiative is a very common place for schools to start, says Johnson, because reading and writing play a part in almost any challenge area a school may have—including math. "When a school has alarming math scores, often it can be traced to students not reading or understanding word problems or constructive response problems," says Johnson.

The Success in Sight® process

Each manageable change initiative follows a sequential, five-step process that builds the capacity of staff to make and sustain change.

1

TAKE STOCK
First, a school uses its data to assess its strengths and weaknesses, prioritize areas of needs, and establish goals for improvement.

2

FOCUS ON THE RIGHT SOLUTION
The school leadership team investigates and selects strategies to address the identified problems and plan for how implementing changes will impact the staff.

3

TAKE COLLECTIVE ACTION
This is the implementation phase, during which the leadership team manages the implementation of the change initiative by all staff members.

4

MONITOR AND ADJUST
The staff collects and analyzes data to monitor how well the initiative is working and makes adjustments if necessary.

5

MAINTAIN MOMENTUM
This is the time for reflecting on the process, documenting what worked and what didn't, celebrating progress made, and planning for sustainability of efforts.

Examples of typical language arts-related initiatives are supporting claims with evidence, summarizing, vocabulary instruction, and using conventions. The goal with any of these is for students to achieve growth in that area (measured by pre- and post-assessments), which then translates to better achievement on a larger scale.

Developing a culture of improvement

The success of your school's improvement efforts, big or small, hinges on your staff and their attitude toward and willingness to make changes. To get everyone focused on student achievement, principals need to learn how to share leadership with their staff and, with the help of teacher leaders, develop a culture of improvement that involves everyone.

"With the amount of responsibility a principal has, there's no way for one person—or even two or three people—to take on school improvement," says Johnson. "Principals need to learn to let go and to rely on teachers and teacher leaders."

The school leadership team is critical in leading not only the data-driven decision making process and the development and implementation of the school improvement plan, but also the establishment of a purposeful community.

Part of a purposeful community is having staff which share the belief that, by working together, they can make a difference in their students' outcomes. One of the first steps is putting into place processes and structures that help staff communicate and work effectively with each other.

"These processes reflect how you 'do business' in your school. They set the tone for making changes and help create a positive school culture and climate," says Johnson. Such processes include operating principles, norms, procedures, and expectations; in other words, the personal and social behaviors necessary for the school to reach its goals.

All staff members give their input and agree on these processes. Examples of common agreements are respecting the opinions of everyone, listening actively, reminding each other of the school's vision and expectations for the group, and celebrating accomplishments.

Growth is the goal

Manageable change initiatives don't always succeed in terms of meeting achievement goals. Perhaps the initiative didn't address the true root cause of a problem, or implementation was inconsistent. Even in those cases, though, Johnson says, there is almost always some growth to celebrate.

At the end of each change initiative that Johnson leads is a "maintaining momentum" phase during which the principal and leadership team reflect on the initiative: what went well, what didn't, why they did or didn't meet their goal. At this point, the school decides on its next initiative, which may be something different or may be a "re-do" of the initiative they just completed, with adjustments made. If they do choose to go on to something else, Johnson says, it's important that they find ways to sustain the accomplishments from the previous initiative.

It's important for schools to remind themselves that school improvement never stops. The processes, structures, purposeful community, and shared leadership they establish are meant to stay in place—through every kind of change initiative and with the inevitable changes in staff and students—now and for years to come. ◆

Heather Hein writes, edits, and supports the publication of a variety of McREL's materials. Contact her at 303.632.5520 or hhein@mcrel.org.

School improvement must-haves:

How to establish shared leadership and protocols

By Roger Fiedler

As a school improvement leader and coach, McREL Principal Consultant Dana Frazee has worked with schools and systems across the U.S., Canada, and the Pacific in a variety of settings, from urban to rural, large to small, and a variety of socio-economic and demographic communities.

In nearly every case, she's found, schools that are in crisis often struggle with establishing structures for shared leadership, decision-making, and communication, elements that are crucial to the success of a major improvement effort.

Frazee's first-hand experience is backed up by McREL's research and analysis of effective school and district leadership, which found that when major, second-order-level changes in school processes, procedures, and focus are instituted, teachers and support staff often feel serious disconnects with school culture, communication, and order (Waters & Cameron, 2007). They may feel there is less cohesion and more fragmentation in the school and less clarity regarding the school's vision. They may also feel like the principal is less accessible and less willing to listen to their concerns. They may feel like they have less influence on the day-to-day functions and direction for the school. And they may feel like patterns of behavior, communication, and decision making are no longer predictable (Waters & Cameron, 2007, p. 13).

To implement school improvement plans successfully, principals must help their staff members through the disruptions to culture, climate, and order. But they cannot do this alone, says Frazee. "Before launching any major improvement or turnaround activities in a school, a principal must establish structures and processes for shared leadership, which has to include protocols for meetings, decision making, and communication."

The School Reform Initiative, a nonprofit organization that provides guidance and resources for shared leadership, says that creating protocols "permits a certain kind of conversation to occur, often a kind of conversation that people are not in the habit of having. Protocols are vehicles for building the skills—and culture—necessary for collaborative work. Thus, using protocols often allows groups to build trust by actually doing substantive work together" (School Reform Initiative, n.d.).

Through years of working with schools, Frazee has developed a multi-step process she uses when helping schools build the necessary protocols and shared leadership teams.

Build a representative leadership team, and define the team's key areas of responsibilities and expected behaviors
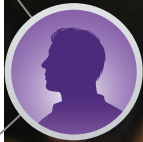
Creating a team of staff members to share leadership and take on mutual influence, responsibility, and accountability is essential. Be sure the team has membership from different stakeholder groups such as grade-level or subject-area teaching teams, and support staff functions. Also make sure your team has a mix of new and veteran staff, and, if possible, a demographic mix as well.

Once the team is identified, Frazee has them review the research on effective leadership responsibilities. Together, the team identifies seven key activities and behaviors that, together, they must be able to demonstrate and maintain focus on.

Set behavioral and procedural norms for meetings and decisions

Create a list of expectations for how meetings will be organized and run, and the protocols for how team members will treat each other. Frazee recommends the following protocols as a starting point:

- Keep students in the forefront of all decisions.

- Respect others' ideas while feeling empowered to share different opinions and feelings.

- Have notes of minutes from meetings available within two days.

- Focus on the topic, not the person.

- Actively listen for understanding.

- Set and distribute an agenda prior to meetings.

- Allow time for silences and pauses so everyone can participate.

- Begin meetings on time and end on time.

- Be prepared for meetings (readings, materials, etc.) and commit to attending all meetings.

- Build on what others say, referring to them by name.

- Have open, honest communication during meetings.

Additionally, the team has to decide how it will make decisions. Will your team make decisions by unanimous consent, majority vote, individual command, or another model? Be clear from the start on how decisions will be made and stick to it.

Schedule team meeting dates

Be specific about when and where your team will meet during the entire school year. It's not good enough to say you'll meet "as needed." The work will be stressful enough, and any clarity of purpose and structure you can provide will help relieve anxiety.

Establish roles for each meeting: facilitator, time keeper, recorder, and process observer

Sharing leadership means sharing responsibility and ownership. Four distinct roles are needed during meetings: a facilitator to focus conversation and lead decision-making processes; a time keeper to keep agenda items moving and ensure meetings begin and end on time; a recorder to take notes that will be shared with the school community; and a process observer to make sure that agreed-upon protocols are followed.

Use an agenda

Create an agenda template that includes the team's norms, responsibilities, meeting roles, and expected outcomes for the meeting. This gives clarity to everyone on what will be discussed, in what order, and to what purpose.

Review assigned tasks and responsibilities at the end of each meeting

Before the end of the meeting, review individual assignments, responsibilities, and deadlines. By being explicit about expectations and agreeing on action steps as a team, you'll limit confusion, increase shared ownership of the process, and ensure progress.

Set up a communication chain

Each team member should have responsibility for communicating to a certain group of staff members all the decisions made in the meeting and for seeking input from that same group for future agenda items. It's critical to agree on what information needs to be shared with the school community, and how that will be done.

Share information on the process with the whole staff

Don't work in isolation. As a team, use a calendar to plan when and how you will share information on steps 1–9 with the entire staff. If you've done well selecting a representative group of people for the team, every staff member will feel some sense of representation and ownership of the process, or at least know who to go to with specific concerns and issues.

Frazee points out that this process provides a solid foundation for success no matter which particular instructional or operational changes the school will undertake as part of their improvement or turnaround plan. Charging forward without paying sufficient attention to these steps, or treating them haphazardly, raises the chances that issues related to school culture, communication, input, and order will weigh down your improvement efforts, reducing efficiency and outcomes or even bringing them to a halt. ◆

Roger Fiedler is McREL's director of communications and marketing. Contact him at rfiedler@mcrel.org or 303.632.5579.

References

School Reform Initiative. (n.d.). *Why protocols?* [PDF]. Denver, CO: Author. Retrieved from http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/1%20General%20Guidelines%20for%20Collaborative%20Work/why_protocols.pdf

Waters, T., & Cameron, G. (2007). *The Balanced Leadership Framework: Connecting vision with action.* Denver, CO: McREL.

Continuous improvement helps New York district redefine itself

By Heather Hein

Mount Vernon, New York, a densely populated area adjacent to New York City, has undergone tremendous change in the past several years. Straddling the urban and suburban, this one-time "bedroom community" of homes and small businesses has evolved into a center of regional commerce and industry. Mount Vernon's population now includes more than 98 nationalities, making it one of the most diverse areas in Westchester County.

While much of the change has been positive, it has presented challenges for the city's sole school district. Mount Vernon City School District (MVCSD), which serves 16 schools across just 4.4 square miles, has struggled with high turnover among staff, decreased resources, and increasing poverty among its students. School and district leadership has been largely inconsistent, processes and structures have broken down, and most schools are underperforming.

But the district is refusing to be defined by its deficits. With the support of a state turnaround grant and the leadership of an interim superintendent who believes passionately that all kids deserve a great education, MVCSD is making systematic, systemic changes that are transforming teaching and learning across the district.

A different approach

Over the years, MVCSD had tried various improvement efforts—without much to show for it in terms of student achievement. When the Common Core State Standards came along, district leaders knew they had to change their approach to school improvement.

Leaders at eight of the district's 16 schools began working with McREL consultants in December 2012. Their initial goal was to establish the structures, processes, and attitudes necessary to effectively implement 1) the six instructional shifts required by the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and 2) data-driven instruction.

According to McREL Principal Consultant Dana Frazee, who leads the project, the McREL team began work in Mount Vernon with "no preconceived notions" about how to make improvements, but rather, with a willingness to adapt to whatever the district needed.

"We approached the work with the goal of building on the strengths of the district, with the assumption that the teachers and leaders have the ability and the will to learn what is necessary to improve student performance," Frazee said.

That assumption was correct—and pretty quickly the need to grow the work became apparent. In less than a year of work with McREL, MVCSD has begun a journey toward continuous school improvement, taking on not only Common Core instructional shifts and data-driven instruction but also leadership practices, classroom observations, and research-based instructional strategies.

In addition, the district decided to expand the work to the rest of its 16 schools so that all school leaders in the district "speak the same language," said Frazee. "They are focusing on specific strategies across the entire district, so that their improvement efforts are not disjointed but instead work in partnership. They have begun seeing and using the connections among instruction, curriculum, assessment, leadership, and evaluation."

No more excuses

One of the first orders of business was to establish processes and structures so that teachers and leaders could work together effectively. Each school established a leadership team and decided on the responsibilities on those teams. They developed norms for working together, including learning about and trying different ways to make decisions and setting up communication chains in order to get information out to, and feedback from, staff.

Jamal Doggett, the second-year principal of Longfellow Elementary School, said the communication chain has been very helpful in making sure everyone on his staff is informed—which is always a challenge. "Now, everyone is responsible for communicating to someone. Before, there was always someone saying, 'I didn't know.' Now that excuse is out the window. If someone doesn't get the message, you know who to go to and how it happened." Sharing responsibility is a win-win: Doggett is better supported by his teachers, and his teachers are building their own leadership skills.

In addition, Doggett says the behavioral and procedural norms his team has established have made meetings more productive. "Everyone knows how to conduct themselves, what to expect, how we're going to make decisions. That allows us to focus better on the best interests of the students."

The school leaders next learned about the Common Core six instructional shifts in English language arts and set goals for implementation. Each team's implementation plan was unique to its school's needs and culture, but all of the teams worked to develop a walkthrough tool to help monitor the changes in the classroom. Using McREL's Power Walkthrough® software and iPads provided by the district, each school leader conducted several walkthroughs using the tool, and then revised it based on how it worked.

"The walkthrough tool has helped us ensure that the end result of a lesson is the same, regardless of how a teacher gets there," said Frank Gallo, standards administrator for English language arts (ELA). "For teachers to know what's expected of them, for students to be engaged in what we want them to do—having that all in one place is very, very valuable."

Getting consistent in the classroom

At the same time that leadership teams have been working "behind the scenes" on structures and processes, teachers have been making real changes in the classroom—based on their data and school improvement goals.

MVCSD analyzed student achievement data from all of its schools, pinpointing two research-based strategies to implement districtwide to help improve student reading at all levels: reciprocal teaching and rule-based summarization.

The two strategies work hand-in-hand: Rule-based summarization gives students a specific set of rules for summarizing a text, and reciprocal teaching is a discussion protocol in which students become teachers by taking on specific roles in small-group reading sessions.

"Both strategies are student-centered in that they offer more opportunities for differentiating instruction," said Doggett. "It's also helped transform the teacher's role from 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side.'"

This shift may feel a bit like losing control for some teachers, but the pay-offs for students are well worth it. Frances Lightsy, principal of Grimes Elementary School, said reciprocal teaching has "fostered greater student ownership of learning and has allowed teachers a greater comfort level with letting go"—especially since they've seen positive results almost immediately.

> *"Everyone knows how to conduct themselves, what to expect, how we're going to make decisions. That allows us to focus better on the best interests of the students."*
>
> -Jamal Doggett, Principal
> Longfellow Elementary School
> Mount Vernon City School District

Classroom management has improved because students are on task and engaged. Students benefit from having a purpose to read: "Before, kids would read a paragraph and answer questions," said Doggett. "Now, everyone has a job and has the chance to speak and give input. The result is a rich, engaging discussion that deepens their understanding of a text."

What comes next

In the current school year, MVCSD teachers and school leaders are continuing to use the practices they've learned for the Common Core instructional shifts for ELA and data driven instruction while also taking on the instructional shifts for Common Core math.

In a walkthrough of Davis Middle School recently, Assistant Superintendent Gertrude Karabas said she witnessed firsthand how the strategies learned in the last year have led to improvements in learning and teaching. "I heard young students of different backgrounds proudly reading erudite summaries based on non-fiction passages to spontaneous applause and not feeling a bit shy about showing their intelligence. I heard assistant principals talking about depth of knowledge as it relates to the tasks and questions to assess student learning," Karabas said. "These are new, positive behaviors that, hopefully, we will now see in math."

With the structures, processes, and attitudes the district has put in place over the past 10 months, MVCSD has renewed its belief in itself, its students, and the possibility that everyone in Mount Vernon will get the education they deserve. ⬡

Heather Hein writes, edits, and supports the publication of a variety of McREL's materials. Contact her at 303.632.5520 or hhein@mcrel.org.

What's in it for our students?

By Bryan Goodwin

In 1996, Kodak released what was touted as a breakthrough camera, the Advantix Preview, a regular film camera with a digital view finder so users could see the picture they'd taken and determine whether to keep it on the roll when they developed the film. Inside Kodak, the concept must've seemed brilliant; the company could enter the digital camera market while preserving its core business of selling film. There was just one problem: few customers wanted such a thing, and the Advantix Preview failed miserably, as chronicled by Carroll & Mui (2008) in *Billion Dollar Lessons*.

From the outside looking in, Kodak's blunder seems obvious and profoundly short-sighted. Not only did they fail to view their product from the customer's perspective, they let their own internal demands and discomfort with change keep them from responding to customer needs. However, both mistakes are easy to make, whether we're in businesses or schools.

Putting students at the center

Consider school improvement plans. Often, they detail what the *adults* in the building will do—teachers will align teaching with new standards, instructional coaches will observe classrooms and assist with alignment efforts, and school teams will review data to monitor implementation—with little consideration of what will be different for students or how they will engage in the efforts. Describing these adult behaviors is important, of course, but will fall short if we don't also consider students' role in our improvement plans. Here are a few important questions we might ask:

- What do our students need from us?

- What differences will students see in their learning experiences as a result of our efforts?

- How will students be partners in our improvement efforts?

- What will be in it for students? What will motivate (and support) them to change with us?

Research suggests that educators should not ignore such questions. For example, a McREL meta-analysis of school factors related to student success (Marzano, 2000) attributed 14 percent of the variance in student achievement to motivation and 13 percent to teaching quality. An important implication we might draw from these data is that improving teaching quality only goes so far to improve

achievement if we do not, at the same time, motivate students to learn. The good news, as we note in *The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching* (Goodwin & Hubbell, 2013), is that teachers can, in fact, positively influence student motivation—from how they talk to students to relationships they build with them to how they write their lesson and unit plans.

The learning environments in which we place students also profoundly influence their ability to learn (Furgeson et al., 2011). As Abraham Maslow (1943) observed long ago, human motivation is hierarchical—basic needs must be satisfied before we strive for higher needs. Learning, as it turns out, falls well down the list of human needs. To learn, our more basic needs of food, safety, and acceptance must be met first. So if we plunge directly into teaching and skip past these basic human needs, students who feel unsafe or emotionally insecure will be unlikely to learn.

Asking the hard questions

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Kodak's blunder is how so many smart people could be blind to their customers' needs— namely, that people purchase digital cameras not to preview photos, but to avoid waiting and paying to develop film. Seeing through that blind spot, however, would have required moving well beyond a business-as-usual mindset and putting customer needs first. That's easier said than done, in business or in schools. And that's the point here—not to use tired canards about doing "what's right for the kids" to shirk responsibility or resist change, but rather to ask ourselves the hard questions about whether we are putting student needs at the center of our schools and improvement plans. 🔷

Bryan Goodwin is McREL's chief operating officer and author of *Simply Better: Doing What Matters Most to Change the Odds for Student Success* and *The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching*. Contact him at **303.632.5602** or **bgoodwin@mcrel.org**.

References

Carroll, P.B., & Mui, C. (2008). *Billion dollar lessons.* New York: Penguin Group.

Furgeson, J., Gill, B., Haimson, J., Killewald, A., McCullough, M., Nichols-Barrer, I., et al. (2011). *Charter-school management organizations: Diverse strategies and diverse student impacts*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematics Policy Research and Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Goodwin, B., & Hubbell, E.R. (2013). *The 12 touchstones of good teaching: A checklist for staying focused every day*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Marzano, R.J. (2000). *A new era of school reform: Going where the research takes us*. Aurora, CO: McREL.

McREL

McREL International
4601 DTC Blvd., Suite 500
Denver, Colorado 80237-2596

Featured Experts

DR. EMILY STEELE

Dr. Emily Steele, a lead consultant at McREL, provides professional development and consulting for school-level systems improvement. You can reach her at esteele@mcrel.org.

DR. ROGER D. GODDARD

Dr. Roger D. Goddard, a leader in research on the effects of collective efficacy in schools, is a senior fellow at McREL. He can be reached at rgoddard@mcrel.org.

CATHERINE JOHNSON

Catherine Johnson is a lead consultant at McREL, where she provides professional development and consulting for school-level systems improvement. Contact her at cjohnson@mcrel.org.

DANA FRAZEE

Dana Frazee, a principal consultant at McREL, assists schools in implementing McREL's Success in Sight® approach to school improvement. Contact her at dfrazee@mcrel.org.

HERMES
CREATIVE AWARDS

Tell **us** what **you** think

We want to hear from you! Use #ChangingSchoolsMag to let us know how you feel about the issue or School Improvement.
Not on Twitter? E-mail your thoughts to: **info@mcrel.org**

✉ **Sign up to receive Changing Schools free in your mailbox:**
http://www.mcrel.org/contact-us

View a digital version online:
http://www.mcrel.org/changingschools